
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Collins family

(*per. c.* 1820–*c.* 1980)

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Sir William Collins 1817–1895

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Collins family (*per. c.* 1820–*c.* 1980), publishers, came to prominence with **William Collins (1789–1853)**, who was born at Pollokshaws, near Glasgow, on 12 October 1789. The identity of his parents is not known, although his father may have been Edward Collins, an Englishman who arrived in Glasgow in 1746 and is known to have founded the Collins paper mill at Dalmuir, near Glasgow. William Collins was educated at the local parish school, where he did well; he left about 1800, and went to work at the loom at Pollokshaws. Some six years later he became a clerk in John Monteith's cotton mill. By now an active, ambitious, and devout Christian, he offered on Sundays religious instruction and on weekday evenings lessons in English, writing, and arithmetic.

On 14 March 1807 Collins married Jean Barclay (*d.* 1846), the daughter of a Paisley engineer. He left the mill in 1813 to open a private school in Campbell Street, Glasgow, and within four years his income from the school had tripled. He founded a Sunday school in 1815 and over the next two years established a chain of Sunday schools throughout Glasgow. He became an elder of the kirk at the Tron Church in 1814, and a year later arranged for the translation to that church of Dr Thomas Chalmers. This inspirational preacher became the most influential figure in his life, his spiritual mentor who was not averse to combining religion with business.

In 1819 Collins closed his school and established himself in the Candleriggs as William Collins & Co., printers, and (in partnership with Chalmers's brother Charles) as Chalmers and Collins, booksellers and stationers. Their first book, Dr Chalmers's *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns*, was published on 23 September 1819, and despite growing social unrest Collins managed to establish his business on a firm footing during 1820. In December that year he was caught up in a quarrel between Dr Chalmers and the Glasgow publisher John Smith over a booklet originally published by Lesslie of Dundee, a quarrel (outcome unknown) which lasted for over two years and revealed Chalmers's formidable pride, temper, and obstinacy.

The character of the early Collins list—a character which was to endure for well over a hundred years, particularly in the Glasgow publishing departments—was built on evangelical preaching and awareness of the next world: educational, instructive, edifying, above all Christian. It featured collections of sermons, schoolbooks, and a body of rather fearsome children's fiction written to glorify the covenanters. Collins was an outspoken opponent of slavery, and arranged meetings with William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay on his first journey south to sell his new books to the English book trade. In 1822 he started to publish his Select Library of Christian Authors, designed to make theological classics accessible to the rapidly growing reading public. By 1829 there were almost fifty volumes in print. The first of so many Collins best-sellers, *The Christian Philosopher* by Thomas Dick, appeared in 1823 and was regularly reprinted for over half a century.

Collins found another best-seller in 1825, *The Christian Psalmist*, an anthology edited by James Montgomery, which was to be reprinted four times within the next twelve months; but 1825 also saw a sudden recession in retail bookselling, which ruined Archibald Constable and threatened the survival of every under-capitalized publisher. Not only was Collins under-capitalized (even though he printed most of the books he published himself, as his successors continued to do for the next century and a half), but his energetic expansion of his list also left him particularly vulnerable to bad debts and dwindling orders. Collins solved the immediate problem by borrowing enough from his brothers-in-law to buy out the Chalmers family's interest in the retail business, which had been losing money, and close it down. Remarkably, he achieved this on terms which avoided any serious breach with his mentor, Thomas Chalmers, but the climate of their relationship remained changeable. Thunder and lightning could be expected whenever Chalmers felt himself taken for granted or otherwise ill-treated. Thus he placed more blame upon his publisher for the disappointing critical reception of his *Political Economy* (1832) than could reasonably have been expected.

By now Collins had thrown himself with characteristic fervour into the temperance movement. At the height of the cholera epidemic in 1829 he founded Britain's first temperance society, and wore himself out with journeys to other great cities and passionate speeches to packed meetings; in 1831 he founded the London Temperance Society. Temperance speeches, tracts, and magazines poured from the Collins printing works. In 1834 he took up yet another crusade and founded the Glasgow Church Building Society with the aim of constructing no fewer than twenty new churches in that city—a target which was reached within seven years, a direct result of Collins's relentless drive.

In 1835 Collins published Nathaniel Paterson's *The Manse Garden, Leitch's Practical and Economical Readers*—of which one and a half million copies were sold within fifteen years—and the first of the twenty-five volumes of the collected works of Thomas Chalmers. In the same year he joined with other evangelicals in urging state aid for church extension, appearing on platforms and printing lectures. In 1837 he was accompanied by his son William [*see below*] on a visit to London in pursuit of this aim. Returning to London in 1838, he met the archbishop of Canterbury, the duke of Wellington, Sir Robert Peel, and the young W. E. Gladstone.

Every publisher has on his list an author who feels that he is neglected and bitterly resents any attention paid to another author. Dr Chalmers played this part in the life of William Collins. Feeling entitled to greater sales and greater critical esteem, and yearning for a London publisher who might be expected to achieve this for him, he was quick to complain about trifles and tried from time to time to interfere with Collins's arrangements with the retail trade. The final storm arose as a consequence of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland and the establishment of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843: both men supported the new church, and Chalmers became its first moderator. In 1844 Collins undertook

extensive printing work for the Free Church. In the same year the Free Church authorities determined to distribute many thousands of copies of the *History of the Reformation* by the Swiss historian Merle d'Aubigné among their flock. Three volumes of this work had already been published in Britain by three publishers including Collins. The right to publish the fourth volume was won by Oliver and Boyd of Edinburgh. Chaos ensued. In 1846 Chalmers suddenly transferred his literary interests to Oliver and Boyd. In 1847 'the most illustrious Scottish churchman since John Knox' (said Lord Rosebery) died.

Growing pressure for the termination of the monopoly in Bible printing enjoyed by successive king's and queen's printers for Scotland since 1580 was rewarded in 1839, when all Scottish printers were given the right to print the scriptures 'under bond and caution' (to ensure that their work contained no errors). Collins printed his first New Testament in 1841. By the end of 1843 he had completed three bibles, thus establishing a tradition which continued as long as the company maintained its own printing works.

William Collins died in simple lodgings in Rothesay, Buteshire, on 2 January 1853, and was buried in the Necropolis, Glasgow. He left many memorials; the *Scottish Guardian* praised 'the strength and simplicity of his faith ... his burning zeal ... his liberality ... his readiness for every good work'. To this we may add praise for his vision, drive, and Calvinistic rectitude in commercial matters. Jean Collins had died in 1846; his sole surviving son, William, inherited a well-established printing, publishing, and bookselling business.

Sir William Collins (1817-1895) was born in Glasgow on 12 October 1817. In 1829 he left Glasgow grammar school and was apprenticed to the business; in 1843 he became a partner; and on 24 June 1845 he married Annabella Proudfoot Glen (*d.* 1862). He inherited more than ambition and a prosperous business: like his father, he was a fervent supporter of many good causes, but in one respect he went even further by preaching total abstinence.

By 1853 the Scottish literary renaissance led by Sir Walter Scott and J. G. Lockhart had wound its course, but the publishers of such English authors as Dickens, Tennyson, and Thackeray kept book printers busy throughout the land, not least in Edinburgh. Scotland was now on the threshold of rapid commercial advance, and with it came an ever-increasing appetite for education and, therefore, schoolbooks. The appointment of Collins as publisher to the Scottish School Book Association swelled the tide in the early 1860s. His list was widening in scope, although it was still overwhelmingly educational in tone, and the installation of ten new steam-driven presses made it economically attractive to print and publish dictionaries and other reference books and standard editions of household classics.

The new presses also helped to establish Collins as one of the leading publishers of the Bible. In 1860 he stated in evidence to the select committee on the Bible printing patents that he had seventeen editions in print and was printing over 100,000 copies per year; the

cheapest was priced at 1s. In 1861 the house of Collins moved into the fine new premises at Herriot Hill, later known as Cathedral Street, that they continued to occupy for over a hundred years. In 1862 Collins was appointed queen's printer for Scotland.

The Collins list continued to expand during the middle years of the century, the seminal period of modern science, and Collins recognized this with a Science Series comprising seventy-two titles at various levels, of which more than 2.5 million copies were sold. Trotter's *English Grammar* sold over half a million copies, and by 1868 the firm was selling more than a quarter of a million illustrated dictionaries per year.

On 26 September 1865, his first wife having died on 12 September 1862, Collins married Helen Jamieson, with whom he had two children (he had eleven in all). Outside business he devoted himself earnestly to temperance reform (earning himself the nickname Water Willie) and, as a Glasgow city councillor for the Liberal persuasion from December 1868, to close scrutiny of the city's expenditure of public money. In 1877 he became lord provost of Glasgow, and a year later led the corporation and his affluent fellow citizens in the prompt establishment of a relief fund to help the thousands of genteel investors left penniless by the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank. He was knighted in 1881.

In 1871 Collins bought the copyright in the Popular Poets series from the fading London publishing firm of Edward Moxon; under the new title Grosvenor Poets they sold well for the next half-century. In the following year he published *Domestic Cookery* and *Domestic Medicine* to compete with Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*. In 1875 he bought out the Scottish School Book Association, and the schoolbook list rose to 920 titles. Like so many other Scots, Collins and his sons William Collins [*see below*] and Alexander, now both partners in the firm, were drawn to explore the expanding world markets of the Victorian empire. They had already achieved substantial exports, particularly of schoolbooks, to Australia and New Zealand, where the name of Collins was respected and reassuringly familiar to the many Free Church families who had emigrated there after the Disruption of the Church of Scotland. The mid-1870s saw Collins representatives travelling all over Canada, India, and the Antipodes; within ten years new offices in Sydney and Cape Town had been added to those in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London (Auckland followed in 1888). Editorially, too, the firm was quick to realize that it was imperative to create new educational books for these new markets and to adapt many of the books already on the list, originally written with British schools and schoolchildren in mind, for use abroad. By the end of the decade the gospels had been translated into African languages, printed in Glasgow, and exported to missionaries on the west coast of Africa.

In 1879 Collins bought a paper mill at Bowling, Dunbartonshire, for his third son, John. In the same year the publishing and printing business was converted to a limited company. It had grown very large, with nearly 2000 employees. Twenty-eight presses were producing about 2 million books per year, but still could not keep

pace with the demands of the publishing departments. The stationery side was already flourishing (120 million envelopes were manufactured annually on machines invented by the third William Collins) when in 1881 the firm produced the first of the many millions of diaries that it was to print over the following 120 years. By the early 1890s the rate of progress had still not slackened: two more paper mills at Denny, Stirlingshire, had been acquired, more presses installed, and an innovatory process had been introduced to add colour by lithography to the monochrome letterpresses illustrations in school and children's books.

Although it was still open to any Scottish printer to apply for a licence to print the whole Bible or part of it, in practice Collins had by now secured a virtual monopoly through the economies of scale that could be achieved in their large, efficient plant—and hence a virtual monopoly also in publishing the Bible north of the border. A new enthusiasm had developed for the addition of maps, illustrations, and explanatory material ('helps') to the plain text of the Authorized Version, and Collins were quick to benefit while it lasted. In 1892 the firm opened the International Bible Agency in New York to act as its sole agents, and a new typeface (Clear-Type, from which the press took its name for the next eighty years) was introduced for use in dictionaries and bibles.

William Collins died on 20 February 1895 at Edinburgh, aged seventy-seven. As a boy and young man he had watched his father expand the firm he had started so humbly into an important employer in Glasgow and a considerable force in the book trade. His life, like his father's, was distinguished by hard work, driving ambition, strict financial rectitude, generous philanthropy, and exemplary care and consideration for his staff (not least in repeatedly taking the lead among Scottish printers in reducing the working week). The city fathers recognized his contribution to Glasgow by burying him high up on the Necropolis, near his father's grave and the John Knox memorial statue.

William Collins (1846-1906) was born at Glasgow on 6 September 1846. He developed his natural bent for science and technology through attending Glasgow University. On 2 December 1875 he married Annie D. Leisk, but the couple remained childless. Although he inherited a relentless drive to expand the family business, his character differed markedly from that of his father and grandfather. Everything was done at top speed. A partner before the age of thirty he was censured more than once by his fellow directors for impetuously exceeding his responsibilities.

William's brother Alexander Glen Collins, born on 25 June 1848, became a partner before the age of twenty-eight, and concentrated on increasing the sales of bibles and schoolbooks. He married Cornelia, the daughter of the late Godfrey Thomas Hope Pattison, an American merchant, on 18 June 1872; his first son, William, was born in 1873, and his second, Godfrey, in 1875. An art lover, he worked with his father on an exhibition designed to help the relief of hardship occasioned by the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank. He is known to have shared his father's enthusiasm for yachting. A

genial, well-liked figure—who must nevertheless have his share in any celebration of the success of Collins bibles—he lived for some years in semi-retirement before his death in 1911.

The third William Collins, as has been noted, lived and worked in the fast lane. A fashionable though often absent-minded dresser, he kept two fine carriages, a yacht, a flat in London, and a hunting-box in Northamptonshire (a taste later shared by his great-nephew William Alexander Roy Collins), yet found time also for old-master paintings, music, literature, and gambling on the Riviera. Above all, he was a hard worker and a thinker, and he soon saw clearly that the firm had been too reliant for too long on its staple lines of bibles, school and reference books, classics, and stationery. In adding to these a new and more adventurous list of original fiction and non-fiction books for children, and thus reviving memories of his grandfather's early publishing initiatives, he shaped the firm as it was to develop and thrive over the next century. This new list became known in the trade as Reward Books, as it was composed of wholesome and godly titles, intended as Sunday-school prizes, or birthday and Christmas presents. It featured such popular authors as Katherine Tynan, Andrew Lang, and the future Mrs Thomas Hardy, Florence Dugdale.

The turn of the century saw the inception within the space of seven years of five outstanding series of hardback pocket classics designed to sell at 1s. per copy: Nelson's, the World's Classics, Collins's, Routledge's, and Everyman's. These series inevitably shared a great many features, serving as they did the needs of the same classes and categories of reader as understood and anticipated by publishers and editors of similar commercial and scholarly standing. Collins, like Nelson, published mainly fiction; the other imprints cast their nets much wider, with a high-minded appeal, as J. M. Dent put it, 'to every kind of reader'. The new rotary presses brought over from Germany in 1900 proved well suited to the mass production of these little books, and Collins Handy Illustrated Pocket Classics (unlike the other series, embellished with newly commissioned illustrations) were launched three years later. The series eventually numbered almost 400 volumes, including twenty-one by Sir Walter Scott. In the next fifty years Collins sold some 29 million Classics: their best-sellers included *David Copperfield* and three other Dickens titles, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *Treasure Island*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Jane Eyre*. The Gem series, originating with an English dictionary in 1902, grew to over 100 titles and provided further business for the rotary presses for the whole twentieth century.

William Collins continued to develop and consolidate his firm at a brisk pace. But his life was tragically cut short on 17 July 1906, in an accident stemming from the combination of his mechanical ingenuity and his literally breakneck pace of life. He had fashioned his own gate-key to the lift in the block of flats at Westminster where he stayed when in London. This saved him seconds when the hall-porter was busy, but on this occasion it cost him his life: the electricity supply had failed, the porter was elsewhere mending the fuse, the hall was dark, and the lift-shaft was empty.

Again the family was lucky enough to have two brothers and their cousin ready to step up. **William Alexander Collins (1873–1945)**, the nephew of the third William Collins, was born in Glasgow on 26 March 1873, the son of Alexander Glen Collins (1848–1911) and Cornelia Pattison (b. 1854/5). He was educated at Harrow School. He married Grace Brander, and they had two sons: William Alexander Roy Collins [*see below*] and Ian Glen Collins (1903–1975). William Alexander Collins was elected to the board in 1897, and succeeded to the chairmanship in 1906 at thirty-three. He assumed particular responsibility for stationery and the overseas offices; his brother, Sir Godfrey Pattison Collins (1875–1936), who had trained for the Royal Navy, was appointed a director in 1899 and took charge of publications; and his cousin William Collins Dickson, born on 12 October 1876 and educated at Fettes College and Glasgow University, also appointed a director in 1899, took charge of engineering and costing. Retrenchment soon became the first priority, when it was discovered that before his death in 1906 the impetuous William Collins had invested too optimistically in new equipment and branch offices in the empire.

May 1907 saw the simultaneous appearance of both the Collins and the Nelson Sevenpennies, cheap pocket hardback editions of copyright novels from their proprietors' and other publishers' lists. Many publishers declined to lease titles to them, but enough were available to feed the hungry rotary presses. Even these did not represent the cheapest line of fiction on the Collins list—there was a Penny Library for schools, and the Pocket Library of eighty full-length novels priced at 3½d., of which several million copies were sold before the First World War. Business was now booming in the empire, and the workforce in Britain was producing nearly 90,000 books per week.

In 1910 Godfrey Collins embarked on his long second career of public service, winning Greenock for the Liberal Party at both general elections in that year. He quickly found political favour and was appointed parliamentary private secretary to the secretary of state for war, Jack Seely. He continued his editorial overview of the Collins lists, and in 1913 put his experience to the firm's service in launching a new series, the Nation's Library. For a shilling one could read *Socialism and Syndicalism* (by Philip Snowden), *Aviation*, *The Case for Railway Nationalisation*, *The Land Problem*, or *The Relations of Capital and Labour*.

Godfrey Collins, aged thirty-nine, and William Alexander Collins, aged forty-one, were not slow to join the Army Service Corps after the outbreak of the First World War. William won the DSO in France, and rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel; Godfrey served in France, Egypt, India, Gallipoli, and Mesopotamia, and was appointed CMG in 1917. Collins sent nearly 300 other members of staff to the war, and struggled like so many other firms with the consequent scarcity of craftsmen and skilled workmen. Costs tend to rise in wartime, and supplies of materials dry up. The scarcity of paper dictated some pruning of the list to ensure that books needed for the national emergency (not to mention books which could be relied on to be

profitable) were accorded priority over more marginal items. Thus it was that the Nation's Library and the Sevenpennies fell under Godfrey's rationalizing axe on his return to business in 1917, while the *Collins Children's Annual*, launched in 1914, survived the war (and stiff competition from other publishers' similar products) and well beyond. As the war progressed it was joined in the children's list by *Hunting the U-boats*, *With Beatty in the North Sea*, and *'Midst Shot and Shell in Flanders*.

Godfrey Collins seems to have inherited from his uncle William the ability to run headlong, without in his case falling down a lift-shaft. In that same year, 1917, realizing that there was simply not enough good fiction reliably available—from the Collins list and other publishers—to support the series of cheap reprints that had so flourished before the war, he decided to move general publishing to London and to broaden its base, found premises at 48 Pall Mall, recruited an editor, Gerald O'Donovan, and issued an autumn list of no fewer than fourteen titles. This would have been a considerable performance at the best of times. In 1917, with the Glasgow factory short of 132 craftsmen and already at full stretch producing bibles and school books, it was a miracle, which Godfrey achieved by employing outside printers and binders—crumbs from the table for them, of course, but 80,000 crumbs, and a very promising table.

That first list included works by Henry James (the firm bought four titles from his executors, including *The Ivory Tower*), Mrs Humphry Ward (*Missing*), and Edward Garnett (*Turgenev*). The list over the next few years included works by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Victoria Sackville-West (her first three novels), J. Middleton Murry (*Aspects of Literature*), Rose Macaulay (Collins published all her novels from 1920 to 1956), Henry Williamson (*The Beautiful Years*), Walter de la Mare (*Memoirs of a Midget*), and Michael Arlen (*The Green Hat*, of which 70,000 copies were pre-ordered by booksellers in 1923, and of which 200,000 were sold within three years). New poetry began to appear on the list, with volumes by the Georgian poets Edward Shanks, Francis Brett Young, and Gerald Gould.

Godfrey Collins had been re-elected for Greenock in 1918 as a Coalition Liberal, and again in 1922, as a Liberal. Re-elected in the following year at Greenock, he became Liberal chief whip. He continued to represent Greenock throughout the 1920s. This increase in his workload, and the success of his new list, necessitated two new key appointments at Pall Mall: that of S. J. Goldsack, who became sales manager, and F. T. Smith, who transferred from Glasgow as chief editor. They held these positions, and much later directorships, until well after the Second World War.

By the early 1920s detective stories were in vogue. Collins had already published their first, *The Skeleton Key* by Bernard Capes: the floodgates opened, unsolicited manuscripts poured in, Freeman Wills Crofts, G. D. H. Cole and Margaret Cole, and Agatha Christie (with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) joined the list, and in 1930 the Crime Club was born. Its members—20,000 within the first twelve months—received a monthly mailing giving details of the new books. Writers of the calibre of Rex Stout, Ngaio Marsh (creators

respectively of Nero Wolfe and Roderick Alleyn), and Nicholas Blake (Cecil Day Lewis) joined what became a large stable of authors. Christie, promoted as the 'Queen of Crime', was always the most popular, particularly when she featured Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot. Alongside pure whodunits, adventure stories or thrillers gained in popularity on the coat-tails of John Buchan; all were to feature on the Collins list for the next half-century.

Meanwhile the sale of bibles, testaments, and liturgical books continued to flourish: by 1931 sales exceeded 600,000 copies, helped no doubt by the sales jingle:

Satan trembles when he sees
Bibles sold as cheap as these.

Overseas markets, to which William Alexander Collins paid personal attention, were particularly successful, notably in the United States. The Collins brothers, sensing the post-war ferment of new ideas in education, realized that many of the schoolbooks which had remained in print since before the turn of the century were obsolescent if not obsolete. They set up four new series of reading and geography books, histories, and Shakespeares. A new educational manager was appointed at Cathedral Street, John Crossland, whose Laurel and Gold series included his own verse anthology, of which over half a million copies were sold. Other notably successful anthologies followed. Children's home reading was supplied by books on the open air and transport subjects.

Returned again for Greenock in 1931 as a National Liberal, Sir Godfrey Collins was appointed secretary of state for Scotland in 1932, and so could no longer be an active director of Collins. Re-elected in 1935, he was taken ill while on holiday in Switzerland, and died at Zürich on 13 October 1936. One of his authors, Rose Macaulay, said in tribute: 'Never did any publisher realize more fully than he the identity of interest of publisher and author'. By then William Alexander Collins's sons William Alexander Roy, always known as Billy, and Ian Glen (b. 23 April 1903) were hard at work in the firm—unless they were playing tennis in the men's doubles at Wimbledon or, in Ian's case, cricket for Scotland. Ian had immersed himself in Glasgow business: manufacturing technologies, bibles, schoolbooks, diaries and stationery, and the intricacies of the export trade. Billy Collins, who had been working at Pall Mall with his uncle, took charge when he died, ambitious to enhance the house's standing in the modern world of London publishing.

Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*, written in seven months in 1935 and completed just before she died, was published in early 1936 to critical applause, winning the James Tait Black memorial prize for the best novel of the year; it remained in print for many years. In 1936 also appeared *The Weather in the Streets* by Rosamond Lehmann. The same outstanding year saw débuts by T. H. White, Peter Cheyney, and Nigel Balchin. Other well-known authors published by Collins before the Second World War included Howard Spring (*My Son, my Son*), Margery Sharp, Leo Walmsley, and the

poet laureate John Masefield (*The Country Scene* and *A Tribute to Ballet*, both illustrated by Edward Seago). Trips by Collins to the United States also secured British rights in novels by Mary Ellen Chase, Kenneth Roberts, Agnes Sligh Turnbull, and James Ramsey Ullman, among others.

To meet the manufacturing demands of this expansion in their publishing, Collins extended their Cathedral Street empire in 1936 by acquiring the adjoining printing works of the publishing house of Blackie (premises which had been bought by Blackie in 1829 from A. and J. M. Duncan, then printers to the University of Glasgow). The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the typographic revolution led by Stanley Morison, when the Monotype Corporation revived the great type designs of the previous centuries in a form suited to single-character machine typesetting. The directors of Collins sought the advice of the distinguished printer and typographer Giovanni Mardersteig: when he asked to see the vaunted Clear Type, he was told that no such type now existed. The outcome in 1936 was Collins's Monotype Fontana (the name refers to the firm's device), modelled by Mardersteig on the Scottish roman types made about 1760 at Alexander Wilson's Glasgow foundry.

The Second World War brought back the problems of the First World War that were still familiar to many members of the staff, almost 500 of whom served in uniform, and the same number in munitions factories. Paper was soon in short supply and, before long, rationed. Bombed schools, bookshops, and wholesalers arose from the ashes and demanded replacement books. Imported materials and exported bibles, books, and stationery were lost in Atlantic raids on allied shipping. Collins was hardest hit in London: the warehouse at Bridewell Place and the office at Pall Mall were destroyed in air raids in, respectively, 1940 and 1944. The editorial offices under Billy Collins moved to 13–14 St James's Place, where they remained until 1983.

As had happened in the First World War, wartime difficulties coincided with enormous demand for bibles, classic fiction, and patriotic and escapist literature of all kinds. The boredom of the long hours of inactivity between battles and in air-raid shelters and hospitals intensified the value of the book as a never-failing friend to millions of readers and introduced the habit of reading to millions of newcomers. Indeed, to quote Desmond Flower, 'Anything printed, even if upside down and/or in Sanskrit, was saleable' (D. Flower, *The Paper-back*, 1959, 17). 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man', and Arthur Bryant, already the author of a three-volume biography of Samuel Pepys, joined the Collins list in 1940 with *English Saga, 1840–1940*. He published many more works of popular history with the firm until his death in 1985.

In 1941 Collins published Peter Quennell's *Byron in Italy* (sequel to *The Years of Fame*, 1935). In the same year appeared the first twenty of the Britain in Pictures series. These elegantly produced essays on all aspects of British life, work, history, and arts, each plentifully illustrated in full colour, represented only the second large-scale appearance in Britain of that phenomenon of post-war

publishing, the 'packaged' book. The series was the brainwave of Hilda Matheson, then engaged on propaganda work for the Ministry of Information, and seems to have been designed to quicken patriotic feelings. W. J. Turner was appointed general editor. Publication was entrusted to Collins and design and production to Adprint, whose directors Wolfgang Foges and Walter Neurath had previously sold the King Penguin series to Allen Lane. By 1951 nearly 3 million copies of 133 titles had been sold: the best-sellers were *The Birds of Britain* by James Fisher (84,218), *Life among the English* by Rose Macaulay (61,636), *Wild Flowers in Britain* by Geoffrey Grigson (60,574), and *The English Poets* by Lord David Cecil (60,247).

Succeeding years of the war brought work from Bernard Darwin, Noel Streatfeild, Thomas Armstrong, Hammond Innes, Norman Collins (no relation), Hesketh Pearson (*Bernard Shaw*, 1942), and Edmund Blunden (*Cricket Country*, 1943). Three months after the war ended came the first two volumes in the New Naturalist Library, which had been under discussion for three years between Billy Collins and a distinguished editorial board. Unlike Britain in Pictures, which saw a brief revival in 1951 to coincide with the Festival of Britain and was then remaindered, the New Naturalist Library, which grew to over eighty titles by 1976, remained in print.

William Alexander Collins, who had been appointed CBE in recognition of his work for servicemen in 1943, died on 3 September 1945 at a nursing home in Prestwick, Ayrshire. A caring and generous employer, a friendly, modest, yet lively man, he had been content to see his brother Godfrey succeed as a West End publisher and his sons take responsibility for important departments of the firm, while remaining firmly in charge at board level. The final key member of this generation of the Collinses, his cousin William Collins Dickson, who had been living in retirement since 1929, died nine days later. So **William Alexander Roy [Billy] Collins (1900–1976)** became chairman and presided at St James's Place. He was educated at Harrow School and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he distinguished himself more as a sportsman than as a *littérateur*, obtaining a third-class degree in modern history in 1922. His brother Ian, who for his war service was appointed OBE and chevalier of the Légion d'honneur, and received the Croix de Guerre, became vice-chairman, and made a speciality of bibles, prayer books, and stationery, while his cousin William Hope Collins (Godfrey's son, born on 5 September 1903) took charge of the printing works.

The return of peace saw a number of promising additions to the Collins list: H. J. Massingham (*The Wisdom of the Fields*) and John Moore (the Brensham trilogy)—evidence of people's longing to recapture the innocence of the pre-war countryside—Neville Cardus (*Autobiography*), Christopher Sykes (*Four Studies in Loyalty*), Ivor Brown (*Shakespeare*), and Milton Waldman, who published his *Elizabeth and Essex* and joined the firm as literary adviser. They flourished alongside war stories, for which an apparently insatiable public appetite was developing. Gerald Hanley's *Monsoon Victory* and Bernard Fergusson's *Beyond the Chindwin* had been published

during the war, but they were eclipsed after 1945 by Roy Farran's *Winged Dagger*, Desmond Young's *Rommel*, Paul Brickhill's *Reach for the Sky*, and *The Great Escape*. *The Wooden Horse*, by Eric Williams, which outstripped them all and sold half a million copies, had been first published as *Goon on the Block* by another publisher, was acquired by Collins after it failed, and was substantially rewritten by Waldman.

On 14 December 1949 the directors floated the first public issue of shares in the company's history, over-subscribed four times within a few minutes (this led eventually to the acquisition of a controlling interest by News International and the cessation of family interest in the firm). By now Collins employed some 2500 people in Glasgow alone, and it was calculated that the printing presses could together produce at least 15,000 copies of a 256-page book per hour. Throughout the 1950s Collins was either first or second in the annual count of new books and new editions published; their total in 1960, when they again came first, was 576 titles.

In 1950 appeared the first of many beautifully illustrated books on the ballet, brought to Collins by the editor Mark Bonham Carter and printed away from Glasgow by photogravure. This was *Baron at the Ballet* (Baron was a celebrated photographer, and Arnold Haskell contributed an introduction); 60,000 copies were sold in twelve years. A new 'packager', Rainbird McLean, sought out Collins in 1951 for a sumptuous new edition of Robert Thornton's *Temple of Flora*; Sacheverell Sitwell's equally sumptuous *Fine Bird Books* (1953) and *Great Flower Books* (1956) followed from the same stable. Further, more modest Rainbird McLean titles were published from time to time.

Billy Collins took a particular interest in natural history and wildlife. The flourishing New Naturalist Library may have been largely his creation, and R. S. R. Fitter's *Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds*, published in 1953 (and followed a year later by *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*), sold 100,000 copies in the next ten years and presaged a long list of nature books and field guides to wildlife the world over.

In 1953 Collins bought the publishing house of Geoffrey Bles Ltd, which had been founded in 1923. With Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel* (1930) and books of popular piety by C. S. Lewis and J. B. Phillips, the firm had enjoyed occasional success; ironically, it proved to be seriously under-capitalized when its best-sellers, Lewis's children's stories in the Narnia series, arrived in the early 1950s. Bles was allowed autonomy, but its list dwindled and stopped altogether in 1974.

Most significant of all in that hectic year of 1953 was the launch of Fontana Books, the firm's own paperback imprint. Collins had taken a one-quarter share in the Reprint Society book club on its foundation in 1939, and Pan Books (of which Collins owned a one-third share) was established as its independent paperback subsidiary in 1944. Until the early 1950s Collins had been content to lease paperback rights in their books to Pan and their only rivals, Penguin

Books, but by 1953 the paperback market was expanding and it was clear that the house should take advantage of the riches of its backlist. The rights in many books were brought back to Collins as their leases expired, and the first batch of Fontana paperbacks included titles by Armstrong, Williams, Bryant, Christie, Cheyney, Spring, Balchin, and Hammond Innes, a very successful writer who published all his thrillers with Collins.

In 1955 Collins bought another small publishing house, the Harvill Press, created in 1946 by two Catholics, Manya Harari and Marjorie Villiers. Their aim had been to rebuild the bridges, destroyed during the war, between peoples of different nationalities and religions. Their eclectic list included translations from the European languages, and through the critic and translator Max Hayward Harvill became particularly well known for Russian literature, usually by dissidents. They found an ally at St James's Place in Billy's wife Priscilla Marian, *née* Lloyd (1901–1990), whom he had married some twenty years earlier, on 14 October 1924. Known as Pierre to her friends, she had converted to Catholicism and was building one of the leading British religious lists. The Collins imprint on protestant works satisfied her adviser Ronald Gregor Smith and the shade of Dr Chalmers, and the Harvill imprint widened the ecumenical spectrum. Fontana enjoyed enormous success with its religious list, launched in 1957 with a range of authors from Phillips and Lewis to Georges Bernanos (*The Carmelites*) and the *Confessions* of St Augustine.

In 1955 Collins published H.M.S. 'Ulysses', the first of many thrillers by Alastair MacLean. In 1956 came the firm's last substantial British acquisition, the fashionable Hatchards bookshop in Piccadilly, London; again its management enjoyed reasonable autonomy, though Billy Collins was always very keen to see his new books in the window. Rose Macaulay's last novel, *The Towers of Trebizond*, was published this year to critical acclaim, as were *Naught for your Comfort* by Father Trevor Huddleston, and *The Fortress*, an account of his wartime experiences by a Collins editor, Raleigh Trevelyan. But this was nothing beside the massive success of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, published in 1958—an *annus mirabilis*—under a joint Collins–Harvill imprint: the first printing of 25,000 copies sold out in four days. In that same year came *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery*, with a first printing of 135,000 copies; the *Collins Guide to English Parish Churches*, edited by John Betjeman with illustrations by John Piper; the *Autobiography* of St Theresa of Lisieux, translated by Ronald Knox; books by Sybille Bedford and Roy Jenkins, both new to the list; and *The King's War*, the second volume of C. V. Wedgwood's account of the English civil war (*The King's Peace* had been published in 1955).

The following year saw the publication of *The Phenomenon of Man* by the mystical Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This was widely reviewed but perhaps less widely understood (although the author was a Catholic priest, his books appeared under the Collins imprint because, it was said, Harari and Villiers found them more obscure

than transcendental). A prolonged strike in the printing trades during the summer severely curtailed output, yet Collins's profits rose by £100,000.

In 1960 came two new books under the Collins-Harvill imprint: Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, one of the century's great novels, and *Born Free: a Lioness of Two Worlds* by Joy Adamson, the account of how an African game warden and his wife raised a motherless lion cub, taught it to hunt for itself, and set it free. Sales of *Born Free* totalled 135,000 after six months, 230,000 after twelve months. This year also saw the completion of the highly important *Statistical Account of Scotland* and the launch of the Fontana Library, a remarkably ambitious and wide-ranging series of what were then called 'egg-head paperbacks', for which the rights in almost all the titles were acquired from other publishers, though a few such as Lord Acton's *Lectures on Modern History* were out of copyright. That the Fontana Library soon spawned a sub-series Theology and Philosophy was due to Pierre Collins's urge to publish, for example, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Father Martin D'Arcy, and Helen Waddell. No fewer than ten Fontana religious titles featured in the autumn 1961 list, together with *The Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal* and *The Non-Existent Knight*, the second book by Italo Calvino to be published by Collins. The children's department in London published the first six (including Dr Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*) of a series initiated by Random House in New York, the Beginner Books, destined to print many million copies in hard covers and later in paperback. The profit on the year rose to £800,000.

In 1962, Collins and Macmillan bought Heinemann's share in Pan Books to become joint owners of Pan—a shrewd move, as Pan were larger than Fontana and second only to Penguin in British paperback publishing. Later in the year the book trade staged its successful defence of the net book agreement (to the great relief of booksellers around the country), and Collins opened a new million-pound six-storey warehouse capable of dispatching 100,000 books per day. Maurice Collis, Compton Mackenzie, Michael Frayn, Norman Lewis, and Philip Ziegler joined the list; Ross Macdonald joined the Crime Club; Jean Renoir wrote *Renoir, my Father*; and Harvill published a new translation of Pascal's *Pensées*. In November came an illustrated translation of Goethe's *Italian Journey* by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, printed by Mardersteig at the Stamperia Valdonega.

The Companion Guides were launched in 1963 under the general editorship of Vincent Cronin: the first titles dealt with Paris, the south of France, and the Greek islands, and some twenty further titles followed. Sybille Bedford's second novel, *A Favourite of the Gods*, was published seven years after her first, the acclaimed *A Legacy*. Lord Beaverbrook joined the list with *The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George*, and the film-maker Elia Kazan with his first novel, *America America*. Fontana issued the first ever paperback Bible, the plain text of the Revised Standard Version. By now paperbacks were

booming in Britain, with 10,000 titles in print. The same year saw the first title in a new series of paperback originals, the Fontana History of Europe: Geoffrey Elton's *Reformation Europe*.

The mid- to late 1960s saw the Collins list expanding to include important titles such as Roy Jenkins's *Asquith* (1964), Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals of his Last Years* (1964), and Max Mallowan's *Nimrud and its Remains* (1966), an account of his principal Mesopotamian excavation. Nigel Nicolson also edited for Collins at this time the first of three volumes of his father Harold's *Diaries and Letters* (1966), covering the years 1930–39. Bryant launched his two-volume English social history with *The Medieval Foundation* (1966). Malcolm Muggeridge, Edward Crankshaw, and Gerald Durrell joined the ranks of Collins authors, and the Harvill Press continued to publish translations of writers such as Julio Cortázar and Mikhail Bulgakov. Harvill's interest in Russian books in particular was to continue into the 1970s, with books by Sinyavsky and Sakharov, as well as Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974). Fontana also flourished, with the publication in 1967 of the *Fontana English Dictionary* ('including the new terminology of the space age'), Iris Murdoch's *Sartre* (1967), and the attainment of 6 million sales of religious titles.

William Hope Collins, Billy Collins's cousin in charge of the factory, died on 21 August 1967. After his death the printing operation moved to another former Blackie factory at Westerhill; warehousing and the Glasgow publishing offices followed over the next ten years, and the Cathedral Street premises were sold to the University of Strathclyde.

Despite these changes, the company continued to flourish. The first volume of William Barclay's new translation of the New Testament appeared in 1968. Carlos Baker's life of Ernest Hemingway was followed in 1970 by a major coup for Collins, the novelist's previously unpublished *Islands in the Stream*. The year 1970 also saw the appearance of *Master and Commander*, the first of the Jack Aubrey series of novels about the navy in Napoleonic times written by Patrick O'Brian. The book was at first largely unnoticed by the book trade on either side of the Atlantic, but Collins's faith in the writer resulted in a steadily growing readership as successive books in the series were published. At the same time, Fontana Modern Masters was launched under the general editorship of Frank Kermode, with lives of Camus, Fanon, Guevara, Lévi-Strauss, and Marcuse. Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War* was a popular success for Collins in 1971—its first printing of 100,000 copies sold well. The first volume of Malcolm Muggeridge's autobiography appeared in 1972, along with biographies of Sybil Thorndike and Rose Macaulay, and novels by Peter Levi, Julian Symons, and Catherine Gaskin.

In 1974 Collins acquired the American World Publishing Company, which proved a costly disappointment. Nevertheless, sales of such important titles as *The Common Bible* ('published with the blessing of the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches'), and *The Good News Bible* (1976), demonstrated the sound footing of the company. *The Good News Bible* was one of the best-sellers of the year—it had

been co-published with the bible societies, and the first printing totalled 1 million copies. The autumn list of 1976 published from St James's Place alone included twelve other religious titles, thirty fiction, fifteen Crime Club, twenty-seven non-fiction titles, and fifty Fontanas (including an original title by Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*). Collins, now printing 60 million books per year, had indeed come a long way since 1819.

Sir William Alexander Roy Collins died at his home, Hayle Farm House, Horsmonden, Kent, on 21 September 1976 and was buried at Horsmonden church. He had been appointed CBE in 1966 and knighted in 1970. He had two sons, William, known as Jan (b. 10 June 1929), and Mark (b. 3 June 1935), and two daughters, Deborah (b. 30 May 1926) and Sarah (1933–1967). All worked for the firm for a time, Jan in Glasgow (where he remained after succeeding his father as chairman) and the others at St James's Place. Sarah built up a highly successful foreign rights department. The secret of Billy Collins's success as one of the twentieth century's greatest publishers lay in three outstanding qualities, all of which were also evident in his predecessors. His larger-than-life enthusiasm was infectious, bringing in new authors (some of whom were irresistibly tempted away from their previous publishers), flattering booksellers across the Commonwealth, harrying literary editors into reviewing his books, above all selling his books to his own sales team and making sure that their saleability was fully appreciated by every representative within reach. Almost all Collins's geese were swans. He was obsessive over detail, and he drove his colleagues and himself very hard: for many years he started the day by opening the post, he approved every book jacket, Fontana cover design, and national media advertisement. Essential additional strength came from his wife, Pierre, whose eye for good writers and successful books confirmed his taste and extended his horizons. On Friday evenings Billy and Pierre rushed down to the country (first Northamptonshire, later Kent) where weekends were vigorously occupied in farming, hunting, gardening, and above all reading manuscripts. These strengths were offset, his critics maintained, by an impatient lack of purely intellectual or cultural concern, a mischievous but transparent interest in setting senior colleagues against each other, and an occasional insensitivity to others' feelings which a privileged upbringing and a powerful ambition would account for. He could be brisk, terminating discussion with a clinching 'isn't it' which was not to be interpreted as an invitation to further argument, but he was invariably courteous, and his was a kind heart.

Jan Collins became non-executive chairman in 1979 and sold his shares in the firm to Rupert Murdoch in 1981. The firm was sold to News Corporation in January 1989.

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See also

Collins, Sir William (1817–1895)

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