

## AN ENGLISH PUBLISHER'S VIEWS.

HIS ALLUSIONS TO DISCOUNTS OR CUT PRICES—THE COUNTRY RETAILER AND MODERN CONDITIONS—IS THE BOOKSELLER RETROGRESSING?

THE discount question in England has, in one sense, no direct interest for us in Canada, though it is not far removed from the cutting of prices by the trade. Yet a talk with Mr. Hodder, the veteran English publisher, will interest our readers, because he deals with other features of the bookselling profession. Mr. M. H. Hodder, of Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton, is probably the doyen of English publishers. For fifty-three years he has devoted himself to one firm, beginning as junior assistant, ending as senior partner. To a London reporter, speaking of discounts, he said:

"To give discount is a tendency of the age. It is not confined to the publishing business. Traders of all kinds find that it attracts customers to allow a rebate off the nominal price of their goods. Numbers of people buy a shilling book for ninepence who would never pay ninepence for it in the first instance if that were the nominal price. To my mind there can be no question but that the discount system has had a most beneficial effect on the circulation of books. More books are sold to-day than ever before, and though a bookseller has to do with a smaller profit on each volume, he sells far more. I, for one, doubt the desirability of interfering with the present discount system.

"There is the strongest repugnance among many booksellers to permit any publishers or union of publishers to coerce them. They feel that it would be an encroachment on their rights, and a thing alien to the spirit of their trade that the publishers should dictate to them as to how they are to conduct their business. This feeling is shared by many publishers, who doubt the right of coercion. But even allowing that coercion is right, we must ask ourselves is it practicable? I do not believe that it is, and the whole history of the publishing trade in recent years bears me out. Publishers have tried before to-day to bring pressure to bear on discount traders, but it has hurt the publishers most. Some time ago my own firm issued a book, at the author's request, at a net price. One large house would persist in allowing a discount on the book, and we felt ourselves obliged, in order to keep faith with other retail traders, to close that firm's account. The attempt was not successful. The sale of the book was hurt, the retail trader was not benefited, and it will be some time before we try a similar experiment. The experience of other publishers who have taken a similar step, has, I believe, been very similar."

"That might not apply, Mr. Hodder, if all the publishers united in coercing?"—

"All the publishers are not likely to support the 2d. in the shilling discount; and the leading discount booksellers of London will undoubtedly resist any change. A very large part of the trade in London is in the hands of a few firms, who buy largely and are able in many cases to obtain special quotations, and can, by their facilities for displaying and advertising their stock, materially affect the sales. One firm alone has nine shops in the city. Publishers have to think well before they offend these large traders. But even if we all agreed not to serve them, they would be able to get what they wanted through the wholesale houses. These wholesale houses are strong enough to resist any attempt on the part of the publishers to dictate to them whom they shall serve."

"But what of the poor country bookseller, Mr. Hodder?" "I do not want you to think that I am indifferent to the troubles of the country bookseller. His profits are small, for he cannot usually afford to buy even the smallest number of a book in order to get special terms. The way for the country booksellers to alter matters is not by a general scheme which will apply to the whole country, but by local unions and agreements. Let the booksellers in one district form a league, agreeing among themselves to sell no new books at a greater discount than 2d. in the shilling. This has been done in some parts, and might well be extended."

"But supposing, Mr. Hodder, that one house stood out in a country district and insisted on the 3d., would you agree then to the publishers coercing that house?"—

"Experience has proved that it cannot be done. You need only take the recent case of Dublin, where one firm has insisted on giving 3d. as against the 2d. of the others. For months efforts have been made to compel that house to yield, without success. It has been the same in Glasgow."

"I do not believe," Mr. Hodder continued, "that an alteration in the discount in the country will greatly help the booksellers there. On the contrary, I believe it will take trade from them. The discount system in London cannot be altered, you may rest assured of that. One great result of there being a less discount in the country than in London will be that many country buyers will patronize the metropolitan rather than their own shops."

"If I could be shown any workable scheme that would permanently benefit the trade, I would join in it," Mr. Hodder said. "We publishers recognize that it is to our own gain to help the retail traders to our very utmost. For instance, my firm

often gets offers from colleges to take considerable quantities of books on special terms, but we make the arrangement through a local bookseller, and allow him his profit. While I do not believe that any alteration in the discount system generally is workable, it might be possible to try selling books over six shillings at only 2d. discount, and, after a book had been published twelve months, booksellers would be free to increase the discount if they desired. You can quite understand that it is often to the interest of a firm to sell books at a lower rate after a lapse of time."

"It has been said that the country bookseller is unenterprising, and that he has largely only his own lack of energy to blame for his present parlous position?"—"That statement requires modification. You will find active, progressive, and enterprising firms in various parts of the country, as well as in London. But, speaking generally, it does not pay the country bookseller to speculate in new books. The limits of his business are so plain that he has no room to do so. The market for new books is a very confined one, and the number of new books being issued is very large."

"Looking back, Mr. Hodder, with your long experience, do you think that the bookseller has degenerated? We are told that fifty years ago he was a bookman, who knew and loved his wares; to-day he is a mere trader, who takes no more interest in his stock than the grocer does in his sugar. Is that so?"—"Certainly not. You must remember that there are very few now who devote themselves wholly to bookselling. The bookseller in the country has usually to be also a stationer and fancy dealer, and will still have to be so. His chief energy is absorbed in selling a variety of fancy articles, and he has neither much time nor opportunity to be a bookman. But there are still many book lovers and bookmen left among our booksellers, and those I know are mostly among the discount booksellers. Why? Because, devoting themselves wholly to books, they have to master the knowledge of their wares if they are to carry on their trade successfully."

## A CHINESE DINNER.

Prof. Chas. G. D. Roberts was the guest of honor at a rather peculiar dinner in New York a few weeks ago. It was a Chinese dinner in a Chinese restaurant in the Chinese quarter of the city. The dinner was given by Robert Mitchell Floyd, in the restaurant of the Hong Low. The table and surroundings were decorated in true Chinese fashion and were gay with color.

Those at the dinner were: Prof. Charles G. D. Roberts, the guest of the occasion;