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Publishing in Wartime: The Modern Library Series during the Second World War

GORDON B. NEAVILL

ABSTRACT

American book publishing during the Second World War had to cope with a huge increase in demand for books coupled with scarcity of resources, especially paper rationing imposed by the War Production Board. Based on research in the Random House archives and focusing on the Modern Library series, this article examines how publishers coped with wartime challenges and opportunities. Random House grew rapidly during the war. Sales reached the million dollar mark in 1941 and exceeded three million dollars by 1946. Many new titles were published in smaller printings than demand would have justified and were out of stock for extended periods before they could be reprinted. The psychological uncertainties and dislocations of wartime affected the kinds of books that were in demand. Sales of philosophy and poetry increased at a disproportionate rate. *The Oracles of Nostradamus*, published two months after Pearl Harbor, became one of the Modern Library's best-selling titles. Shortly after the war ended the Modern Library became embroiled in a censorship controversy involving the removal of poems by Ezra Pound from a Modern Library poetry anthology. The end of the war was accompanied by rapid inflation in all areas of the economy, and paper remained in short supply despite the end of rationing. It was not until September 1948 that all Modern Library titles were back in stock for the first time since the war.

INTRODUCTION

For American publishers and libraries, the Second World War was a time of plenitude and scarcity—plenitude in the sense of a huge increase in

demand for books, scarcity in terms of resources with which to meet that demand. Publishers, who had to cope with paper rationing and other shortages, were directly affected by the scarcities and felt them most keenly. The focus of this article is book publishing during the war. Most of the examples come from research in the Random House archives and relate primarily to the Modern Library series. In addition to addressing problems endemic to publishing, I will discuss shifts in reading taste during the war and touch on an example of censorship perpetrated by the Modern Library.

It will be helpful to begin with a few words about the Modern Library series and Random House.¹ The Modern Library was conceived shortly before American entry into the First World War by Albert Boni, a young Greenwich Village bookseller and occasional publisher. His objective was to promote the currents of European modernism in the United States by publishing inexpensive reprint editions of the works of such authors as Samuel Butler, Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, and Oscar Wilde. The firm Boni and Liveright was created to publish the Modern Library, and the first twelve volumes appeared in May 1917. The series grew rapidly during its first two years, but Boni's connection with it was short-lived. The two partners were incompatible, and Boni left the firm in July 1918. Horace Liveright was more interested in publishing new American writers than in the relatively unglamorous business of reprint publishing. He became one of the most important literary publishers of the 1920s with a list that included Hart Crane, Theodore Dreiser, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Eugene O'Neill, and Ezra Pound. In the summer of 1925, when he needed money, he sold the Modern Library to Bennett Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer. Of the 115 Modern Library titles published by Boni and Liveright, 64 had appeared in 1917 and 1918.

The Modern Library's new owners were young men in their twenties. Within five years they transformed the series. They broadened its scope to include older classics and more American authors and made major improvements in format and design. The first of the Modern Library's subsidiary series, Modern Library Giants, began in 1931. The Giants included two kinds of books: works like *War and Peace* that were too long for the compact format of the regular Modern Library, and substantial collections like *The Complete Novels of Jane Austen*, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, and *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*. A second subsidiary series, the shorter-lived Illustrated Modern Library, was published between 1943 and 1948.²

Cerf and Klopfer called their firm The Modern Library, Inc. After a few years they began publishing other books under the imprint Random House. The imprint was used initially for fine limited editions and occasional trade books published "at random." After the Crash and the subsequent collapse of the limited editions market, they turned Random House into a general trade publisher. They acquired Eugene O'Neill and his editor Saxe Commins in 1933 from the Liveright bankruptcy, published the first American

edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1934, and absorbed the firm of Harrison Smith and Robert Haas in 1936. The acquisition of Smith and Haas brought a list that included Isak Dinesen, William Faulkner, Robert Graves, André Malraux, and Jean de Brunhoff, author of the *Babar* books. At this point Random House became the corporate name, and the Modern Library became a subsidiary of its offspring. The two principals of Smith and Haas joined Cerf and Klopfer as partners of Random House. Smith stayed for less than a year; Haas remained until his retirement in 1956.

The war brought many changes to the firm. Klopfer, who was a few weeks away from his fortieth birthday, applied for a commission in the air force. He spent the later years of the war in England with the Eighth Air Force, serving as an intelligence officer for a heavy bomber squadron. Cerf was four years older than Klopfer and too old for military service. He remained a civilian, looking after Random House and playing an active role in the Council of Books in Wartime. Haas was in his early fifties, but he was touched most deeply by the war. His son, a junior lieutenant in the navy, was killed in action in 1943.

Cerf had his hands full running Random House. The firm grew rapidly during the war; sales reached the million dollar mark in 1941 and exceeded three million dollars by 1946. Cerf told a friend in 1943, "I think we have reached the major leagues as publishers now and I damn well mean for us to stay there."³ Part of the growth could be attributed to a series of best-selling war books. Richard Tregaskis's *Guadalcanal Diary*, published in January 1943, was the first Random House book to sell over 100,000 copies (Cerf, 1977, p. 163). *Thirty Seconds over Toyko*, by Ted W. Lawson, followed a few months later.

It was during this period that Cerf began to be known to the public at large as a writer and speaker. He took over the "Trade Winds" column in the magazine *Saturday Review of Literature* in February 1942. For the next fifteen years he enlivened the magazine's pages with a weekly mixture of publishing gossip, jokes, and stories. He also began to compile what became a long series of best-selling humor books. The first, *The Pocket Book of War Humor*, was an original paperback published by Pocket Books. His next project was a collection of humorous anecdotes and stories, *Try and Stop Me*, published in 1944 by Simon and Schuster. It became a best seller and was reprinted as an Armed Services Edition, which was distributed to American military personnel around the world. Cerf also became known as an engaging speaker. His first exposure came with tours of well-known authors selling war bonds for the Treasury Department. This was followed by a weekly radio program, "Books and Bullets," for the Council on Books in Wartime, in which Cerf interviewed authors of war books. The radio program led to lecture tours through the Colston Leigh agency. By the early 1950s, through extensive lecturing and his participation as a panelist on the Sunday evening television program "What's My Line," Cerf had become a celebrity.

PLENITUDE AND SCARCITY

The increase in demand for books during the war had several causes. For civilians, gasoline rationing and other wartime restrictions reduced options for spending leisure time away from home. Large numbers of people in this pretelevision era turned to reading. Extended periods of inactivity are characteristic of military life in wartime, and many soldiers and sailors passed the time by reading. The Armed Services Editions, published with the cooperation of the American publishing industry, distributed nearly 123 million copies of paperbound books between 1943 and 1947 to American military personnel overseas.

The war also affected the kinds of books people were interested in reading. The best-seller lists from this period reveal a strong interest in books about the war. In 1942 seven of the top ten nonfiction titles were war books. War books accounted for eight of the top ten nonfiction titles in 1943, seven of the top ten in 1944, and four of the top ten in 1945 (Hackett & Burke, 1977, pp. 133–41). The psychological uncertainties and dislocations of wartime also affected the kinds of books that were in demand. There is evidence of increased demand for books dealing with human values, especially philosophy and poetry.

The surge in demand for reading matter affected both publishers and libraries. For publishers, who had never before encountered such demand for books, the experience was dazzling. But it also had its downside. Cerf commented in 1943, "When you are able to sell any junk that you can get between covers it takes a little of the kick out of putting over the really good new numbers."⁴

As wartime restrictions increasingly affected the publishing industry, publishers found themselves unable to satisfy the demand for books. Paper shortages brought about a decline in the physical quality of books. Publishers used cheaper grades of paper and squeezed more text onto each page.⁵ Publishers frequently found it necessary to choose between bringing out new books and reprinting backlist titles. When newly published books attracted large audiences, publishers were often unable to keep up with demand. Cerf described a typical situation in his gossipy "Trade Winds" column: "The head of one firm greeted me cheerily at the Plaza last week and told me that he has no less than six books on the current *Tribune* best-seller list. Then his face fell. 'I might as well add,' he said, 'that five of them are out of stock'" (Cerf, 1942, December 12).

The paper shortage was caused by a combination of factors. According to Joseph A. Brandt, director of the University of Chicago Press, the crisis began in the forests. "Woodcutters began to discover that they could earn much more if they moved to the war-industry centers," he wrote, "and almost before we knew it the essential raw ingredient of paper manufacture had become a rarity." Large quantities of available paper supplies were required for military purposes. Every 75-mm shell, for example, had to

be packed in its own paper carton. Publishers were unable to get all the paper they could have used. To make matters worse, there was also a shortage of printers and binders. Neither of these occupations was classified as essential and many printers and binders were drafted into the military (Brandt, 1945, p. 101).

The War Production Board, which was responsible for allocating paper supplies, was established in January 1942, a few weeks after the United States entered the war. Its purpose was to direct war production and assign priorities to the delivery of scarce materials. Paper use in the publishing industry was limited in fall 1942, when each publishing firm was allocated a paper quota based on its use of paper in 1941. Initially publishers were restricted to 90 percent of the paper they used before the war. This was not a severe hardship, especially compared with Britain, where publishers in 1942 had to get by with 37.5 percent of the paper they used in 1939 (Cerf, 1942, August 29).⁶ Paper restrictions became increasingly severe as the war continued. There was an additional 10 percent cut in 1943, and a further 15 percent cut early the following year.⁷

Paper rationing meant that newly published titles had smaller printings than demand would have justified. It was common for books to be out of stock before they were reprinted, if they were reprinted at all. Cerf reported in spring 1944:

Not only we, but every other book publisher in the country, has had to slash schedules into shreds and let perennial back list dependables go out of print. . . . To show you what's happened to Random House, we have only 24 out of 64 Giants now in print, and over 100 Modern Library titles are now out of stock. Yesterday, the Army called up and asked if we could possibly fill an order for 400,000 Modern Library books. . . . If we could give them 10% of the order . . . we'd be lucky. Houghton Mifflin had over fifty books scheduled for publication during the rest of 1944. They have just cut this list to *twelve*, and think it possible that they won't have a single book left for sale after October 1st. Macmillan last week announced that twenty-four titles on its already published catalogue had been postponed until further notice.⁸

Random House favored the regular Modern Library and new trade titles at the expense of Modern Library Giants when allocating paper supplies. Despite paper shortages and occasions when titles were out of stock, regular Modern Library sales made impressive gains every year of the war. The growth began in 1941, prior to American entry into the war, as Table 1 indicates.

Modern Library sales during the first six months of 1943 were 100 percent ahead of the record-breaking 1942 sales. That pace could have been maintained throughout the year if paper had been available. October sales were merely 70 percent ahead of the previous year because of paper restrictions.⁹ Paper was not yet in as short supply as it would be later, and few Modern Library titles were out of stock in 1943.

Table 1. Modern Library and Random House Dollar Sales, 1940-48

Year	Regular Modern Library	Giants	Random House	Company Total	Modern Library and Giants % of Company Total
1940	\$171,346	\$175,359	\$ 542,657	\$ 889,374	39
1941	309,710	269,290	772,569	1,351,580	43
1942	339,902	224,216	967,313	1,531,448	37
1943	596,454	360,147	1,650,313	2,606,921	37
1944	601,525	241,436	1,591,434	2,434,406	35
1945	796,346	92,085	1,955,919	2,844,385	29
1946	834,907	486,682	1,909,840	3,230,442	41
1947	946,415	544,632	1,760,140	3,330,987	45
1948	882,809	533,915	1,981,143	3,341,072	42

Note: The decline in Giants sales in 1944 and 1945 was due to the large number of out-of-stock titles. Company totals include some additional income from sources other than Modern Library, Giants, and Random House sales.

Modern Library books were not rationed, and orders from regular customers were filled as they came in. But no new accounts were opened during the latter part of 1943, even though large retailers who had not traditionally sold books were clamoring for them. Cerf noted:

[P]ublishers have had to turn down thousands of dollars worth of business from chain stores and other outlets that are ready to use books as a stop-gap because there are so many other standard lines that they can't get at all. Ironically, these are the accounts we have been wooing unsuccessfully for years, and it is tough to turn them down when they come around with their hats in their hands. Our first obligation, however, it to our first customers, particularly when we realize that these chain stores will probably drop books completely as soon as they are able to get their old lines back.¹⁰

Thirty-five regular Modern Library titles and fifteen Giants were out of stock by January 1944. Availability of specific titles varied from week to week. When the firm's New England sales representative visited college stores during this period, he recalled, "faculty members would be waiting to ask me what titles were in stock in the Modern Library so that they could choose among them for reading assignments" (Consolino, 1977).

Later that year the Modern Library stopped reprinting Giants altogether. Newly published Giants continued to appear at a rate of two a year, but backlist titles were allowed to go out of stock until after the war. This was a sensible policy. The profit margin was lower than that of regular Modern Library books, and the Giants were paper guzzlers. The 8-by-5.5-inch Giants were larger than regular Modern Library books, and many of them exceeded 1,000 pages in length.

SHIFTS IN READING TASTE

The war brought increased demand for books in general and also shifts in demand for certain kinds of books. In Britain, data collected by Mass Observation, a grass-roots movement that enlisted volunteers to conduct surveys documenting contemporary life, indicated that sales of poetry picked up during both world wars.¹¹ A similar phenomenon appears to have occurred in the United States. Cerf reported that sales of poetry and philosophy titles increased at a disproportionate rate and that demand was especially strong among those in the service. "It seems that men who face danger want to know what makes them tick," he commented in a 1943 radio interview. "We find orders coming from army camps for Plato and Shelley and Keats" ("Of Men and Books," 1943).

The Random House archives do not include comprehensive sales information for the Modern Library, but there is enough information to support Cerf's statement, at least in part. Complete Modern Library sales figures exist for 1942/43, so it is possible to establish rankings of individual titles following American entry into the war. Prewar sales figures are not available, so we cannot compare wartime with prewar sales. But we have 1951/52 sales figures for the 100 best-selling titles in the regular Modern Library (out of 285) and the 25 best-selling Giants (out of 75). So it is possible to compare wartime sales with sales in the early 1950s.¹²

Cerf referred to Plato and Shelley and Keats. The Modern Library included two volumes by Plato at this period: *The Works of Plato*, a collection published in the series in 1930, and *The Republic*, published in fall 1941. In 1942/43 *The Works of Plato* ranked fourteenth among regular Modern Library titles in terms of sales and *The Republic* ranked twenty-first. We do not know how *The Works of Plato* sold before the war, but both volumes were strong sellers during the war. They were even better sellers in the early 1950s, when *The Works of Plato* and *The Republic* climbed to the sixth and seventeenth positions in terms of sales. The postwar increase probably reflects the growing importance of the college market. Young people whose college careers had been interrupted or postponed by the war returned to earn their degrees, along with large numbers of other veterans whose attendance was made possible by the G.I. Bill.

Keats and Shelley's *Complete Poetical Works* was a Modern Library Giant originally published in 1932. It was the fifteenth best-selling Giant in 1942/43 with annual sales of 6,619 copies. It did not rank among the twenty-five best-selling Giants in 1951/52, so it appears to have slipped in relative popularity.

Cerf's observation about the appeal of poetry during wartime is also supported by available sales figures for Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The Modern Library published two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, one in the regular series and another in the Giants. Like Keats and Shelley, Whitman suffered a decline in sales between 1942/43 and 1951/52. During the war *Leaves of*

Grass was the twenty-eighth best-selling title in the regular Modern Library and the twenty-fourth best-selling title in the Giants. By the early 1950s the regular edition slipped to sixty-second in terms of sales, and the Giant did not rank among the twenty-five best-selling titles in that series. These figures suggest that sales of poetry in the Modern Library were stronger during the war than in 1951/52.

The uncertainties of wartime almost certainly account for the unanticipated success of *The Oracles of Nostradamus*, which was published in the Modern Library in February 1942, two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The decision to include Nostradamus in the series had been made before the United States entered the war. Cerf commented, "We put that title in possibly with our tongues in our cheeks, because people seem to be interested in predictions of a strange character" ("Of Men and Books," 1943). Paul Galdone, who designed the jacket in November 1941, did not foresee the Japanese attack. The jacket merely refers to "fateful happenings predicted tomorrow for Europe and America by the sixteenth-century soothsayer whom Hitler relies upon today" (Ward, 1942, book jacket front panel). When the United States declared war on Japan on December 8 and recognized a state of war with Germany and Italy three days later, the future looked dark and the outcome of the war was uncertain. *The Oracles of Nostradamus* immediately became one of the Modern Library's best-selling titles. It sold 16,043 copies between May 1, 1942 and November 1, 1943. Only five Modern Library titles—W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in the regular series, and *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan*, and *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* in the Giants—sold more copies during this period. *The Oracles of Nostradamus* did not rank among the Modern Library's one-hundred best-selling titles in 1951/52.

EDITORIAL INITIATIVES

The Modern Library added and dropped titles as usual during the war. The series (regular Modern Library and Giants) grew from 278 to 316 volumes between 1941 and 1946. The number of new titles was significantly larger than this suggests, since twenty-eight titles were discontinued during these years. Titles dropped in 1941 and 1942 because of poor sales included William Beebe, *Jungle Peace* (1925); Irving Fineman, *Hear, Ye Sons* (1939); Anatole France, *The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard* (1917); George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1918); James Huneker, *Painted Veils* (1930); Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1927); Gertrude Stein, *Three Lives* (1933); and Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1933).¹³

The most notable new addition was the complete works of Shakespeare, published in three volumes in fall 1943. Cerf and Klopfer had long wanted to include Shakespeare, but the length of the volumes, which averaged

nearly 1,200 pages each, made it difficult to keep them in print. The Shakespeare volumes had first printings of 20,000 copies each, and the Modern Library warned that there would be no paper for additional copies until the following year.¹⁴ There were one or two additional printings during the war, but printing costs made Shakespeare marginally profitable at best. Postwar inflation erased whatever profit margin the volumes may have had, and they were out of stock through much of 1945 and 1946. They returned in fall 1946, divided into a more economically feasible format of six volumes.

A heightened sense of patriotism may have been responsible for the cluster of American history titles that appeared during this period. *The Federalist* (1941) was followed by *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern (Modern Library Giant, 1942); *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Adrienne Koch and William Peden (1944); *A Short History of the United States*, by Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager (1945); and *The Selected Work of Thomas Paine*, edited by Howard Fast, published in one volume with Fast's novel *Citizen Tom Paine* (Modern Library Giant, 1946).

One project that never materialized was a Modern Library edition of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Max Lerner, whose edition of Machiavelli's *The Prince and The Discourses* had been published in the Modern Library in 1940, appears to have suggested Tocqueville for the series. No good unabridged edition of *Democracy in America* was then available, and Cerf authorized Lerner to proceed. Almost immediately a problem arose. Professor Phillips Bradley of Queens College advised Lerner that he was preparing a new edition of the work. Bradley believed he had staked a claim to Tocqueville and thought it would be a breach of academic ethics for Lerner to prepare a rival edition. Cerf urged Lerner to go ahead, but Lerner's enthusiasm for the project appears to have been sapped and he failed to deliver his introduction. Two and a half years later he indicated that he was ready to resume work on the project, but by then Cerf had turned elsewhere. Henry Steele Commager was preparing an abridged edition of *Democracy in America* for Oxford University Press, and Cerf hoped that the Modern Library could reprint that edition.

Tocqueville never joined the ranks of Modern Library authors. Bradley's edition was published by Alfred A. Knopf in two volumes in 1945 and immediately took its place as the standard English edition of Tocqueville's work. Commager's abridged edition was published in 1946 in the World's Classics, Oxford University Press's series of inexpensive editions of classic works, and therefore was unavailable to the Modern Library.

No war books as such were included in the Modern Library. Cerf tried to get reprint rights to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in 1942, but Houghton Mifflin, its original American publisher, was bringing out a new edition of their

own.¹⁵ Two titles published in the series in the 1940s had some relevance to the war. Karl von Clausewitz's *On War* appeared in the Giants in 1943, but it sold poorly and was discontinued three years later. Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*, originally published by Random House in 1938, was reprinted in the Modern Library in 1944 with a new chapter by Snow bringing the work up to date. The front panel of the jacket of the first printing proclaimed in bold lettering, "THIS IS THE BOOK THAT TELLS WHY JAPAN CAN'T WIN!" The typographic jacket was revised in 1946 when the Modern Library edition was reprinted. The new jacket noted that the book included such topics as "The life of Mao Tse-tung, China's Lenin," "China's war against Japan," and "How Chinese partisans built the foundations of the new democracy emerging triumphant in China today."

THE EZRA POUND AFFAIR

Shortly after the war ended the Modern Library became the subject of a public controversy over the removal of poems by Ezra Pound from a Modern Library poetry anthology. At issue was *An Anthology of Famous English and American Poetry*, a Modern Library Giant edited by William Rose Benét and Conrad Aiken, published late in 1945.

The anthology was something of an anomaly. The American portion, edited by Aiken, was a revised version of an anthology that had been a staple of the regular Modern Library since 1929. The English portion, edited by Benét, had been prepared for the Modern Library with the expectation that it would be published on its own. Aiken's two anthologies in the regular Modern Library, *A Comprehensive Anthology of American Poetry* and *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, were out of stock for extended periods during the war. Aiken complained bitterly about the hardships he was suffering because of the loss of royalty income. He described the thousand dollars or so that he had received each year from the two anthologies as his "lifeline."¹⁶ He revised both anthologies in 1944. The 2,000-copy first printing of *A Comprehensive Anthology of American Poetry* sold out in ten days, and he was told it would be at least three months before it could be reprinted. Aiken responded, "So harrowing for us to know that if there *were* paper our livelihood would be definite and assured—we'd have an income on which we could live."¹⁷ Around this time someone at Random House—probably Commins or Linscott—had the idea of packaging Aiken's anthology with the anthology of English poetry that Benét had submitted and publishing both as a Giant. The motivation appears to have been to provide Aiken with a bit of additional income to compensate for his lost royalties from the regular Modern Library edition.

The timing was unfortunate. In May 1945, as the anthology was being prepared for publication, Pound was taken into custody in Italy and returned to the United States to face charges of treason. Cerf insisted on

the removal of all of Pound's poems from the volume. He ignored Aiken's strenuous objections but agreed to list the twelve omitted poems and to include the statement that Aiken had been "overruled by the publishers, who flatly refused at this time to include a single line by Ezra Pound" (Benét & Aiken, 1945, p. 788). Cerf's distaste for Pound's politics was focused entirely on the forthcoming anthology. There was never any suggestion of purging Pound from Aiken's recently revised anthologies in the regular Modern Library.

The removal of the poems was widely condemned. Lewis Gannett in the *New York Herald Tribune* compared the action with Nazi book burning. Many of Cerf's friends, including Henry Steele Commager, Max Lerner, and the Random House editor Robert Linscott, opposed the decision. W. H. Auden, the most prestigious poet on the Random House list, informed Cerf that he was prepared to leave the firm over the issue.¹⁸

Cerf had not expected this kind of reaction and began to question whether he was right. He devoted his "Trade Winds" column in the *Saturday Review of Literature* to the controversy, giving his side but also reprinting Gannett's column (Cerf, 1946, February 9). He invited readers to let him know their views. A slim majority of the 289 letters that came in opposed the exclusion of Pound's poems (Cerf, 1946, March 16). The twelve poems were restored in a subsequent printing along with a footnote that read:

After the publishers of the Modern Library omitted the poems of Ezra Pound from the first edition of this volume, a veritable avalanche of praise and blame, equally divided, descended upon them.

Nothing could have been further from the intention of the publishers than to exercise arbitrary rights of censorship. We now have decided to include these poems of Ezra Pound in order to remove any possible hint of suppression, and because we concede that it may be wrong to confuse Pound the poet with Pound the man. (Benét & Aiken, 1945; 1947 and later printings, p. 788).

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS

The war in Europe ended in May 1945 and Japan surrendered in August. Paper rationing was lifted immediately after the war, but it took time for paper mills to get back to prewar levels of production. Every publisher was trying to reprint out-of-stock titles, but paper remained in short supply. Cerf commented in September that "paper plants, printing houses and binderies are working twenty-four hours a day and still running weeks and weeks behind. . . . [W]e have on order exactly one million and a half Modern Library books. If we get 100,000 of them before January 1st, I will be surprised."¹⁹

A wave of strikes that accompanied the return to a peacetime economy disrupted publishers' spring 1946 production schedules. Klopfer, who was back at Random House, remarked that summer, "We are having the usual

hellish time getting our books out and the situation amongst the suppliers is certainly no easier than it was at any time during the war."²⁰

The extraordinary demand for books that had been a product of war-time conditions began to weaken. Spring 1946 was a good season for the publishing industry but not as good as some had hoped. The most popular books did well, but the secondary books—which Cerf defined as books that sold 6,000 to 10,000 copies before the war and then jumped to 20,000 to 30,000 copies because of wartime demand and orders from the army and navy—returned to prewar levels (Cerf, 1946, July 15). The market for war books collapsed so completely that not even remainder dealers could absorb all the copies left in publishers' warehouses.

The main problem for publishers was getting back into full production. Many new titles had been postponed during the last two years of the war, and there were backlists to reactivate. The spring 1946 Random House catalog indicated that two-and-a-half million regular Modern Library volumes were in the process of being printed and bound and that most titles would be back in stock by March.²¹ The Giants were slower to return. It was not until September 1948 that the Modern Library could announce, "Every title in the Modern Library and the Modern Library Giants is now in stock for the first time since the war."²²

The books no longer sold at prewar prices. The end of the war was accompanied by rapid inflation in all areas of the economy. A Modern Library advertisement in October 1946 noted that production costs of books were about double what they had been five years before.²³ Maxwell Perkins of Charles Scribner's Sons confirmed this in June 1947 when he indicated that book manufacturing costs had risen 100 percent in the past six years, mostly on account of wages.²⁴

The retail price of Modern Library Giants increased from \$1.45 to \$1.75 on January 1, 1946, but the increase was little noticed. Hardly any Giants were then available. In November the retail price rose again to \$1.95 and the price of regular Modern Library books increased from ninety-five cents to \$1.10. The ninety-five-cent retail price had been in effect since 1920; the new price lasted five and a half months. On April 15, 1947, the price went up to \$1.25. Booksellers were supplied with gummed price-change stickers for the jacket flaps since most Modern Library books in stores still bore the old price of \$1.10 or even ninety-five cents.

CONCLUSION

I have focused on the problems that American publishers faced during the war, but the war years also provided extraordinary opportunities for growth, as Modern Library and Random House sales figures indicate. The problems, real as they were, were insignificant compared to those faced by publishers elsewhere. The book community in the United States emerged from the war relatively unscathed. Shortages were less severe than in Britain

and other countries. There were no cultural or human tragedies on the order of those that devastated libraries and the book trade in Europe and Asia. No American authors, librarians, or publishers were forced into exile or executed. No American libraries, publishing houses, printing plants, or book wholesalers were destroyed by enemy action.

NOTES

- Unpublished letters by Random House personnel in the Random House Papers at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, have been quoted by permission of Random House, Inc. Unpublished letters by Conrad Aiken in the Random House Papers have been quoted with the permission of Joseph I. Killorin. I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, for their helpful and informed assistance over the course of three decades. Work on this article was supported in part by a grant from the Wayne State University Humanities Center, which is gratefully acknowledged.
1. For general accounts of the Modern Library series, see Neavill (1981) and Satterfield (2002). See also Neavill (2004), a review of Satterfield. Several passages from the review have been incorporated into the present article.
2. For an account of the Illustrated Modern Library, see Neavill (forthcoming), a companion study to the present article.
3. Bennett A. Cerf to Charles Allen Smart, August 26, 1943, Random House Papers (hereafter RHP). Smart was an Ohio author who worked in publishing and taught at Choate School in Connecticut before moving to a farm in Chillicothe, Ohio, which he had inherited from his aunt. He wrote eleven books, including three published by Random House between 1940 and 1947. He was serving in the U.S. Navy at the time of his correspondence with Cerf.
4. Cerf to Smart, October 19, 1943, RHP.
5. During the First World War, the English publisher Martin Secker reorganized the text of Norman Douglas's *South Wind* (1917) from fifty to forty chapters to reduce the amount of blank space after chapter endings. The Modern Library edition, published by Boni and Liveright in 1925, was the first to appear in the author's intended form of fifty chapters.
6. See Neavill (forthcoming) for an account of how Random House secured additional paper within War Production Board guidelines to launch a new series in 1943, the Illustrated Modern Library.
7. Cerf to Smart, August 26, 1943; Cerf to Lewis Browne, April 4, 1944, RHP. Browne was an author, radio commentator, and lecturer. His anthology *The Wisdom of Israel* was published by Random House in 1945 and reprinted as a Modern Library Giant in 1956.
8. Cerf to Browne, April 4, 1944, RHP.
9. *Publishers' Weekly*, July 31, 1943, 317; Cerf to Smart, October 19, 1943, RHP.
10. Cerf to Smart, August 26, 1943, RHP.
11. Mass Observation typescript report no. 46, "Book Reading in Wartime," cited in Calder (1969, pp. 516–17).
12. "Eighteen Months M.L. & Giant Sales, 5/1/42 to 11/1/43" [typescript]; "100 Best Selling Modern Library Titles; 25 Best Selling Giant Titles (Nov. 1951–Oct. 1952)" [typescript], RHP. I have adjusted the 1942/43 sales in one example from an eighteen-month to twelve-month basis.
13. Dates in parentheses indicate the year the work was added to the Modern Library.
14. Modern Library advertisement, *Publishers' Weekly*, July 31, 1943, pp. 317–18.
15. Cerf to Robert Linscott, Houghton Mifflin, November 4, 1942; Linscott to Cerf, November 6, 1942, RHP. Linscott became a Random House editor in 1943.
16. Conrad Aiken to Linscott, November 4, 1944, RHP.
17. Aiken to Linscott, March 16, 1945, RHP; emphasis in the original.
18. W. H. Auden to Cerf, January 29, 1946, RHP.
19. Cerf to Browne, September 13, 1945, RHP.
20. Klopfer to Cerf, August 14, 1946, RHP.
21. Random House catalog, spring 1946, p. 18, RHP.

22. Modern Library advertisement, *Publishers' Weekly*, September 18, 1948, p. 1095.
23. Modern Library advertisement, *Publishers' Weekly*, October 12, 1946, p. 2150.
24. Maxwell Perkins to Katharine Newlin Burt, June 4, 1947, in Perkins (1950, p. 303).

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