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# The Canada Bookseller

MISCELLANY AND ADVERTISER.

No. 3—Vol. 2.]

SEPTEMBER, 1872.

[NEW SERIES.

Advertisements should reach the office of Canada Bookseller not later than the 15th of the month.

## THE CANADA BOOKSELLER.

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### COVERS FOR BINDING.

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### UNDERSELLING.

THE discussion which for the past year or so has been so vigorously carried on, concerning what is generally regarded as the one cause of the demoralization of the book trade—underselling—is by no means new. The trade organs of England and America of ten years since all contain articles and communications of which those of the past year are almost duplicates, in form and suggestion as well as spirit and complaint. All this time, notwithstanding most vigorous protest, the evil has been growing from bad to worse; the chief hope now-a-days is that the system has become so ruinous that a change for the better must be near at hand.

The history of this matter begins early in the present century. Up to the turn of the century, and indeed for a few years later, the English country bookseller could not buy on his half-yearly account at less than 10d. on the shilling, or 16 2/3 discount. Paying transportation charges, and frequently giving credit, he had no idea of selling a book at less than the stated prices. About 1810, the system of travelling came in vogue; then trade dinners (sales) became common, at which special rates were offered, and a twenty-fifth copy thrown in gratis; still later 25 off was a common discount, and a thirteenth

copy was given away with each dozen bought. Entering retailers began to offer discounts to customers, in some cases 20 per cent., and the trade in England grew thus into its present demoralization. There has been very general complaint in England over the difficulty, but it is nothing there to what it is here. Twenty-five off and a thirteenth copy with the dozen, makes one-third off; here forty off is a common publishers' discount; fifty is not unfrequent; at "special sales" we have heard that sixty has been reached; while, at the trade (auction) sales there is of course no limit to the lowness of price, and books have been slaughtered as far below cost as ninety per cent. of the published price. The retail discounts have followed closely upon these, with much the same history as in England. Like complaints of the demoralization of the book trade come from Italy. The difficulty has never arisen in Germany, because of the thorough and excellent organization, *esprit de corps*, and wise far-sightedness of the German trade.

During these ten and more years of discussion, there has been one cry from the trade—English not American—the remedy unanimously suggested by the retailers themselves being the reduction of the stated price to such an extent that not more than twenty per cent. could be in any case allowed by the publisher. All the difficulties and all the problems of the book trade are intimately associated with this question of underselling, so that in discussing it everything seems to come up. In connection with this suggestion, the retail trade protests against the selling of books at retail by publishers or jobbers, especially below the stated retail price, and against the "mailing notice" system, now adopted by all our publishers in advertising, to send any of their books free of postage on receipt of retail price. It asserts that under the present cut-throat system, *it does not pay* to "keep up stock," and that to earn bread and butter, the "book-stores" must be chiefly filled with stationery and "gim-cracks," and books made a subsidiary matter, to which little attention can be paid. Buyers who wish more than a single book, habitually order from the publishers, who act also as jobbers for them, and procure what they want at a rate as low as, frequently lower than the bookseller can himself obtain, because he must pay his own express bills, while his should-be customer is furnished carriage free. And so the majority of "book-stores" through the country keep but two or three hundred dollars' worth of book-stock on hand, order few new books, simply offer to obtain what the infrequent chance-

customer wishes, put their capital into the better-paying "gin-cracks," and let books "take care of themselves."

This, as we have already pointed out, affords opening for the undermining of the regular trade by "agents' books." The more enterprising retailers fall into the cut-throat fashion themselves, and vie with each other in selling books "close," and now some of the general stores come in and offer books at very nearly cost price, and attract customers for their other goods. It is safe to say that the forty per cent. discount generally allowed does not average more than ten per cent. profit in the retail sale throughout the country; we doubt if the figures would be even so high.

On the other hand the publisher is to be heard. He complains that he is forced to advertise the "mailing notice, because it is the only way in which the retailers can be compelled to keep his books in stock. In other words, he competes with the retailer to keep him enterprising. "Publishers must find a market for their books, and if the retailers will not offer that market, they must go beyond the retailers for their customers. Under the present state of things, the first edition of a new book, save it be by a popular author or otherwise exceptional, would remain on the shelves unsold if it were not pushed directly into the hands of book-buyers and an indirect demand thus brought to bear upon the retailer, from those who hear of the new book through those who have bought it from the publisher. It is claimed that no one would be so foolish as to take the trouble of writing, the chances of mails both ways, and the likelihood of the book being battered on the way, when he could buy quicker a fresh copy at a book-store near by, and that in fact orders are sent to the publisher direct customarily only when the desired book has been inquired for in vain. As to the underselling, the answer of the publisher is *Et tu quoque!* The retailers themselves do it, and should not complain of us for following their example. In short, the dispute between the publisher and the bookseller is in each claiming as cause what the other considers to be effect. One says, "We must cut into you because you don't keep up stock!" the other says, "We can't keep up stock because you cut into us!" The truth is, as frequently happens, between; cause and effect are here, as elsewhere, mutual, and react each upon the other. Undoubtedly, as a matter of history, the demoralization arose originally from the too great increase of discounts, but it is questionable, now that the evil has grown, whether the removal of the original cause would be at all an adequate remedy; whether a general reduction of discounts now would have the effect that booksellers hope and agree it would. After a man has touched poisoned ivy, taking it away from him doesn't cure him forthwith.

But certainly so terrible an evil to the trade must admit of some remedy, partial if not complete. The discussion of this means carries us into a still broader field, and to the consideration of a question which underlies all these discussions as to authors' books, the agency system, the "introduction" of school books, and the difficulties of which we have specially given th

history and explanation in this article. That question involves a consideration of the distinctive character of the trade in books, and the remedial measures we find for underselling and like disastrous practices, we propose to give in a further article on "The Unity of the Trade." Meanwhile we shall be glad to hear from correspondents who may have new light to shed upon these subjects, or new suggestions to make. It is advisable that this discussion should be continued in the trade organs, until discussion shall culminate in definite action on the part of the trade.—*Weekly Trade Circular.*

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