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John Tebbel: *The Golden Age Between Two Wars, 1920-1940 Volume 3: A History of Book Publishing in the United States* [Book Review]

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BOOK REVIEW

JOHN TEBBEL: *THE GOLDEN AGE BETWEEN TWO WARS, 1920-1940 VOLUME 3: A HISTORY OF BOOK PUBLISHING IN THE UNITED STATES*, NEW YORK AND LONDON, R.R. BOWKER, 1978. xiii, 774 pp. \$32.50 £24.25

Like those great fleets of multi-tomed histories launched more often in previous centuries than in our own, John Tebbel's *History of Book Publishing in the United States* is a work of undeniably monumental proportions. It opens with the establishment of the first printing press in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the late 1630s and will conclude with an examination of the highly commercialized publishing industry of the present day. Sections on general topics alternate with capsule histories of most of the major American publishers and a large number of the minor ones. The three large volumes published so far carry the story to 1940 and average nearly 750 well-filled pages per volume. Moreover, Tebbel is bringing it to completion with remarkable speed. Volumes 1-3 have appeared at three-year intervals since 1972. The fourth and final volume, which will deal with American publishing during World War II and in the postwar era, is promised for 1980.

Tebbel's model, as he indicated in the preface to volume 1, has been Frank Luther Mott's *History of American Magazines* (5 volumes, 1930-1968). Both works are monumental in scope, and there are notable parallels between the two authors. Each began his career as a journalist, went into teaching, and became head of a school of journalism. Yet Tebbel's history is hardly comparable with Mott's. Mott, like Allan Nevins, was a journalist who became an outstanding scholar. His *History of American Magazines* is an important and permanent contribution to scholarship. Tebbel, on the other hand, has remained primarily a journalist. He is a frequent contributor to periodicals like *Saturday Review* and a prolific popular historian, with more than thirty books to his credit. *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* is his most ambitious undertaking. It is a project he has tackled with great energy and stamina and to which he has brought a high order of organizational skill and a talent to present masses of information in a straightforward, readable way. But the result is far from being the definitive history of American publishing. Judged by scholarly criteria, it leaves much to be desired.

The history is based on a wide range of published sources — scholarly monographs and articles, publishers' memoirs, anniversary histories of individual firms, articles in general periodicals, a detailed reading of *Publishers Weekly* and other trade journals. Tebbel has had access to the rich collection of clippings about nineteenth-century publishing in the Adolf Growell scrapbooks at the Frederic G. Melcher Library of the R.R. Bowker Company and has made good use of existing theses and dissertations. No attempt has been made to tap unpublished archival materials. Surprisingly, he does not appear to have used the oral history

collection at Columbia University Library, which includes oral histories of a number of the publishers who figure prominently in the present volume.

From these sources Tebbel has brought together a vast quantity of information. But the history is essentially a scissors-and-paste compilation, not a work of creative synthesis. The facts he has assembled are allowed to speak for themselves. There is little interpretation of their historical significance. The narrative is not set very firmly against the social, intellectual, or economic background. Tebbel's volumes tell us a great deal about American publishing history, but they rarely help us understand it better. There are other problems as well. Tebbel seems to have accepted most of his sources at face value, without attempting to evaluate their reliability. And he has taken shortcuts that in a rigorous scholarly work would be unacceptable. For example, in discussing articles by or about publishers in general periodicals, he often relies on summaries of their content in *Publishers Weekly* instead of turning to the articles themselves.

Since Tebbel's history will be used mainly as a source of factual information, it is appropriate to ask how accurate that information is. A careful reading of the present volume indicates that the incidence of error is high. Some of these errors are unavoidable. Others are unforgivable. The following paragraphs will examine the kinds of errors one encounters.

No author who writes a general work about a big subject can avoid occasional minor inaccuracies, half-truths, and suspect judgements. Often these are flaws which only a specialist would be likely to notice. The following statement, which also contains the kind of embarrassing blunder, the making of which is one of the occupational hazards of authorship, is an example of this. In Tebbel's chapter on censorship in the 1930s, we read: 'Lytton Strachey, the eminent British publisher, author, and socialist, was barred by the State Department in 1938 from entering the country, to which he had been invited for an eight-week lecture tour.' (p. 651) Tebbel, of course, means John Strachey, not Lytton. Providing it happens rarely, a slip of this kind can be chuckled at and forgiven, allowing us to proceed to misleading information in the sentence of a more substantive nature. A minor objection is that, though John Strachey associated closely with publishers on both sides of the Atlantic and served on the selection committee of Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, he was never a publisher himself. The major problem is that Tebbel conveys the untrue impression that Strachey was kept out of the United States in 1938. The State Department attempted to bar his entry and detained him at Ellis Island for fifteen days, but in the end the courts allowed him in. Errors of this kind are regrettable, but they are the price one pays for surveys on a large scale.

Another type of error is also unavoidable, given the paucity of previous scholarship about American publishing history and the consequent necessity of relying on non-scholarly sources which may be superficial, fragmentary, or inaccurate. As Tebbel's bibliographic notes indicate, most of the scholarly work done to date has concerned the colonial period and the

early nineteenth century. There has been far less research into later nineteenth-century publishing; by the time we reach the period of the present volume, scholarly studies are practically nil. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the number of errors in Tebbel's volumes is increasing as the history advances towards the present.

Large sections of the present volume have been based almost entirely on information in *Publishers Weekly*. Though *Publishers Weekly* is an essential source for any history of American publishing after 1872, it needs to be used with caution. Its historical articles in particular tend to be unreliable. This is to be expected. *Publishers Weekly*, after all, is a trade journal. The historical articles in its pages generally appear in connection with book-industry anniversaries. They are journalistic pieces written under journalistic constraints, and they frequently contain mistakes that future historians will have to correct. For example, Tebbel repeats from *Publishers Weekly* several statements about the Modern Library series which can be corrected on the basis of my own research in the Random House archives. He tells us that when Bennett Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer took over the Modern Library from Boni & Liveright in 1925, they set out to modernize the list by trimming authors who were no longer fashionable, and indicates, as an example of the outdated list they inherited, that it then included four books by Gabriele D'Annunzio and six by Anatole France. In fact, the fourth D'Annunzio and the sixth France were added by Cerf and Klopfer themselves. Large-scale trimming of the list did not occur until the 1930s. At another point he states that by 1939 the Modern Library had grown to 400 regular volumes and 150 'giants'. This is wildly inaccurate: there were 220 regular volumes and 40 giants in 1939. Even at its largest, in 1970, the Modern Library never exceeded 394 regular volumes and 102 giants. Finally, in a discussion of publisher's devices, Tebbel writes that the designer of the Modern Library's first running torch-bearer emblem was Norman Moore. The designer of the original torch-bearer was Lucian Bernhard (it was redesigned by Rockwell Kent in 1929). Tebbel got this bit of misinformation from a 1927 *Publishers Weekly* article called 'The Cult of the Colophon.' His source for the first two misstatements was an historical sketch of Random House's first fifty years that appear in *Publishers Weekly* in 1975. Similar errors presumably lie hidden throughout the text. These are errors for which Tebbel cannot be held responsible.

There are, however, numerous errors which are Tebbel's fault and which suggest that the book was compiled with a degree of carelessness and haste. In a section devoted to the small expatriate presses in Paris in the 1920s, for example, Tebbel calls Nancy Cunard's Hours Press the '24 Hours Press' and Jack Kahane's Obelisk Press the 'Guardian Obelisk'. These misnomers appear to be the result of his having taken his list of these presses from the table of contents of Hugh Ford's *Published in Paris; American and British Writers, Printers, and Publishers in Paris, 1920-1939*, whose chapters about the Hours and Obelisk presses are so

titled. In transcribing the table of contents he has also managed to transmogrify Bill Bird of the Three Mountains Press into Bill Beard. These errors are dutifully incorporated into the index. Moreover, two of the presses he lists as belonging to the 1920s did not get underway until the 1930s. A cursory examination of Ford's text would have prevented these mistakes.

Finally, it must be noted that in addition to passing along the errors of his predecessors and introducing new errors of his own, Tebbel has muddled the waters in other ways. The scissors-and-paste method of compilation can be perilous, and he has fallen into one of its worst traps. This is the danger of discussing a topic in more than one context, using one source in one place and a different and contradictory source in another. The worst example occurs inauspiciously in the opening chapter, an overview of book publishing from 1919 to 1940. Tebbel has relied heavily in preparing this chapter on a sketch of American publishing from 1872 to 1972 that appeared in the one-hundredth-anniversary issue of *Publishers Weekly*, an article which is riddled with error. Tebbel repeats the errors from the relevant portions of that article practically verbatim, in spite of the fact that they are contradicted by his more accurate accounts of the same topics elsewhere in the text. For example, Tebbel writes that 'Everyman's Library, begun in the closing years of the past century by the English publisher J.M. Dent, was making rapid progress in early twentieth-century America'. (p. 6) Everyman's Library began in 1906, as Tebbel notes correctly in volume 2.

The next paragraph tells us that the Little Leather Library (a forerunner of both the Modern Library series and the Book-of-the-Month Club) was founded about 1914 by Albert Boni and Horace Liveright. As Tebbel's chapter on book clubs indicates, it was Harry Scherman, not Liveright, who was involved with Boni in the Little Leather Library. Liveright and Boni did not even meet until late 1916 or early 1917 — as Tebbel makes clear in volume 2 and in the chapter on the new publishers of the 1920s in the present volume.

We are informed on the next page that Charles Boni's Paper Books series was started in 1927. The correct date, given in the chapter on paperbacks and cheap editions, is 1929. The chronology of the Literary Guild gives the most trouble of all. In the opening chapter Tebbel tells us that the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild both began operations in 1926. The Book-of-the-Month Club did begin in 1926; the Literary Guild's first advertisements appeared in January 1927 and its first selection went out short thereafter. A hundred pages later, in discussing the history of Doubleday, Tebbel writes that Doubleday Page acquired in 1926 the Literary Guild, which he now says had 'begun a little earlier'. (p. 109) Doubleday — by then Doubleday Doran — actually assumed control of the Literary Guild in 1934. We finally get a reasonably accurate account of the Literary Guild's development based on contemporary *Publishers Weekly* reports but still weak on dates, in the chapter on book

clubs. Such inconsistencies are disconcerting to the reader and tend to undermine one's confidence in the author.

It would be wrong to conclude from the above observations that Tebbel's history is without value. Within its limitations it is a very useful work. Tebbel has not advanced our knowledge of American publishing history, but he has brought together an enormous amount of previously scattered information. One can find in his volumes the basic record of what is known about the history of American publishing. That record, however, is not very impressive. It contains many gaps. For example, though literary agents had assumed an important role in the publishing equation by the 1920s, there is practically no mention of them in the present volume, for the simple reason that little has been written about literary agents in this period for Tebbel to draw upon. It also contains many errors, and Tebbel by and large has left the job of trying to separate falsehood from truth to his successors. (Given the main thrust of this review, it should perhaps be stated that there is a great deal of information in Tebbel's volumes which is not erroneous.) Finally, the record consists for the most part of bare, uninterpreted facts. In the long run, Tebbel's greatest contribution may be not that he has brought together what is known about American publishing history, but that his volumes reveal how terribly imperfect that knowledge is. In either case we may be grateful for what he has done. His volumes are well organized, decently footnoted, and passably indexed. I look forward to their appearance, read them eagerly on publication, shelve them within easy reach, and refer to them often — but with caution.

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