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THE STATE OF BOOKSELLING IN CANADA.

By Observer.

WITHIN the past twenty-five years bookselling in Canada has undergone a great change and to-day the bookselling business is at a critical conjuncture in its existence. The public libraries, the introduction of co-operative systems of supplying books, the increase in newspaper and magazine circulation, and above all, the departmental stores, have almost completely destroyed the old type of bookstore. On the other hand the character of the average bookseller has altered, much to the detriment of his business. The ability and capital, which might have averted the calamity, have been sadly lacking in the bookseller of to-day.

Twenty-five years ago, in the older portions of Canada, it would have been possible in almost every town and city to have pointed out a bookseller, who had a good stock, knew his business thoroughly and sold books. To-day an interested person might travel from Port Arthur to Halifax and not find above six stores of this standard.

The hope of bookselling is, at the present day, centred in the west, where, both in Manitoba, the Territories and British Columbia, there are some genuinely first-class bookstores. With enterprise and a sufficient supply of capital, there is no reason why these stores should not successfully withstand the inroads of those agencies which have been so harmful to eastern booksellers.

So far as current works of fiction are concerned, there can be no doubt that the sale has been considerably influenced, so far as bookstores are concerned, by the introduction of such schemes as the Booklovers Library into Canada. A store, which would order twenty-five copies of a new novel on publication a few years ago, is now content with one-fifth that number or even less. Public libraries, which are at present in a higher state of efficient management than ever before, are also better patronized. Instead of a single copy of a new novel being received, four, five, six or more copies are taken and there is no need for the impatient reader to visit the bookstore, before he can secure a copy. The department store, too, with its huge transactions, is able to procure and sell large quantities of fiction at much lower prices than the poor bookseller.

Turning to that class of literature on which the Canadian bookseller was able for years to make a decent profit, the juveniles and standard authors, this business has almost completely left his hands. This loss is directly

attributable to the department stores, which went direct to the source of supply in England, got special rates and undersold the regular trade. By means of mail orders, the department stores now send these books all over the country. They supply the Sunday school libraries at low rates and, about the holiday time, do a huge trade in juveniles and cheap standards.

So far as school books are concerned, the trade is still pretty well in the hands of the local booksellers, though here again the department store has been making serious inroads. The children, however, usually want their books right off and accordingly patronize the home dealer.

The outlook for the Canadian retail trade is, however, not without its bright side. Though greatly harassed, the booksellers are not giving in and, with proper precautions, there is little doubt but that the situation can be greatly improved. A serious fault has been a fearful lack of enterprise. A dealer is afraid to stock books even when he knows they will be asked for. He carries the smallest and weakest stock imaginable and when he buys, he buys cheap stock, because he believes the great sale is for this class of book. Here, he is mistaken. Let him leave the sale of cheap books to the department stores, where books are considered just as so much merchandise. In cheap books, he absolutely cannot compete. With the better class of book, however, the case is different. There is a good opportunity for the sale of these books on even terms with the department stores and the profits are better.

A bookseller, who knows his books, possesses a tremendous advantage over the department stores, where knowledge of books and literature is never much in evidence. Let a bookseller be widely read and communicative of his reading, let his stock be strong and extensive and he will find a clientele growing up around him and an extension of business, which ensures his success. The Canadian people are buying and reading books and better books than ever before and it is for the bookseller to secure this better trade.

A plea for combined action against evils, which are threatening the whole trade is in order here. When the success which has attended the formation of associations in other branches of trade is observed, there can be little doubt but that an active association of booksellers would do much to counteract or remove these evils.