

*Two Augustan  
Booksellers*

JOHN DUNTON *and* EDMUND CURLL

*Peter Murray Hill*

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LAWRENCE, KANSAS 1958

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Catalog Card Number  
58-63057

PRINTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS PRESS

## *Preface*

In 1952 a new Chancellor and a new Director of Libraries at the University of Kansas, Franklin D. Murphy and Robert Vosper, came together to institute a revitalized program of enrichment and growth of the university libraries. One of the products of the program was the early establishment of a public lectureship on books and bibliography. In subsequent years five distinguished exponents of as many different kinds of bibliophily have visited the Lawrence campus to talk about books and bibliography. The choice of lecturers has been fortunate; all have had something to say. The present publication indicates clearly the further conviction that what the lecturers said was not only worth hearing in Kansas but is also worth reading and rereading anywhere.

The University of Kansas' Annual Public Lectures on Books and Bibliography are listed overleaf. The purposes of the list are three: (1) To identify each of the five lectures presented up to 1958; (2) To delineate explicitly the peculiar facts of publication of the second, third, and fourth lectures within the Library Series of the University of Kansas Publications; and thereby (3) To allow colleagues in other institutions to escape some of the exasperation induced by publication of parts of one series within another series. A separate list of the entire Library Series is printed inside the front cover of the present volume.

ROBERT L. QUINSEY

# THE ANNUAL PUBLIC LECTURES ON BOOKS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

## FIRST LECTURE

*An Informal Talk* by ELMER ADLER at the University of Kansas, April 17, 1953. Privately printed, 1953.

## SECOND LECTURE

PETER MURRAY HILL. *Two Augustan Booksellers: John Dunton and Edmund Curll*. Delivered at the University of Kansas, October 6, 1954. University of Kansas Publications. Library Series Number Three. Lawrence, 1958.

## THIRD LECTURE

WILLIAM B. TODD. *New Adventures Among Old Books: An Essay in Eighteenth Century Bibliography*. Delivered at the University of Kansas, December 9, 1955. University of Kansas Publications. Library Series Number Four. Lawrence, 1958.

## FOURTH LECTURE

ARCHER TAYLOR. *Catalogues of Rare Books: A Chapter in Bibliographical History*. Delivered at the University of Kansas, November 30, 1956. University of Kansas Publications. Library Series Number Five, Lawrence, 1958.

## FIFTH LECTURE

JACOB ZEITLIN. *What Kind of a Business Is This? Reminiscences of The Book Trade and Book Collectors*. Delivered at the University of Kansas, January 17, 1958. Publication to be announced at a later date.

**I**T IS NOT EASY perhaps in these days of radioactive and supersonic bustle to translate ourselves for an hour into a more leisurely world—a world in which a leading London bookseller and publisher, a keen (not to say a sharp) business man, could feel that he was on to a very good thing when he happened to get hold of the text of a funeral oration written in Latin by a Westminster school-boy on the subject of a Reverend Divine lately deceased. Nevertheless that was precisely the text that Edmund Curll did get hold of in the summer of 1716. And, knowing a good thing when he saw it, he quickly published it, price 6d, with a translation in English for good measure.

Unfortunately in his haste he allowed a few mistakes in the Latin to slip through the press. With the result that he found himself, this well-known London publisher, inveigled to Westminster School; tossed in a blanket; soundly beaten on his bare anatomy and made to apologise on his knees for his presumption and false quantities.

We feel, suddenly, I think, hearing about this now, that it can't have been such a dull, slow world in which

such things could happen: a world in which the interplay of men's passions and reasons, and not of protons and gamma rays, constituted the main stuff of life.

But to continue the story. One of the masters at Westminster School at that time had a turn for humorous verse, and an occasion like this was far too good to miss. So a day or two later (for publication was one of the few things they were probably quicker at then) a fourpenny poem appeared on the booksellers' stalls bearing the subtitle: "A Consolatory letter from Mr. D. to Mr. C. Upon his being tossed in a blanket."

Now Mr. C was Mr. Curll, obviously. Who was Mr. D? And why should Curll be made to say to him in the poem:

My Bowels yearn with fellow-feeling  
To see thee smart for Copy-stealing?

Of course the whole of civilised, educated, gossip-conscious London (then a very much more compact place) saw the point at once.

Mr. D was John Dunton, also a bookseller, also a publisher, also, it would seem, to put it politely, "a keen business man." But there was more to it than that. The London publishing world was full of such men. Why the particular link between Mr. C. and Mr. D.? That is the subject of my talk to-night. We are going to take a necessarily brief look at two of the most remarkable men in the publishing and bookselling world of the final years of the seventeenth and the early years of the eighteenth centuries.

To start with, both Dunton and Curll were "originals," to use a phrase of the time. Characters, we might call them to-day. And they stood out the more because

they were both fond of publicity, both rather quarrelsome, both prepared to go out of their way to attract the limelight in the bookselling world—and, more important, to *record* it. Amid all the squabbles and excitements which attended the making and selling of books in those days when books, remember, were virtually the only medium by which human knowledge was exchanged, both Dunton and Curll were, if we may borrow a modern metaphor, “cameras”—cameras who recorded a great many of the goings-on in that world which otherwise we, today, would know nothing about whatsoever.

So let us look at some of those goings-on, as recorded by Messrs. Dunton and Curll. John Dunton was the first on the scene. He was born in 1659, not only the son, but the grandson and great-grandson of a clergyman. Obviously his father wanted him to carry on the tradition, but possibly you cannot go on indefinitely producing chips off an old block; anyway, young John Dunton proved, in his own words, “too mercurial for the Church.” As he puts it: “I was headstrong and impatient if any Project my thoughts ran upon did not take effect the next minute.” And he was certainly full of “Projects” (a favourite word of his) even at an early age. Projects, some of them, of a precocious nature. At thirteen, for instance, his attempts to master Greek were seriously interrupted when, as he says, “I was wounded with a silent passion for a Virgin in my Father’s house, that unhinged me all at once.” Within the next year or two he was in love again; and again; and soon after that he met another young lady “that almost charmed me dead.”

But perhaps the most significant incident of those early years took place one day when young John was (and

THE  
L I F E  
O F  
Mr. *JOHN DENNIS*,  
The Renowned  
C R I T I C K.

In which are likewise  
Some Observations on most of the POETS  
and CRITICKS, his CON-  
TEMPORARIES.

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Not written by Mr. CURLL.

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[ Price 1 s. ]



here comes another favourite word of his) “rambling” home from school through the fields, “projecting” to himself the plan of his future life, and working out “What I would *be* and *do* when I came to be a man.” So busy was he doing this that he walked straight into a river. It was a lesson which a wiser man might have taken to heart.

Just why his father felt that, for such a boy, book-selling would be a more suitable career than the Church, we needn't go into. The plain facts are that at fifteen John Dunton was apprenticed to Mr. Thomas Parkhurst; and having run away only once, and fallen in love rather more often than that, and fooled away his time rather more often still, and having wound up his apprenticeship by whimsically inviting a hundred of his fellow-apprentices to what he called a “funeral” entertainment to celebrate the end of it, he finally emerged at the age of 22 a fully-fledged potential bookseller.

This is perhaps the moment to take his portrait briefly. He was of medium height and slender build; had a round and rather cheerful face, pitted with the small-pox; his nose was slightly Roman and his hair black and curly. Such was the young man who, in 1681, in his own words, “took up with half a shop, a warehouse, and a fashionable chamber . . . that I might not run the hazard of too large a rent till I found how accounts would balance.”

To be a bookseller in those days was almost automatically to be—or at least to want to be—a publisher as well, and Dunton soon found himself badgered by hackney authors who offered him specimens of their work; specimens which they would be only too delighted to expand into complete books at so much a printed sheet;

sometimes for as little as six shillings a sheet, though more often twenty shillings, and, in the case of very successful authors, double that. Dunton had no great affection for most of these hacks. "I always thought," he says, "their great concern lay more in *how much a Sheet*, than in any generous respect they bore to the *Commonwealth of Learning*."

However, he eventually picked his man and printed his first book—an important step in his career, for by printing more than he wanted he was able to exchange the surplus copies through the trade and so stock his shop with other books. Dunton's first printed books were pretty dull ones, it must be confessed: sermons, funeral discourses, theological dissertations, and the like. Dull, that is, to us, for we must always remember and make allowances for that remarkable and, nowadays, scarcely comprehensible difference of intellectual climate which made a good, dull sermon in those days sell like a hot cake.

It wasn't until 1685 that Dunton hit on something which, to us, seems to have somewhat more salt in it. And this may be the moment to draw attention to that curious duality of mind in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries which enabled many men of high and serious purpose to take immoderate delight in literary trivia of the utmost frivolity and even indecency. It may be argued, of course, that such a duality has always been part of the English character; that you find it, for instance, in Hamlet or in the knocking on the door scene in Macbeth, or in, shall we say, the fact that during a recent Coronation, one of the loudest cheers from the London crowd was for the little men with brushes and dustpans who came along the processional route clearing up after the horses.

Nevertheless it seems true to say that never was this duality more openly obvious than during the period we are dealing with. And perhaps we may venture to suggest that the reason for this strange mixture of the frivolous and the serious, of the religious and the licentious, lies in that undue rocking of the pendulum of human taste which was set going, and kept going, first of all by the restrictions of the Puritan period, then by the uninhibited reaction of the Restoration, and again by the late seventeenth century reaction to that reaction. This is merely a suggestion. Whether or not it accounts for the fact, the fact remains; and we shall see it crop up again when we come to speak of Edmund Curll.

The first open evidence of it in Dunton's case came, as we have said, in 1685. About that time Dunton met a young student of Divinity who bore a name later to become, through his son, part of the English language, but who at this moment was most concerned with getting into print some extraordinary verses he had written. He was Samuel Wesley, destined later to be the father of John. And the result of his meeting with Dunton was the publication of a small volume with a title-page and frontispiece which still hit us in the eye as we open the book to-day: "Maggots," the title reads, in the bold Gothic type which Dunton was so fond of, "Maggots: or, Poems on Several Subjects, never before handled, by a Schollar." The word *maggot* had come to have a metaphorical significance about this time, meaning whimsical, odd, a trifle crack-brained.

The poems themselves were certainly that. The title of one of them is "On the grunting of a Hog," and others are "To my Gingerbread Mistress," "On a Cow's Tail,"

“A Pindaric Ode on Three Skippes of a Louse,” and “A Dialogue between a Chamber-Pot and a Frying-Pan.” Subjects never before handled, indeed! How John Wesley must later have regretted his father’s maggoty humour!

In fact, John Dunton also had cause to. That arresting title made its point all too well. It stuck in people’s memories, and the older Dunton grew, and the more maggoty he tended to become, the more the word recoiled on him.

But to continue chronologically: it was no fault of Dunton’s that this first really original “project” of his in 1685 should coincide with Monmouth’s unsuccessful rebellion and a general slump in trade. A duller man might have been content to brood in his shop until things picked up, but Dunton’s bold and original answer, despite the fact that he was married by now, was to pack up several tons of books and set sail for America, where he also hoped to collect some money owed to him. He was miserably sea-sick, and half his books, which he had thoughtfully divided between two vessels, were lost when one vessel went down in a storm; but eventually, weather-stained and slightly dizzy, he and his apprentice Sam Palmer arrived at Boston in February 1686, in the good ship *Susan and Thomas* of 150 tons, Captain Thomas Jenkins.

It’s an interesting picture that Dunton has left us of Boston in 1686; a town where you could be fined ten shillings for being drunk, and whipped soundly for “kissing a woman in the street, though but in the way of civil salute.”

But we must resist the temptation to stray too far from the bridle path of bibliopoly which we have set ourselves. And without straying from it, there is entertain-

ment enough in Dunton's description of how he opened a warehouse and did business in Boston. "The books I had with me," he says, "were most of them Practical, and well-suited to the genius of New England, so that . . . they began to move apace."

Practical most of the books may have been, but it seems that they also included a sprinkling of titles which might attract the lady customers of Boston, of whom we get several revealing glimpses.

We feel, for instance, that we know almost personally a certain Mrs. F - - -. "When she came into my Warehouse," Dunton says, "I wonder'd what Book she intended to buy; at last I perceiv'd she intended to buy none, because she knew not which to ask for; yet she took up several, look'd in 'em, and laid 'em down again. Perceiving her Simplicity, I ask'd her in Joque, whether she wou'd not buy the History of Tom Thumb? She told me "Yes;" upon which, I ask'd her whether she'd have it in folio, with Marginal Notes; to which she only said 'The best, the best' . . . ."

We also feel we have met before a certain Doll S - - -, who, Dunton says, "Us'd to come often to my Warehouse and wou'd plague my man *Palmer* more than all my Customers besides: Her life is a perpetual Contradiction; and she is made up of 'I will' and 'I will not': Her constant Dialect in my Warehouse was '*Palmer*, Reach me that Book, yet let it alone too; but let me see't however, and yet 'tis no great matter neither.' "

Dunton paid a visit to Cambridge and sold several books to Harvard; and he opened a branch warehouse at Salem, which did well in the sole charge of young Sam Palmer, though only after the latter had been suitably ad-

monished for spending too much of his time duck-hunting instead of bookselling.

But in all it seems doubtful whether Dunton made much of a profit out of his American venture. "He that trades with the inhabitants of Boston," he records dryly, "must be well furnished with a Grecian Faith; he may get promises enough, but their payments come later." One thing Dunton did get out of his trans-Atlantic trip. Ever afterwards, he was able to describe himself as the traveller—the "rambler"—which he so longed to be. It's a word which came more and more into his curious philosophy as the years went by.

It's time now, too, introduce a further trait in his character: He just couldn't seem to stop scribbling. "No person alive," he once said to himself half-jokingly, "ever saw him without a *goose-quill* in his Mouth, or between his Fingers." And it's a remarkable fact, and a measure of his extreme scribaciousness, that during the first three weeks or so of his stay in America—weeks in which he had plenty of business on his hands; in which he moved about and led a full social life (especially among the ladies)—in those three weeks he not only kept a voluminous diary of his doings and sent off innumerable letters to friends and relatives in England, but also wrote no fewer than two or three letters a day (sixty in all) to his wife in London: "A whole Cargo of Love!" as he puts it modestly.

Dunton returned to London in the autumn of 1686 but later, he slipped away and took a "ramble" to the Low Countries and Germany.

He was back again in London in November, 1688, and by now, as he says, "The Humour of *rambling* was pretty well off with me, and my thoughts began to fix

rather upon Business. The Shop I took, with the sign of the Black Raven, stood opposite to the Poultry Counter, where I traded ten years . . . with variety of successes and disappointments."

Those ten years are probably the most interesting of Dunton's life; years in which, apart from the great deal of business he did as a bookseller and publisher, his own curious and conflicting personality came to its fullest flower. The main ingredients of that personality we have already mentioned: first the impulse to *ramble* (either geographically or mentally) in conflict with the desire to set on foot new and splendid *projects*; then the duality of mind, the levity and seriousness, and above all, the ever-present, ever-scratching goose-quill.

The first really typical flowering of his complicated personality came in 1691, with the publication of a very remarkable book called, briefly: "A Voyage Round the World: or, A Pocket Library, Divided into Several Volumes. The first of which contains the Rare Adventures of Don Kainophilus, from his cradle to his 15th year. . . ."

Now it's quite certain Dunton took hints for the style of this rambling autobiography from other writers, but the fact remains that for the most part it was an original "project"—and a very maggotty one at that. Chapter One is headed "Of my Rambles before I came into my Mother's Belly, and while I was there," and a typical chapter begins with the following apostrophe, well-seasoned with typographical dashes:

—But first to the purpose. —Here Page, bring me a Brimmer. —So, so, —now I can write *Rambles agen!*"

Two words will have leaped already to the intelligent and well-read listener's mind: *Tristram Shandy*. And it's no

secret that, nearly seventy years later, Sterne did take hints for his own rambling, maggoty masterpiece from this lesser book of Dunton's. Sterne admitted as much, and it's a particularly happy coincidence that the very copy which he almost certainly made use of now rests, quite by chance, in the public library at Boston.

Unlike Sterne, Dunton was not a genius, and the pre-natal and ante-natal adventures of Don Kainophilus never capture and hold the imagination as those of Tristram Shandy do. In fact Dunton's book is quite forgotten to-day; so much so that, although Wing records it, he fails to record it as Dunton's. This is a pity, because, although it isn't a work of genius, it is full of spirit and of incidental information about the Life and Opinions of John Dunton. And it's by no means nothing, on top of that, for a book to have helped to touch off a world masterpiece of literature. It was Ernest Hemingway, I think, though his exact words escape me, who said that some writers exist solely in order that another writer may compose a single sentence.

Dunton clearly meant to keep up his rare adventures of Don Kainophilus through as many volumes as the public would stand for, as did Sterne, of course. But in Dunton's case three volumes were enough, not nine. No more were published; and anyway he had already been caught up in a much more successful and profitable "project," the most successful, as it proved, of his career.

He thought of it one day, walking with two bookseller friends through St. George's Fields. Stopping suddenly, with a dramatic gesture he exclaimed: "Well, Sirs, I have a thought I will not exchange for fifty guineas."

Nowadays this particular "project" doesn't seem so



strange to us, or so valuable. There can hardly be a magazine or newspaper in the world which hasn't at some time or another boasted an "Answers to correspondents" column in which readers may have their problems, intimate or otherwise, resolved by somebody, or by a panel of somebodies, masquerading under some such pen-name as *Aunt Mabel*.

*Aunt Mabel* is, in fact, the tail-end of the idea which Dunton had in St. George's Fields. For what he set up in 1690 was a twice-weekly penny paper which did nothing more or less than print answers to correspondents' questions. So popular did it immediately prove that Dunton, too, found that a panel was necessary to cope with the number and complexity of the queries. But since the year was 1690, and there were still plenty of members of the public who had read the classics, the title the panel chose to work under was not *Aunt Mabel*. They called themselves *The Athenian Society*, and the paper was called *The Athenian Gazette* or *The Athenian Mercury*.

Classics or not, human nature doesn't change much, and to-day we can still recognize a familiar ring about many of the queries which were sent in:

"Why should an unhappy marriage make a man look old?"

"Are coffee and tobacco prejudicial to procreation?"

"A lady who was near marrying hath broke it off with me, what ought I to do?"

"What is the best instrument to pare corns with?"

Alas, time does not permit us to linger over the answers to these universal problems. But there is at least one question to which the answer must be given, because of its relevance to our theme:

“Is’t possible” one correspondent asked, “Is’t possible for an estate to prosper which is gotten by selling lewd and vitious books . . .”

Not an easy question for a bookseller of that time to answer perhaps, though it’s fair to add that Dunton himself (unlike Curll) was never a particular offender in this respect.

However, *The Athenian Society* thought it best to be on the equivocal side, and their safe answer was: “It may be possible, but not likely. . . .”

*The Athenian Mercury* was a great success, and continued to appear on Tuesdays and Saturdays for more than seven years. To-day, it’s an extremely rare periodical in its original issues; in fact, it was in Dunton’s own day, and he himself speaks of a hundred pounds, which was big money then, being given for the complete run of 580 penny numbers.

Though *The Athenian Mercury* was far and away the most successful, it wasn’t the only periodical which Dunton had a hand in in those days when the periodical paper was a fashionable literary form. *Dunton’s Ghost*, *The Post Angel* and *The Night Walker* are some of the titles which stick in the memory.

Especially *The Night Walker*. By 1696 the pendulum of public morality had swung well away from the merrier oscillations of the Restoration; societies for the reformation of manners were springing up like mushrooms; and in October of that year, in the words of a contemporary newspaper: “About a Cart Load of obscene books and Cards, tending to promote Debauchery,” were publicly burnt in Westminster in the presence of a magistrate. “They belonged,” we are particularly told, with that

characteristic English horror of anything rather saucy that comes from the Continent, "they belonged to one *Bernardi*, an *Italian*." It was precisely at this moment that Dunton launched another of his projects; not a completely original one, it's true, but one which exactly hit off the mood of the moment in that, while it played up this fashionable moral fervor, at the same time it pandered to that other, more raffish streak in the contemporary character of which we have already spoken. It was a brilliant stroke of Dunton's to combine and reconcile the two, and he did it in a paper whose title we must quote at some length:

"The Night-Walker:" (it runs) "or, Evening Rambles in search after Lewd Women, with the conferences held with them. . . . to be publish'd Monthly, 'till a Discovery be made of all the chief *Prostitutes* in *England*, from the *Pensionary Miss*, down to the *Common Strumpet* . . . Dedicated to the Whore-Masters of London and Westminster. . . . Price 6d."

The adventures—the "perilous adventures" he himself called them—which Dunton and his association underwent in doing the field work for this remarkable piece of research into the night life of seventeenth century London, the way in which they would, so to speak, lead the lady up the garden path, only to confront her at the summerhouse door with an admonitory frown and a brief sermon on the wages of sin—all this is the subject of a talk in itself. But we ourselves must turn an admonitory frown upon such trifling. Time is limited; Curll lies ahead of us; and still there is much of Dunton unexplored.

Unexplored is indeed the word. It's a remarkable fact that nobody yet seems to have dabbled in Dunton as

much as he deserves. Everyone knows about his *Life and Errors*, that long rambling book in which he tried once again, in 1705—as he was always trying—to cram his experiences and opinions; everyone acknowledges that without that book we should know much less than we do about the bookselling world of those days. And about the booksellers and authors themselves, too, for many of Dunton's innumerable brief pen-portraits are brilliantly vivid. We can still hear the creaking of Mr. Eliphaz Dobson's wooden leg; we can still admire the zest for living of Mr. Milbourn, who “was fairly married to four Wives and was a tender husband to all. . . . He died in his 74th year; and having learnt all that could be taught him, he is gone to heaven to see more.” And we still have a soft spot surely for Mr. Darby's daughter in Cornhill, “who bears away the bell from all the booksellers' wives in London.”

But too many people, one can't help feeling, have taken *The Life and Errors* as the sum and epitome of Duntonry. It is very far from being so. Outside its covers, as well as within them, we must remember, Dunton was always scribbling, always trying to pin down for posterity his quarrels, his grievances, his delights—anything, in fact, which touched his life. He wrote literally scores of books and pamphlets and poems; perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say hundreds, so many of them now seem to be lost or extremely difficult to come by. For at almost every turn while only tentatively exploring a few of these elusive pieces in preparation for this talk, I seem to have found myself stumbling over some previously unrecorded, or at least previously unpublicised, fact, either about Dunton or his times.

Wing's failure to credit Dunton with *The Voyage*

*round the World* is an instance of this curious lack of interest in him outside the *Life and Errors*. Here are one or two more:

The word "Conger," meaning an association of book-sellers, is recorded by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as appearing for the first time in 1700. But there's a use of it, and not merely a use but a definition, in that same *Voyage round the World* published nine years earlier. Dunton's definition of a Conger is a metaphorical one: "Why," he says, "'tis an *over-grown Eel*, that devours all the Food from the weaker Grigs, and when he wants other Food, swallows them too into the bargain. A *poor Fly* can't stir upon the water, but—pop, he's at him".

Both the British Museum catalogue and Wing have failed to notice that a very amusing work published in 1697 was another of Dunton's "projects." This was, to give it its brief title, *The Challenge sent by a Young Lady to Sir Thomas—, or the Female War*, a charming series of literary debates between the sexes in which the provocative arguments carry such titles as *Against Nunneries*, by Mr. Preston; *For Them*, by Madam Lake; *Against marrying a Widow*, by Sir Thomas; *The Defence of Widows*, by a young Widow, etc., etc.

These emendations and additions to our knowledge of Dunton and his times are made humbly. The fact that they and others too lengthy to be noticed here, have cropped up during the all-too-brief researches I have been able to make, is put forward not as a boast, but as a signpost to the Eldorado which must certainly await more indefatigable explorers. To scholars in search of an author, I do indeed commend John Dunton.

And I commend not only works like *The Dublin*

*Scuffle* of 1699, with its remarkable picture of bookselling and booksquabbling in that city, but also the less obvious pamphlets and protests and whatnots which poured from Dunton's pen after he'd given up the distraction—and dare we say the discipline?—of bookselling; works in which, tucked away, can often be found some valuable piece of information.

One thing which endears Dunton to us, whatever his faults and failings, is the genuine love he had for everything to do with books and for the trade of bookselling: "the most Delightful, Gainful, and best Trade in the City of *London*," he once wrote, adding, "had I an Hundred Sons, I'd make 'em all Stationers, Booksellers, and Printers."

\* \* \*

On to that stage in 1706 came another newly-fledged bookseller and would-be publisher: Edmund Curll, aged 23. Let us look rather closely at the title of what is probably the first book he did publish: *The Athenian Spy with The Way of a Man with a Maid . . . The Second Edition*. Surely that word *Athenian* seems more than familiar! And *Second Edition* has a slightly sinister ring. Can it be that the young Curll is beginning his career by reprinting a book of Dunton's? It certainly looks like it. Did he, we wonder, pay for the privilege? Probably we shall never know, but I think we may give Curll the benefit of that doubt, because there are signs that the two men remained on good terms; and it is certain that in 1710 Curll was one of the booksellers concerned in publishing the first and only volume of that remarkable compilation of Dunton's, *Athenianism*. Let us look once more at that title: *The Athenian Spy, with The Way of a Man with a*

*Maid*. The second part of it has been added by Curll, and despite its Biblical origin it gives the title, we must admit, a slightly salacious attractiveness. Already, at first blow, we see Curll striking a note which was to become very much a part of his stock-in-trade.

But as we glance at that first short list of a handful of new books published by him in 1706, what is this we see? How does a book called *The Devout Christian's Companion* come to be in the list, alongside *The Way of a Man with a Maid*?

Once again, we see that curious duality of character which seems to have been so much a part of the age.

Let us first take a look at this extraordinary bookseller through the eyes of Thomas Amory, who describes him in the second volume of his fantastic mid-eighteenth century novel, *John Bunclé*. Curll was a "tall and thin, ungainly, awkward, whitefaced man." Amory remembers "His eyes were a light grey, large, projecting, goggle and purblind. He was splay-footed, and [extraordinary epithet] baker-kneed. He was well acquainted with more than the title-pages of books. He was not an infidel. He was a debauchee. He died at last as great a penitent as ever expired." Ralph Straus, his modern biographer, meeting him on his home-ground—the title page—calls him "the unspeakable." His contemporary, Alexander Pope, at one and the same time his greatest avowed enemy and most prolific source of income, uses, in the *Dunciad*, the epithets "shameless" and "dauntless." But with the characteristic artistry of a worthy opponent, the poet writes "Alone—untaught to fear, stood dauntless Curll"—some one hundred and twenty lines earlier than the damning epithet "shameless." The latter sticks—the former is forgotten.

Curll's name is synonymous nowadays with the smutty and salacious pamphlet. Curll's "chaste press," as it was branded for all time by Pope in his *Dunciad*, brings readily to mind such catchpenny-titled sixpenny productions as Thomas Stretser's *Merryland* series, the love poems of Bonefonius, the boring pornographic subtleties of *Arbor Vitae* and the equally boring *Cases of Impotency and Divorce*. Besides these and the much reviled and under-estimated "Lives," (of which Curll published more than a score) which gave John Arbuthnot the chance of making the immortal and oft-quoted remark, that "Curll is one of the new Terrors of Death," the average book collector or bibliophile would have some difficulty in naming even half a dozen of Curll's publications. And yet over a period of forty-one years he printed, published or had a hand in over 1,000 books and pamphlets. His authors included Pope, Prior, Swift, Defoe, and Addison, among those in the first rank of contemporary authors, and a considerable number of lesser-known poets whose works deserve a better fate than posterity has awarded them.

I would like, within the time left at my disposal, to speak briefly of Edmund Curll's life and background, and then pass on to some of the more interesting books he published, for, as John Nicolls of *Anecdotes* fame said of him, "The memory of Edmund Curll has been transmitted to posterity with an obloquy more severe than he deserved. Whatever were his demerits in having occasionally published works that the present age would very properly consider too licentious, he did not publish a single volume but what, amidst a profusion of base metal, contained some precious ore, some valuable reliques,



which future collectors could nowhere else have found." The difficulty in treating shortly an account of Curll's life is not what to include, but what to omit. He got into more fights than a patriotic southern Irishman could reasonably expect to encounter in a lifetime spent exiled in Belfast. What is more, he enjoyed most of them immensely; and even those in which he was worsted physically he turned to his own advantage financially by means of print.

Curll was born in 1683, in the west of England, and seems positively to have avoided publicity until "after passing through several menial capacities he arrived at the degree of a Bookseller's Man, kept a stall, and then took a shop in the purlieu of Covent Garden." A commendably brief account of his early years, and, at the present, more or less all that is known. We do know, however, that his education had not been neglected. Curll had considerably more than a smattering of Greek and Latin; in fact, from his own writings it can safely be said that he had been given a sound classical education and had assimilated at least an adequate knowledge of English literature. With these assets, to which must be added a quite genuine love of good books, unbounded belief in his own abilities, great courage and a brain of Machiavellian proportions, the would-be bibliopole arrived in London with a wife and small son.

Curll began, as every good bookseller should, with a stall, where doubtless the haggling customers of the early eighteenth century had a toughening effect on his salesmanship, and well fitted him for the next step up the ladder—the position of Booksellers-man. He was apprenticed to Richard Smith, bookseller and auctioneer, who kept shop "without Temple Bar." He worked for Smith,

helped at his Dutch auctions, kept his eyes and ears open and soon decided that he was quite fitted to strike out on his own. From his first shop "at the Peacock near St. Clements Church" in the year of grace 1706 started a small trickle of books and pamphlets—a trickle that soon emerged as a fair sized stream and, in ten years assumed the proportions of a minor torrent. For in 1716, ten years after the first book to bear his name was issued, his annual output exceeded 65 publications.

Curll obviously knew what he wanted out of life and it is extremely interesting to watch the early pattern of his plan develop. He had probably learnt a lot from Dutton, but, unlike him, Curll possessed a sanity which enabled him to capitalize his genius for self-advertisement and the bizarre. Pounce on a controversy, worry it, exploit it, and when it has ceased to be controversial or profitable, drop it and look out for another; if things are dull and no controversy presents itself, start one with your right hand, reply to it with your left, toss it to and fro, kick it high in the air if it looks like subsiding, and all the while let the eager public know how things are going. A sixpenny pamphlet can be answered by an indignant rejoinder (price one shilling) and by skilful and tantalising advertisements the affair can be kept going for quite a time. If, of course, some injured party, haplessly drawn into the wrangle, fights back, so much the better. Fines and imprisonment, though tedious and inconveniencing, help to bring notoriety and sometimes popular acclaim, and as for an emetic or a blanket tossing—why, these are occupational risks well worth the temporary physical embarrassment, and provide excellent copy for more saleable pamphlets.

In 1710 Curll (unmasked) published *Meditations upon a Broomstick*, and thus came for the first time into Jonathan Swift's orbit—to the proud gratification of the former and the deep, lifelong and ineffectual disgruntlement of the latter. Not unnaturally the poet was enraged at the bookseller, who in his own copy, now in the British Museum, tells how the manuscripts "came into his hands" (manuscripts had a habit of "coming into Curll's hands"): "They were given me [he writes] by John Cliffe, Esq., who had them of the Bishop of Kilalla, in Ireland, whose Daughter he married & was my Lodger." Lodgers played an important part in his business, and were doubtless chosen for their literary possibilities; later there were bitter stories of hack writers "lying three in a bed," churning out pamphlets to order and translations by the ream. Stories culminating in the untrue accusations laid to Curll's charge of the death by neglect and starvation of the poet William Pattison, his protégé from Cambridge. At any rate the Dean was much incensed at, in his own words, the "prostitute bookseller," and throughout his life bore him an unsettled grudge.

Although the conflict between Swift and Curll never reached a virulent stage, and was confined to wordy warfare, a far more active opponent was destined to link his famous name for ever with that of the bookseller.

The minds of Alexander Pope and Edmund Curll were curiously similar—tortuous, terrier-like and retaliatory. It was inevitable, considering the positions they occupied in the small world of letters, that they would meet, and as inevitable that their meeting would be boisterous and that the results would be long-lasting and highly original. The episode of the publication of *Court Poems* and

the subsequent events is fairly well known, and it will suffice to give a brief outline of what happened. In March of 1716 Curll published a slim volume of poems over the imprint of his associate Roberts entitled: "*Court Poems. Viz: 1. The Basset-Table. An Eclogue. 2. The Drawing Room. 3. The Toilette, Etc.*" The preface, written by Curll, attributes the authorship respectively to Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu, Gay and Pope. Gay is the only one mentioned by name, Lady Mary being "A Lady of Quality" and Pope "the judicious Translator of Homer." What followed belongs more to the realms of fantasy than to the actions of grown and intelligent men. Pope, the second volume of whose translation of Homer was about to be issued, asked Lintot, his publisher, to introduce him to Curll, and the three men met over a drink at the Swan Tavern in Fleet Street. What happened is recounted by Curll in his *Curliad*, (page 20) and there is no reason to dispute his account of Pope's rather stupid practical joke since the poet verified it in a letter he wrote soon afterwards.

My brother Lintot," says Curll, "drank his half pint of old Hock, Mr. Pope his half pint of Sack, and I the same quantity of an Emetic Potion . . . but no threatenings past. Mr. Pope, indeed said, that Satire should not be printed (tho' he has now changed his mind) I answered, that they should not be wrote—for if they were, they would be Printed. He replied that Mr. Gay's Interest at Court would be greatly hurt by publishing these Pieces. That was all that passed in our Triumvirate. Then we parted, Pope and my Brother Lintot went together, to his shop, and I went home and Vomited heartily. I then despised the Action, and have since, in another manner, sufficiently Purged the Author of it. . . .

Not a prank that reflects very highly on Pope, and not a practice, happily to say, that set any precedent for dealings between authors and publishers.

Although Curll went home to "vomit heartily" and then to "despise the action," Pope was not content to let matters rest, but went to his home and immortalized his action in two small pamphlets, now extremely rare, entitled *A Full and True Account of a Horrid and Barbarous Revenge by Poison, on the Body of Mr. Edmund Curll, Bookseller; with a faithful Copy of his Last Will and Testament. Publish'd by an Eye Witness and A Further Account of the most Deplorable Condition of Mr. Edmund Curll, Bookseller, Since his being Poison'd on the 28th of March, 1716.* Both might easily be described as bawdy pieces, and Pope skilfully drags in many references, especially in the second pamphlet, to his Homer, which Curll and his hack-writers are represented to be trying to damn.

The satire ends with a soliloquy by the mentally distraught Curll, as "a whole Pile of Essays on a sudden fell on his Head" which gives a vivid picture of the bookseller as Pope would have us see him. "Now," Curll is made to say, as the avalanche of books descends on him,

Now [G-d] damn all Folios, Quarto's, Octavo's and Duodecimo's! ungrateful Varlets that you are, who have so long taken up my House without paying for your Lodging—Are you not the beggarly Brood of fumbling Journey-Men; born in Garrets, among Lice and Cobwebs, nurs'd upon Grey Peas, Bullocks Liver, and Porters Ale?—Was not the first Light you saw, the Farthing Candle I paid for? Did you not come before your Time into dirty Sheets of brown Paper? And have I not cloath'd you in Double Royal, lodg'd you handsomely upon decent shelves, lac'd your Backs with Gold, equipt you with splendid Titles, and sent you into the World with the names of Persons of Quality? Must I be always plagu'd with you? Why flutter ye your Leaves, and flap your Covers at me? Damn ye all, ye Wolves in Sheep's Cloathing; Rags ye were and to Rags ye shall return. Why hold ye forth your Texts to me, ye paltry Sermons? Why cry ye—at every Word to me, ye

Bawdy Poems? To my shop at Tunbridge ye shall go . . .  
and thence be drawn, like the rest of your Predecessors,  
bit by bit, to the Passage-House . . .

1716 was indeed a black year, physically, for Curll; for, hardly recovered from the ill effects of the emetic, he suffered the indignity we have referred to earlier of a blanket-tossing and posterior-beating at the hands of the boys of Westminster School. But though Curll's "baker-knees" may have been somewhat bent by this unpleasant summer, the "splay feet" held up bravely, and it was in this year that he published over 65 books. From then on, until the early forties, Curll was a busy man. The nosing out of worth-while scandals cannot have been a desultory occupation. Many hours must have been wasted in search of what eventually turned out to be a mare's nest; prospects had to be treated to drinks in taverns, worth-while epistolary recipients had (in booksellers' parlance) to be diligently searched for, and profitable tittle-tattle had to be winnowed from the worthless. All this must have taken time. And yet Curll managed to fit in a quite considerable amount of writing of his own, passing through the press, printing and plain ordinary bookselling. His activities could not have left him much time for debauches. As Browne Willis, a contemporary antiquarian of repute wrote in the *Daily Postbag*, "Mr. Curll deserves to be encouraged by us all, no bookseller in town having been so curious as he." This sentence is an extremely apt summing up of Curll's whole character. He was a *curious* bookseller, spending so much time turning over stones, prying and poking into odd corners, and if he did unearth an occasional hornet's nest, let it be said to his credit that he wasn't afraid of getting stung.

Lastly I would like to speak briefly of possibly Curll's

most notorious publications—his *Lives*—though it is difficult to assess their value dispassionately. The obloquy they received from Arbuthnot's witticism (about Curll adding a new terror to death) has remained. Some were undoubtedly meretricious productions, consisting of very little else but the deceased's short will and a reprint of parts of his works. Others, however, such as Defoe's *Memoirs of the Life of Daniel Williams*, 1718, and Gildon's very rare, and until quite recently unknown, *Memoirs of the Life of William Wycherley*, 1718, are documents of extreme interest and contain unique information. And there were very few eminent men in the world of Letters whom Curll allowed to die unsung. Wycherley, Congreve, Dennis, Gay, Locke and Prior all were favoured with obituaries, following hard on the heels of the Reaper himself. The Stage, too, was not forgotten; and here it is that we have a chance of observing the undoubted taste and typographical attractiveness that on the whole typified Curll's work as a printer and publisher. Trivial pieces they may have been, but as charming, original and fundamentally beautiful examples of all that was best in early eighteenth century inexpensive book-production they stand alone. His own lives of John Gay and of the famous comedian Robert Wilks, with the delightful portrait vignettes on the titles, show a taste and originality the measure of which has never been fully acknowledged.

They are bibliographically interesting, too, as they furnish the first general example, to my knowledge, of a portrait being engraved on a title page. Contemporary contumely may have been heaped upon them, they may have been ridiculed by the wits, but they have about them a stamp of originality and near-genius.

Curll did not rely for his publishing material solely on the established poets and writers. He published verse and prose, but mainly verse, of minor poets whose works deserve a better fate than future generations have allowed them. Who to-day but the scholar knows a line of the poems of William Pattison or Samuel Purney? Yet Purney wrote some of the most charming pastorals in the English language, which Curll published in 1717, and though Pattison's verse has yet to be fully appraised, there is ample scope for critical consideration in the five hundred and fifty pages of the two volumes Curll also printed in 1728.

Towards the end of his career, Curll treated his public to fewer and fewer books, the output declining in 1746, his last year in business, to four titles, among which ironically enough, is a reprint of his old *Impotency* volumes. He died in December, 1747, aged 64.

It should not be imagined that the collecting and recording of Curll publications is a simple pastime. In the first place he published a great many pieces over imprints of other booksellers, of whom Roberts and Pemberton probably take pride of place; in the second, Curll used the Stationers' Hall Register very sparingly and many of his publications have to be traced by means of his advertisements in the periodical press.

In 15 years of fairly assiduous Curll collecting, I myself have managed to amass some 500 of his books, the tracking down of which has, in some cases, provided great amusement and even a Sherlock Holmesian excitement.

But the main thing that strikes a Curll collector is the rarity of the great majority of the pieces put forth by the "chaste press." This is in part understandable owing to



the ephemeral nature of most of them—and it is owing to this that they are so valuable. They are among the few permanent contemporary reports of the bickerings and squabbles surrounding the lives of important men of his times. They help to fill in the gaps in their lives and characters left out by, or unknown to the staid biographer—the truths and half-truths blurted out in the heat of the moment. No student or bibliographer of this vastly interesting and very undocumented period can afford to neglect John Dunton or Edmund Curll—in fact he must follow plenty of blind alleys in search of the rich ore to which an occasional stray turning will lead him.

Nowadays, with our shelves bulging with bibliographies, it is well nigh impossible to fail to trace the existence or history of a book or pamphlet from the earliest times up to the end of the seventeenth century. We have our S.T.C., our Greg and Hazlitt; Wing has now flown in on us; and such libraries as Britwell, Huth, Hoe and Pforzheimer make the discovery of a hitherto unknown book up to 1700 a rare occurrence. After the Restoration period, what have we? Griffith, Wise and Sherburn have wrestled with Pope, but have turned a baleful bibliographical eye on Popeiana. Williams and Teerink have laid Swift low, and there are several excellent specialized bibliographies. But the major endeavours dealing with the mass of early eighteenth century material wait to be attempted. Even life-long scholars and collectors of the period are confronted fairly regularly with books and pamphlets they have never seen or heard of.

Can we, in the light of this, afford to ignore men like Curll and Dunton, with their great output of minor pieces? Let us cease to talk about them with a sneer and

to relegate the “chaste press” and the “Maggots” to the top shelf; rather let us plant both feet firmly on the old gentlemen’s remains (literary, not physical), and use them as two more stepping stones across the turbulent waters of bibliography.