

BOOKS AND NOTIONS

OFFICIAL ORGAN

OF EVERY BOOKSELLERS', STATIONERS' AND NEWSDEALERS' ASSOCIATION IN CANADA

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VOL. V.

TORONTO, JUNE, 1889.

No. 54



SOME letters from booksellers in the April and May numbers on the question of the desirability of handling certain classes of books bring up the question of the standing of the bookseller in the community. Is he merely the commercial agent of the publisher, a mere machine for transferring the books from the binder to the reader, and receiving therefor a certain amount of money, or is he something higher?

I remember long ago when I was a boy the veneration with which I looked upon the bookseller. He appeared in my eyes to be just one step from the author; in fact, I do not know but I rather placed him on the higher step, because the writer might err in his judgment, but I knew that my bookseller could not; and I was not alone in my opinion of his position, his high standing as a citizen of education, intelligence and influence. I know that the clergymen who frequented his store treated him as a man equally well informed with themselves; the lawyers asked his counsel as to books and authors; the doctors spent their spare time in his company.

What a pleasant thing it is to know that the race of booksellers of that stamp has still some representatives. As I write I have in my mind's eye a few who are selling books as in the old way, and they are not all old men either. What a relief it is to do business with them. They know their wares; they have read the books or their reviews; they can speak to you intelligently of the authors; they know the salient points of the works. They know their customers—Jones reads theology; Brown likes architectural studies; Henry is after the latest novel. They are served at once because the bookseller knows what they want and where to get it.

Do they make money? That is the first question from our "practical" man. Yes, of course they make money. A thorough knowledge of one's business is just what is needed in a business man. Just as you expect your grocer to know all about tea if he is to make success of selling that article, so the bookseller should know all about books. The "practical" man in the book business, that is to say, the man who calls himself so, is apt to look down on the "bookman," as he terms my old style bookseller. What would he call the hardware man who knows nothing about his goods excepting their names and wrappers, or of the watchmaker who knew only the cases and the names of the various classes of works.

The actual buying and selling of the article are undoubtedly the prime points in a trade, but there is a great deal of difference in the system both of buying and selling, and if a man can weave into his work a little of his love, a little of himself, how much easier, pleasanter, better the work is. If a man's business just suits him, if it is his ideal business, and if he is thoroughly posted in all its details, it is no longer a labor to him, it is a pleasure; more than that his ease is a material agent of his success.

And now to the practical part of my work. Are you training up your assistants to know their business in the right way? Will there be any one to follow you when you drop off? You say this cannot be done under the present system of employing assistance. There is no longer an apprenticeship; no time nor inclination to learn. I am afraid this is all true. I do not see where our next generation of booksellers are coming from. Can you suggest a remedy?

I want to hear from booksellers about the "on sale" business. Is it an advantage or disadvantage to the trade? This subject is being warmly discussed over the lines, and dealers generally maintain that it is an injury to them. They say that publishers in order to meet the loss on return copies have to cut the margins closer; also that the good buyer has no advantage under the "on sale" system.

I propose to have something more to say on the duty on periodicals question in the next issue of BOOKS AND NOTIONS. I will lay the whole case before the newsdealers and let them see who is to blame. Promise after promise has been made that our trade should not any longer be handicapped with a jug handled duty, and during the last session of parliament, although the responsible parties acknowledged the injustice and promised amendment, it is not forthcoming.

An arbitration is on between the Minister of Education and the school-book publishers of Ontario. There is a clause in this agreement to the effect that in case the Minister considers that the prices charged on any school books are exorbitant, he has a right to call for an arbitration, as he has done. The publishers, however, are no chickens; they have, as the boys would say, "got the bulge" on the Minister on some of the details, and have compelled him to make the arbitration a "friendly" one. This means, of course, that there will be no changes in the prices of the readers and other books with large sale. There will probably be a reduction in the price of such books as have a very limited sale. This will make quite as good a showing as a reform, and won't hurt the publishers any to speak of. Dealers will govern their orders accordingly.