

THE BOOK FAIR AT CHICAGO: WILL IT LEAD TO A NATIONAL FAIR?

BY DONALD LAWDER

THERE was more significance in the Book Fair recently held in Chicago, under the auspices of Marshall Field and Company, than merely the fact that it was an overwhelming success; that some forty-six publishing houses were represented by extensive exhibits; that around a hundred thousand persons attended during the week; and that some fourteen authors consented to allow an admiring throng to fervently and devoutly grasp their hands, and, further, consented to autograph volume after volume of their writings, purchased during the fair.

This setting forth of material details, however interesting, would fail adequately to reflect the spirit of the Book Fair and would contribute to it a merely temporary news interest, rather than the permanence which it deserves. For we believe that the Marshall Field Book Fair has performed a far greater service to publishers, booksellers, authors and even the public, than the mere holding of such a fair, under private auspices, would indicate.

We believe that out of this Book Fair will ultimately arise, unless all signs fail, a movement for a national book fair similar in spirit to the century-old fairs of "Das Deutsche Buch" held twice annually—at Easter and at Michaelmas—in Leipzig and in

Frankfort-on-Main. We do not believe that the publishers will entirely ignore the lesson of this valuable demonstration of what can be done to bring the public into closer contact with books. It is, then, with more than purely casual interest, and certainly with an interest much wider than the mere reviewing of a local event in our second-largest city, that we may proceed to chronicle the Marshall Field Book Fair.

It is to be remembered that the fair was the second to be held by this great store of the Middle West; that under the inspiration of Marcella Burns Hahner, head of the book department, the first such fair was held in the fall of last year. There had been nothing like it before. Indeed, unless we recall the days of the book fairs in Philadelphia, preceding the Civil War, there had been nothing approaching it in this country.

Mrs. Hahner, of necessity, then, had first to "sell" the principals of her store upon the idea; not only upon the financial expenditure necessary, but upon the idea of lending a name, never connected with failure, to an untried and somewhat idealistic conception. Then came the work of "selling" the publishers on the proper spirit of cooperation; of the removing of all purely commercial considerations to the basis of an unselfish service to the

industry of which they were a part. And, finally, there came the tireless work of planning and supervising the arrangement of displays—of transforming, almost over night, a very efficiently arranged book department into an exhibition which would reflect the informal spirit of a county fair with its prize pumpkins, mammoth tubers, and jars of home-made jelly, bearing the blue ribbon of the first class.

That the fair of 1919 was a distinct success was apparent even upon the very first day of its opening. It became immediately evident to the principal actors that the "performance", to use the verbiage of the critics of the drama, "scored heavily". And, certainly, some of those publishers who sent their representatives to the first fair, believing that it was a mere form of cooperation between themselves and one of their largest customers, were agreeably surprised by the enthusiastic reports which they received.

This year, the publishers—at least a considerable number of them—journeyed to Chicago in person, satisfied that there was something much larger behind this "fair idea" than mere cooperation with one organization in one city, to promote a wider interest among the public in books. And, it can be said with a certainty, they returned with at least a "cubit added to their stature" by taking thought.

There was present at the fair, on different days of the week, a total of fourteen authors of poetry and prose, consisting of Mary Roberts Rinehart, W. Somerset Maugham, Irving Bacheller, Tom A. Daly, Dr. William Barton, Edgar Guest, Hamlin Garland, Edna Ferber, Enos Mills, Mary Hastings Bradley, Emerson Hough, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters and Henry Kittell Webster. Numerous

other authors, not on the schedule, visited the fair during the week. Most of these gave informal talks to the audiences which gathered around them during the day and then clasped hands with everyone in cordial greeting. Further, they wrote countless autographs upon the fly-leaves of their works. It is estimated that Mrs. Rinehart alone autographed close to a thousand copies of her books purchased on the afternoon of her visit.

The effect upon the public which came to gaze and remained to be conquered was impressive. Remembering, also, the wide variety of people composing the spectators—they ranged from clubwomen to typists, from dignified business men, displaying evidences of material worth, to book-hungry clerks—we cannot be surprised at their delight at seeing in the flesh the persons who, to many of them, represented something slightly less idolistic than a Hindu Buddha. Personally, we recall the effect upon ourselves of meeting, for the first time, an author. Ever afterward we purchased without question whatever came forth from that author's pen. His books thenceforth became endowed with a double personality. He was always looking over our shoulder with us, as we read the imaginations of his brain. Multiply this one impression by the thousands at the Book Fair, and we obtain a conception of one of the values of the exhibit.

Remember, too, that many of those who attended, had never before indulged in the pleasures of "browsing" among books; and think of the joys of roving unconfined in a space half a block square among shelves and tables laden with the season's choicest contributions.

Each of the forty-six publishers participating in the fair was assigned a

booth or a table of ample proportions, for the setting forth of books bearing his imprint. In many cases, the displays were enhanced by the exhibition of original manuscripts, autographs, and photographs of the more prominent authors for whom the firms published. These ranged from Johan Bøjer to Riley, Twain, Eugene Field, Conrad, Roosevelt, Kipling, and numerous others. The books exhibited were for the most part made up of current offerings, of fall lists just released to the public, or of the more important writings published during 1920. In some cases, there were collections of the most important books published during a firm's entire publishing career.

There were in addition to the displays of the publishers, several notable exhibits of very definite historical value, both as concerns books and personalities. One of these, the Lincoln exhibit, was perhaps the most comprehensive collection of its kind ever before gathered in one room. The assembling of this material from its several sources was in itself an achievement of no little consequence. The priceless collections of the University of Chicago, the Chicago Historical Society, and the Art Institute were loaned to the fair for the entire week; and the crowds which thronged through the Lincoln room were evidence that this great American was, indeed, "A Man of the Ages".

And, if we take it as a matter of course that around the Lincoln exhibit stood crowds four and five persons deep, during every hour of the week, what are we to think of the interest manifested in the very precious exhibits of the famous Brick Row Book Shop of New Haven, Connecticut, brought west for the first time, with their custodian, Byrne Hackett, giving

a continuous stream of ten-minute talks on their literary significance?

For we must remember that here at the Book Fair was no mere gathering of the exclusive circles of the literati. This was no invitation affair, cards to which were available only to those with at least a bowing acquaintance with a bookseller. This fair was public in the broadest sense of the word; was open to, and attended by, those who subsist exclusively upon the literary diet furnished by our weekly of largest circulation, as well as bibliophiles who are hardly aware that such a publication exists.

The exhibit included four folios of Shakespeare, the first of which is dated 1623 and alone bears a price of \$30,000; George Washington's copy of Gibbon, duly autographed and book-plated; first editions of "The Vicar of Wakefield", "Paradise Lost", "The Compleat Angler"; a black-letter Chaucer; and original manuscripts of Thackeray, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Lamb, Shaw, Hardy, Stevenson, and Conrad. All of these were the objects of respectful consideration and appreciation.

There is left to chronicle the fine-binding exhibit, in which coverless volumes were brought to a state of exquisite beauty by skilled craftsmen laboring through all the processes of cutting the leather, binding, tooling, and gilding before the very eyes of many who had scarcely before seen a book in any but the conventional cloth cover; not to mention the display of the processes by which a best-seller is brought from a state of mere printed pages to the condition in which it reveals itself as a completed article for sale.

These details of the fair, interesting in themselves, are yet inadequate in indicating the spirit of this enterprise.

Not forgetting the hundred thousand participants for whom, primarily, the fair was held, we are to think of the publishers, the authors, the numerous library committees from surrounding towns, the booksellers from neighboring states, and all the other groups which came into helpful association with each other. Here, indeed, is the application of what was a purely local book fair, to the far greater field of the possibilities of a national fair: the contact with a considerable segment of the public at first hand, and the interchange of ideas among the principal factors of the book trade.

No such medium has been available in this country since the book fairs at Philadelphia, held during the later fifties of the last century, and interrupted, never to be resumed, by the Civil War. At that time the problem of the distribution of books was relatively simple. We had, as a nation, hardly expanded beyond the Mississippi. Our population, then occupied with the difficulties of pioneering, had little leisure for reading. We had neither the number of publishers, nor the prodigious spring and fall lists, of today; and the number of booksellers was in proportion.

The proposition of a national book fair, then, is not entirely new in this country, and certainly it finds many traditions in England and Germany. Most of the leading booksellers of London had their representatives traveling to the great fairs, such as that of Stourbridge, as early as 1500. The importance of Stourbridge to booksellers lasted for several hundred years. It is known to have had its Booksellers' Row as late as 1725.

The leading booksellers of London, in the early days of printing, also made a point of attending the great book market which was held twice a

year at the Frankfort fair. It was here that accounts could be settled and the new books of the world seen. Frankfort remained the centre of the Continental book trade until after the Thirty Years' War in the seventeenth century. It was then gradually superseded by the fair at Leipzig, which has maintained its supremacy ever since. The Leipzig fair remained an important event in the Continental book trade until it was suspended in 1914, although it had gradually become a market only for German books.

Indeed, the national book fair idea has received its greatest development in Germany. Coincident with the Marshall Field fair in October, a book fair of "Das Deutsche Buch" was held at Frankfort-on-Main. And in this discussion of the value of a national book fair in the United States, it will be interesting to review, briefly, the salient points of this, the first exhibition of its kind in Germany since the World War.

There was a general exhibition of books of all departments of writing: fiction, biography, science, the graphic arts, music, education, philosophy, psychology. There was a collection of books of the sixteenth century, appropriately arranged in a room furnished in the style of that period. Probably the most interesting feature was the series of model home libraries. Some of these were: the library of a physician, containing a selected collection of medical books, books about chemistry and natural sciences; the teacher's library, composed of books on pedagogics, educational sciences, and similar subjects; the library of an engineer; of an art amateur; of a "fashionable lady"; of the music lover, and so on.

There was a model library of "the working-man", including a group of

books for people of limited means who seek self-education. These books presented in good editions the standard works of the classical writers, the philosophers, and the scientific discoverers of all times and of all nations. In addition to these suggestions to the reading public, there was a "model bookshop" with a display of the necessary variety of books, effectively arranged, which would enable a bookseller to modernize, and make more attractive, his store.

This brief recapitulation gives an idea of the possible scope of a national book fair in the United States. It is with these possibilities in mind that we return to the contention outlined in an earlier part of this article: we believe the Marshall Field Book Fair to be worthy of a wider scope than the mere locale in which it was held, and that the brilliant idea of its creator, Marcella Burns Hahner, is destined to a far more glorious unfolding.