

The Bull's Head Bookshop— A Unique Library Bookstore

IN A RECENT ARTICLE in *College and Research Libraries*, William B. Ready expressed concern about "the dire state of undergraduate reading."¹ Undergraduate students are not being educated to form a life-long habit of good and wide reading. "This ignorance about reading is producing a class of leaders that is illiterate," says Mr. Ready. There are many ways to attack this problem but all of them are concerned with making more good books readily available. The question might be asked: How can a university library with a limited budget provide an adequate selection of good readable books when the greatest portion of its budget must be spent for teaching and research materials?

The University of North Carolina Library has attempted to solve this problem by providing a rental library and bookstore in the university library building. This may not be a solution for every university library; local conditions, or taboos against competition with independent booksellers may prevent the establishment of a bookshop in the library. However, the idea is worth exploring, and the Bull's Head Bookshop is an example of a bookstore experiment that has worked.

The Bull's Head Bookshop has been an integral part of the University of North Carolina Library for a quarter

¹ Ready, William B., "Libraries and the Refreshment of Reading," *CRL*, XIX (1958), 124-25, 146.

Mr. Littleton, formerly Assistant to the Librarian, is now Director, North Carolina Interlibrary Center, Louis Round Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

of a century. Housed in the Louis Round Wilson Library, it is owned and operated solely by the university library. It is a friendly place where students, faculty members, and townspeople can rent or buy up-to-date fiction, non-fiction and modern editions of the classics. Usually visitors, and especially librarians, are surprised to find a bookstore in a university library because this is a service rarely offered. However, through the years, the Bull's Head has filled various needs and has grown with the expanding university and library. Today it is more useful than ever.

Dr. Howard Mumford Jones, a former English professor at the university is credited with founding and naming the Bull's Head. It grew out of his desire to provide for his students current books which the library could not afford on the meager book budgets of the 1920's. In 1928 he placed on shelves in his small office a few books which were rented to students who met for "bull sessions." From this beginning, the rental collection grew, and the "bull sessions" developed into talks on current books by local authors and faculty members.

In explaining how the Bull's Head received its name, it seems best to quote from an article by Mrs. Jessica Valentine, "How did the Bull's Head get its name? The only true response seems pretty tame: a murmured reference to Dr. Howard Mumford Jones who says he founded the enterprise so that his students might circulate current books and carry on discussions—or 'bull sessions'—in an informal atmosphere mildly akin to that of the old English

taverns, the Mermaid or the Boar's Head."²

In 1935, after a sojourn in the YMCA Building, the Bull's Head Bookshop and its financial and administrative control came to the library with a \$500 loan and a bookstock estimated at \$500. It became a part of the library's extension department and occupied a corner of the same room.

When the addition to the main library building was constructed in 1952, the Bull's Head was provided with a large, redecorated, separate room. The bookshop has always had a pleasant, friendly atmosphere, but in its new quarters it is even more inviting.

Since the late 1930's, it has had a full-time manager. Mrs. Jessica Valentine has been the spirit behind the bookshop and a prime mover in its success. A professional librarian, she combines experience in bookselling with a knowledge of librarianship to make the bookshop a vital part of the library and the university.³

The difference between the Bull's Head and other commercial bookshops lies in their emphases on service and profit. The Bull's Head is a non-profit bookstore, operated solely for service to students, faculty, and townspeople. It must make enough money to be self-supporting because it receives no financial subsidy from the library or the university. From its receipts, it purchases its book stock and pays the salary of its manager and the wages of several part-time personnel. After expenses are paid the remainder goes into more books and services. The library provides only space, heat, light, and janitorial service.

The bookstock has grown from a few hundred titles to over eleven thousand since 1935, and its total assets have in-

creased from \$500 to almost \$20,000. In spite of this growth, its primary purpose is still the same as conceived by Professor Jones: to supplement the library's general collection by providing good books for rent and sale in order to encourage reading and discussion. Current fiction and non-fiction comprise the basic rental stock but these are by no means the only books which are sold. Modern editions of classics are available, including a complete stock of Modern Library, American Everyman, and Viking Portables. Paperback books are becoming an increasingly important part of the stock. The bookshop provides a complete coverage of high-grade paperback books. The carefully selected stock of two thousand titles includes New American Library, Penguins, Anchors, Vintage Books, university press series and a very closely screened selection of Bantams, Dells, and Groves.

The emphasis has been upon books which will encourage wide reading. Therefore, no textbooks are sold or rented. Occasionally maps and inexpensive prints are available, but non-book materials, such as stationery, writing materials, and all the odds and ends of a five-and-ten variety sold by some campus bookstores, are not stocked by the Bull's Head.

All books are for sale and three-quarters of them may also be rented. The rental rate is now five cents per day with a minimum of fifteen cents. This rate has been in effect since February 15, 1954. When a rental book is sold, the minimum fee of fifteen cents is deducted from the list price of the book for each rental. This means that if a book has been rented ten times, \$1.50 is deducted from the list price when it is sold. Rentals usually pay at least the wholesale cost of most of the books.

Careful book selection is the key to the successful management of the bookshop. The manager must know the needs

² Valentine, Jessica L., "The Double Life: or the Rewards of L.S. Training to a Bookseller," *University of North Carolina Library School Alumni Association Bulletin*, XVII (May, 1956), 22.

³ Mrs. Valentine was succeeded on July 1, 1958 by Mrs. Helen Hogan, also a professionally-trained librarian.

and demands of the students, faculty, and townspeople as well as the current book trade. Most of the titles are ordered in advance of publication date so that the book will be on the shelf before or as soon as its official publication. *Publishers' Weekly*, *Retail Book-seller*, and publishers' advance notices are studied carefully. The final purchases are based upon experience and a feel for the demands of the clientele. Best-seller lists and reviews are usually too late for use in the initial selection of a title. However, reviews and best-seller lists in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Saturday Review*, *New Yorker*, and *Time* are read regularly and avidly as supplementary guides in case best sellers or good books are overlooked before publication and in helping to decide how many copies to reorder for rental or sale.

In order to cut down the "dead-wood," or the books which do not sell easily, several devices are employed. First of all, titles are bought in small quantities. Only books by local authors or sure-fire best sellers are duplicated in any great quantity. Orders are placed most frequently for one, three, or five copies, very rarely for as many as fifty. Another device for moving "slow sellers" is the three-for-a-dollar shelf, on which, ordinarily, there are about two hundred books which have been in stock for a fairly long period of time. The policy of selling used books (those which have been rented) at a reduced price also helps to sell them quickly.

Town and gown booksellers in Chapel Hill operate peaceably together but the Bull's Head must maintain a delicate balance between the indiscretion of aggressive competition and the necessity of making ends meet and increasing its book stock. A fear that high-pressure bookselling might bring protests from local book dealers may be imaginary, but the risk is never taken. There is

practically no advertising except for displays in the library. Mrs. Valentine says, "Our emphasis is on the things most modern competitive bookshops seem not to want to bother with. On one hand, we give no discounts, except to immediate library family, and apply no pressure. On the other, we hand out unexpected extras amid the inviting informality of comfortable chairs, good lighting, ashtrays, and an uncluttered display of a most distinctive variety."⁴

The Bull's Head's reputation has been built upon the "extras." In addition to the rental library, these include special orders for any book in print, searching for out-of-print books, arranging for magazine subscriptions, and placing orders for bookbinding with a nearby bookbinder. These, plus a readers' advisory service, have made the bookshop a truly personal bookshop where the needs of each individual are important.

Discussions of books have always been an important part of the Bull's Head. The original "bull sessions" developed into more formal talks by local authors and faculty members. For many years, Bull's Head Teas have been held with regularity. The intellectual climate in Chapel Hill is so favorable to authors that it has never been a problem to procure a guest speaker for these "teas."

In a recent "Trade Winds" column in *Saturday Review*, Pyke Johnson refers to the Bull's Head Bookshop as "that unique institution."⁵ It is not only an institution but an established tradition in Chapel Hill. The only plan for its future is to keep it as it is. As the university grows, the library hopes to maintain in the Bull's Head an informal, personal rental library and bookshop where students are encouraged not only to read good books but to appreciate and own them.

⁴ Valentine, Jessica L., "Ways and Means," *The College Store* (Winter, 1954).

⁵ Johnson, Pyke, Jr., "Trade Winds," *Saturday Review*, XLI, No. 3 (January 18, 1958), 6.