THE ROMANCE OF TEXTBOOKS

By Robert Cortes Holliday

WHEN the group of articles called (in the magazine) "The Practical Side of Writing" was concluding its serial publication in THE BOOKMAN, and when this material was being reprinted in the form of the book called "The Business of Writing", a couple of letters were received by the authors of the chapters, suggesting that some consideration of the business of textbooks be included in their work. Had these friendly suggestions been received earlier this would have been done. At the time they came along, however, it was too late to fit an article on this subject into the order of the series winding up its appearance in the magazine, and the book was already going through the press. The matter of how textbooks come about is quite a story, and one known hardly at all. And so I here offer to anyone interested a little discussion of the subject.

The field of the textbook is a little world of its own. Textbooks are conceived, written, edited, and marketed in a way which is quite unlike the production and distribution of books in general. The whole business has undergone a very interesting development within recent years.

In the "old days", as the textbook publisher puts it, textbooks were written much as any sort of book probably is usually supposed to be written. That is, the author went ahead and wrote it; he put into the book the fulness of his knowledge of the subject upon which he was engaged, just as he felt it; and when he had completed his manuscript he duly submitted it to a publisher. Changed has been all that.

The field today is thoroughly plotted. The textbook publisher keeps pretty close tabs on the whole field of potential authors of textbooks: anyone engaged in the work of education who is likely to have up his sleeve a book on his subject is fingerprinted, so to say, by the educational publishers. And he is more than likely to be annexed by some publishing house before he gets very far in his work of authorship.

The publisher and the author frequently work very close together in the production of a textbook; often they might almost be called collaborators in the authorship of the book. For instance, the writer of a textbook does not commonly sit down and, as the author of another kind of book often does, simply put forth his own mind on the matter. It is customary for him to consider carefully what sort of book of the kind appears to be particularly needed at this time, what seem to be the shortcomings of the volumes in current use in this department of instruction, what features which would be an improvement upon them could be devised, and so on. As the work of writing progresses, the book oftentimes is very considerably shaped this way or that by the counsels of the publishing house. Further, after a manuscript has left the hands of the author, it is every now and then the case that the amount of editing it receives (with, of course, the acquiescence of

the author) alters quite appreciably its earlier form. Cases have been where textbooks have been practically rewritten in the publisher's office: the publisher wanted a book *by* a certain teacher, instructor, or professor, but found he did not want it at all as the manuscript came to him.

Publishing of the general sort is, of course, a good deal of a gamble. Books which the publisher "banks" upon with a feeling almost of certainty every now and then fail to go over; books for which he expects only a moderate sale every once in awhile "go big". He turns down books which later are published very successfully by a rival house; he bids in books which never get "out of the hole". The element of chance is always present to a considerable degree in publishing an author's first book. In the main, the publisher must rely on his judgment of the possibilities of the book; beyond that he shoots pretty much into the air. But in the textbook business the hazard is reduced to a minimum. The publisher may focus his aim upon a definite target; he is able to make fairly precise calculations. The standing of this or that educator, briefly to illustrate the matter, would make reasonably certain the use of his book in the college or university of whose faculty he is a member; the many students he has had who have become members of the teaching staffs at other places would fairly well insure its adoption, in at least a number of cases, in their classes, and so on. In short, the territory is, with something not far from sureness, charted; in the life insurance term, the "expectancy" of a textbook may be more or less mathematically determined.

Now and then one hears it darkly intimated that the "real money" from writing is in textbooks: the rewards from a popular novel are all well enough in their way, but the author of a successful textbook or two has no end of a gold mine. Well, in this as in other matters the textbook business is peculiar. To begin with, the educational book business is not subject to anything like the periodical depreciation of fortune incident to business conditions generally which is the common lot of any other kind of publishing. Textbooks are not luxuries but bread. During the widespread business depression of a couple of years or so ago, a period of decided severity for the book trade generally, I recall that the educational publishers with whom I am acquainted were the only publishers I know who continued in good spirits. Indeed, I remember, they bore not a trace of worry. Houses which combine a general list with an educational list apparently sustained quite easily the precarious course of their general business by the steady keel of their educational business. And then in times of national prosperity it appears that there is a greatly increased popular appetite for education, and consequently a more voluminous distribution of textbooks than in ordinary days.

The active life of most books is brief. They haste away quite soon. One season is the span of even a very successful book, a book of fiction or of general character. After its little hour on the stage its sales steadily decline, in most cases practically cease altogether after so long a time as a year. With educational books it is not uncommonly the other way around. I was told the other day of a textbook which had been going for seventeen years; some time ago it had a sale of twenty thousand copies a year, last year its sale was a hundred thousand. That, of course, is rather an excep-

tional case; but in practically all cases textbooks are "property books". They have something of the durability of a piece of real estate. They are revised again and again and continue to sell year after year.

Among the peculiar things about the textbook business is this circumstance. A book (we'll say) of clever, humorous essays becomes advertised all over. It has a very merry vogue. Reviews of it are all around; columnists feed on it; "everybody" talks about it; everyone, pretty literally, has heard of it; the author's picture is published broadcast; he is regularly famous. The book, doing exceedingly well, sells maybe between ten and fifteen thousand copies. Right along, textbooks which, so to put it, "nobody ever heard of", sell as well as that, not during one year only but for a number of years running.

The highest percentage of royalty is paid on books of fiction, where a very fair royalty is twenty per cent of the list price. The usual royalty on books of non-fiction ranges from ten to fifteen per cent. A sliding scale of royalty is the customary arrangement — ten per cent on the first thousand copies sold, and fifteen per cent on all copies thereafter, or something like that. Authors' royalties on textbooks do not differ materially, I should say, from the royalties on non-fiction books in general. But there is this fact entering into the matter of the author's returns: textbooks frequently sell for very little. Ordinarily a person inclined to buy a copy of a celebrated book of memoirs, or a widely acclaimed volume of travel, is not overlikely to be deterred from the purchase by finding the book to be fifty cents more in price than he had supposed. Indeed (I have heard it said in the book trade), a person who is willing to pay six dollars for a book frequently would "just as soon" pay ten. That, doubtless, is not invariably literally so, but it is quite true enough for the purpose of the illustration here. Now a difference in price of as little as a cent between two competing textbooks has sometimes swung the balance in favor of the adoption by a school board of one over the other. Textbooks are for those mostly with "but litel gold in cofre".

Not a small part of the work on textbooks is done for very slender pay. Introductions oftentimes are written by invitation for school editions of the classics, for instance, and the volumes edited for an amount something like the space rates paid by the more or less literary magazines for an article. The plan ordinarily followed, it seems, when a series of books for educational use is prepared, is for the general editor (the editor of the series) to receive the royalties, the editors of the various volumes each being paid outright a nominal sum for his work. This practical simplification of what otherwise would be a highly complicated matter (as when the series becomes a very substantial property) works out in a way which may seem unjust to the associate editors. But, after all, the initial *idea* was that of the general editor, his the prime constructive thought—the others were invited to be, not coerced into being, associate editors, and, usually in such cases, had expressed themselves as happy in the arrangement when the deal was made.

An entertaining bit of publishing history which could have happened only in the department of educational books is this. When the author of any other kind of book enters into an agreement with his publisher to deliver his manuscript on a stated date,

he usually gets it there within something like hailing distance of that time. It would be remarkably grotesque for him to suppose that he might send it around sometime after the arrival of the next generation. William James, however, in delivering the manuscript of his "Psychology", was eighteen years late.

In publishing houses which combine a business in educational books with a general publishing business, the educational department customarily refers to that part of the business not educational as the "trade department". This practice is confusing to one whose connection has been with a house not having an educational department; as there by "trade department" is meant that part of the house not editorial, nor manufacturing, but which has to do with selling the books — which deals directly with the "trade", the booksellers. When, however, we look a bit into the educational publishing business we see the logic of its use of the term "trade department". For one of the peculiar things about the textbook publishing business is that *it* doesn't deal with the book trade at all. And so consequently one in the educational department of a publishing house quite naturally thinks of that part of the business engaged with books which are handled through the booksellers as, in distinction from his field, the trade department.

Every publisher, of course, has a staff of men whose business it is to go out and obtain orders for his books: his salesmen, or travelers. In the case of the regular publishing business these are men whose entire lives have been passed in the atmosphere of business, commercial dealing. Many of them have grown up in the book trade, starting in as "list boys", lads employed by bookstores to fetch from the publishers books which have been ordered by customers and which have been found to be out of stock. They wouldn't be successful as editors, any more than editors would be likely to be successful as salesmen. They are frequently paid considerably higher salaries than the editorial workers in a publishing house. They go out on the road with their cases of samples and deal with the buyers of the bookstores. A publisher's success (and the success of his authors) is in no small degree in the hands of his salesmen.

Buyers for bookstores are as a class people who have spent their lives in the book business. They are as a rule very much the same sort of capable business people dealing in books that publishers' salesmen are. Both speak the same language, that of the "trade". The travelers for an educational list live in another world, have another language altogether. When you talk to them (or, at any rate, when I talk to some of them) you might think that nothing went on in the world except schools, colleges, and universities. They have it all laid off, that way in which the race is divided up into Yale men, Harvard men, Cornell men, and so on. If you happen not to be one of any of these various kinds of men you are likely to experience a feeling that you are not any sort of man at all. The gossip of the regular book traveling salesmen, naturally, is all of the book trade, the general publishing business, and of authors more or less popular. They tell of how this buyer has gone from a store in Indianapolis to one in Los Angeles, of how that publisher is shaping his business, and comment on the changed allegiance of a certain well known author from one house to another. All of this seems simple enough to one whose field has

been the general book business. To him the gossip of the textbook traveler is marvelous; it seems wonderful that a man should know apparently everything that happens to any kind of assistant professor anywhere in the country. But that, precisely, is the textbook traveler's *business*.

The ranks of educational book travelers are recruited in some measure from the field of teachers. Occasionally it happens that a man who has been a teacher, and has become a textbook traveler, later returns to the teaching profession. He is in very much the same atmosphere all the while. Whether or not they have ever been teachers the main body of them are, in the fullest meaning of the term, "college men". And in their own world there is specialization. Among textbook travelers there are, for instance, "high school men", as distinct from the representative of college textbooks.

The business of educational book travelers is to circulate around among the schools, colleges, and universities; they have no concern with bookstores. Their personal friends are largely among the teaching staffs of educational institutions. They call upon them, and visit them; are entertained by them, and entertain them. A general publisher has a large corps of traveling salesmen when he has five or six; but a going educational list is likely to be represented by twelve or fifteen travelers.

The textbook traveler knows thoroughly the books he handles. He can expound to his hearer exactly why the book of which he speaks is (in the opinion of its publisher) superior to other books of its kind now current. He can follow through the book he has in hand page by page, illustrating point by point its peculiar features as compared with the methods employed by other volumes. He is familiar with the machinery of education.

His course of procedure, in the case of a schoolbook, is to endeavor to obtain at such or such a place the approval of as many teachers as he can; then he goes to the principal for support of the volume. Some time before the matter of adopting a new book of this character is likely to come up before the board of education, or trustees, or whatnot, he puts forward the claims of the volume to members of that body. On the day of — and the day or so preceding — the sitting of this tribunal the publishers' representatives of divers rival volumes turn up in the community, and a form of lobbying becomes entertainingly active.

The teachers and the principal that the textbook man has been able to "get" stand him in very good stead, as nowadays the question of the adoption of a schoolbook rests very largely upon their attitude in the matter. In the "old days" the situation was more picturesque. It was frequently an affair of decidedly lowbrow and cutthroat politics. In those jocund times some schoolbook publishers used to maintain pleasant relations with local town characters of personal popularity. The postmaster, say, might receive a small annual retainer. He was likely to know nothing whatever about textbooks, or books of any other kind. But when the time came around for the public officials charged with that office to consider new schoolbooks for the district, it was his concern informally to put in his oar. "Now looky here, Ed", he might say, "this means something to me." Or he might say it in another way. But, as I remarked, those were other days, other ways.