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EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH
AUTHOR-PUBLISHER RELATIONS: A STUDY OF
MURRAY'S, LONGMAN'S, BLACKWOOD'S, AND TAYLOR
AND HESSEY'S RELATIONS WITH SELECTED AUTHORS.

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PREVIEW

EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH AUTHOR-PUBLISHER RELATIONS

A Study of Murray's, Longman's, Blackwood's, and
Taylor and Hessey's Relations
With Selected Authors

by

Dale Hepker

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Under the Supervision of Professor Hugh Luke

Lincoln, Nebraska

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PREVIEW

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EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH AUTHOR-PUBLISHER RELATIONS

Introduction

For this study of author-publisher relations in Britain from 1800-1830, I have focused on four prominent publishing houses in England and Scotland--namely, Murray's, Longman's, Blackwood's, and Taylor and Hessey's. Since the publishing houses were dominated by individuals, I generally limited the discussion to the relations of those men--John Murray II, Thomas Longman III, William Blackwood, and John Taylor--to their authors rather than to include the authors' relations to editors like Gifford at Murray's or to partners such as Owen Rees at Longman's or James Hessey at Taylor and Hessey's.

To be constructive and personally rewarding to those involved, an author-publisher relationship must consist of mutual trust. That trust, if nurtured, will bring an intimate friendship that will supersede momentary misunderstandings. It can also produce tension and friction, as it did at times during the Romantic Period. The correspondence reveals both the trust and the friction.

The relations between the authors and publishers were usually friendly; however, very few relationships were so stable that there was never a quarrel. Usually, the quarrels were transitory and soon forgotten. Apologies for misunderstandings flowed back and forth in frequent letters. A few

quarrels, however, were deep-seated and resulted in a break in relations. Because these quarrels made exciting stories, they were repeated in print far more than the enduring relationships have been told. Therefore, the emphasis in author-publisher relations unfortunately shifted to the quarrels.

The rapidly evolving social, political, and economic changes of this important transition period in literary history served as a complex milieu in which the drama of author-publisher relations was worked out. In addition, beneath those rapid changes lurked a continuing and fateful undercurrent of authors' distrust of publishers, the Barrabas Complex, not unique only to the nineteenth century.¹ There was a rich heritage of quarrels well enough known to make authors uneasy about entering into a relationship with a publisher. Some authors, like Scott, never settled on a single publisher. From pre-Christian times authors suspected booksellers of dishonest dealings and rejected doing business with them. F. A. Mumby, in Publishing and Bookselling,

¹I have called the author's perennial distrust of publishers the Barrabas Complex, after Byron's alleged notation in a Bible that Barrabas was a publisher. According to Francis Espinasse, in The Critic for January 21, 1860, p. 74, Byron sent a Bible to John Murray and penned a correction in it so that the text "Now Barrabas was a robber" (John 18:40) would read "Now Barrabas was a publisher." Espinasse claimed that John Murray gleefully showed the Bible around. Samuel Smiles, however, declared in A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray, I, 336, that it was Thomas Campbell who had crossed out "robber" and written in "publisher."

compiled a great deal of pertinent information from that ancient time, when writing for fame and not for money was the usual custom. Even later, until the nineteenth century, in England, the aristocracy or wealthy still refused to write for remuneration, and even most other writers depended upon their patrons for support rather than upon cash payments.

Then during the seventeenth century, when author-publisher relations really had a chance to develop, booksellers like Jacob Tonson capitalized on the opportunities to enter into a business relationship with an author. In so doing, Tonson became famous; Bernard Lintot and Robert Dodsley in the eighteenth century also became influential. The publishers' success, however, was accompanied by many tales of woe from the authors. Writers like John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Richard Savage, Samuel Johnson, and Oliver Goldsmith fortified author suspicions about publishers by their recollection of unhappy dealings with publishers. Partly as a result of this undercurrent of unhappiness, nineteenth century authors frequently assumed that they were victims of the publisher's greed, even though they had gained prestige and were better paid, both significant contributions to literary history.

Quarrels took place for three predictable reasons. There were disagreements over finances, misunderstandings concerning rejected manuscripts, and bitter feelings over editorial changes in an author's works--either because of an editor's arbitrary changes in a manuscript or suggestions

that an author make substantive changes. Occasionally, friends interfered between author and publisher and produced misunderstandings. There were also a few quarrels of a miscellaneous personal nature.

One of the most frequent causes of problems was that authors needed money. As they saw flourishing publishing houses, some of the authors felt they received an unfair share of the profits. Then when they saw their works sold as remainders with no remuneration to them, they suspected the publisher of dishonest dealings. According to Robert S. Gill, the selling of remainders looked to the authors, "like a little more of Barrabas's fancywork, for on the surface the publisher [received] something but the author nothing."² Naturally, they blamed their continuing financial plight on the publisher rather than on the public who failed to buy their books. An anonymous writer later described the situation:

When a man has published books which the public persist in neglecting, that man has not so much a quarrel with the stupid and brutal millions who will not buy, as he has with the crafty and cunning band of robbers who will not sell. Unsuccessful writers are always passionately set against the publishers.³

²Robert S. Gill, The Author, Publisher, Printer Complex (Baltimore: The Williams and Wilkins Co., 1940), p. 17.

³August Jessopp, "A Plea for Publishers," The Contemporary Review, 57 (March 1890), 380.

Those who cried out against publishers' greed produced a sympathetic following. DeQuincey wrote that he was sympathetic to other authors "as long as they did not commit murder." He continued: "I have a great indulgence for the frailties of authors. . . . the call of larceny was so audible in their condition, that in them it might often be called an instinct of self preservation, which surely was not implanted in man to be destroyed."⁴ This sympathy, although deserved in many cases, somewhat distorted author-publisher relations. We still hear Campbell's cry in a letter to Scott on June 3, 1805, that authors were "ravens, croakers, suckers of innocent men's blood and living men's brains"⁵ and neglect to remember the praises like Moore's Diary entry in which he declared his pleasure in a lifetime of friendly relations with Longmans.

The authors' cries for better remuneration than they had known before were heard when they began to flex their economic muscles. They correctly ascertained that they were eagerly sought commodities essential to the maintenance of the publishers' new-found wealth and necessary for the expansion of the publishers' businesses. Because publishers could not exist without them, authors demanded and received better

⁴Thomas DeQuincey, Works (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), p. 212.

⁵As quoted in F. A. Mumby, Publishing and Bookselling, 4th ed. (London: Jonathon Cape, 1956), p. 218.

payment for their works than the eighteenth century writers had received. By the very nature of their bartering relationship, however, a severe strain was placed on their friendship, and even writers who were not poor quarreled about money. Although there were genuine attempts on both sides to understand each other's finances, quarrels took place all too frequently.

With Murray and Longman there were only minor quarrels over money with a few of the authors I studied. A possible reason for this low incidence of quarrels is that since they were building their establishments on an already existing business, they could afford to be more generous than those publishers who started new businesses. They could also afford to be more patient in expecting manuscripts from their authors because they had other authors to depend upon. The situation was different with Blackwood, who quarreled with both Hogg and Lockhart about money, and Taylor, who quarreled with Hazlitt, Hunt, and Landor. Their struggling businesses depended on many manuscripts from a relatively few individuals.

Blackwood was often frustrated with Hogg. The poet frequently complained that he was owed money. Even when Blackwood carefully explained the business of a publisher, Hogg still failed to understand the financial complexities of publishing. Blackwood also quarreled about money with John Lockhart on one occasion. The misunderstanding was very disagreeable

to both men, but it was resolved with genuinely friendly feelings on both sides.

Taylor's quarrels over money were different from those of Blackwood. They often ended in breaks that were too serious for the parties to get together again. Taylor's fiery temper was one obstacle to good relations. If he had exerted a little more effort to be patient, the breaks, even if they had come, might not have been so serious.

Both Taylor's poverty and his very busy life contributed to a frequent lateness in paying his authors. Hazlitt's money problems with Taylor occurred so frequently as to be monotonous. Taylor's only dealings with Leigh Hunt concerned a disputed advance of twenty pounds, and his relations with Landor broke off because Landor believed Taylor was tardy in sending payments.

Another issue that produced friction between publishers and authors was the publishers' rejection of manuscripts. Both Murray and Blackwood refused many of Hogg's manuscripts because they were too hastily composed and largely unedited. Coleridge, too, had his works rejected by Murray because they didn't sell. An author usually had little ability to judge the value of his works on the market. When his friends praised his works, he expected a publisher would like them also. When an author wanted so much to succeed, a rejection was a bitter pill to swallow, for frequently the rejected work represented long months of labor.

The most exasperating problem that hurt relations between authors and publishers was that of editorial changes. Sometimes an editor would arbitrarily change lines. Sometimes he suggested that the author change them. In many cases, however, authors could not stand to have their works tampered with. When Blackwood suggested that Sir Walter Scott's conclusion to The Black Dwarf should be changed, Scott was irate. He wrote to James Ballantyne, who was his agent (for he had published the work anonymously): "Tell him [Blackwood] that I belong to the Black Hussars of Literature, who neither give nor receive quarter."⁶

Both Keats and Hazlitt accused Taylor of tampering with their manuscripts. Taylor's first problem with Keats was that he asked Keats to change the preface to Endymion. Very unwillingly, Keats complied, but the final version still brought a violent reaction from the reviewers. Keats also changed some lines in Endymion at Taylor's request but was again disturbed that he had done so. Later, at Taylor's insistence, he reluctantly changed the conclusion of the "Eve of St. Agnes." To get Keats to agree to the change, Taylor assured him that there would be time to reinstate the desired ending when the public taste had changed.

⁶John G. Lockhart, Life of Sir Walter Scott (London: J. M. Dent, 1906), pp. 293-94.

Both Southey and Byron were upset at Murray for his reluctance to print some of their works just as they had written them. Southey, who detested writing for the magazines, wrote in 1817: "The more I consider the matter about emancipating myself from any engagement which subjects me to the control of an editor, the more I perceive and feel the fitness of so doing. . . ." ⁷ He was particularly chagrined over Gifford's tampering with his manuscripts. He called it the "castrating system," ⁸ and contemplated a break with Murray because of his anger.

Byron also quarreled with Murray over contemplated manuscript editing. For instance, while preparing to publish Childe Harold, Murray urged that Byron change a few "indelicate" lines so that the poem wouldn't deprive him of some sales among the orthodox church members. Byron insisted that he would change nothing about politics or religion. Byron agreed to change the dedication of The Corsair, only because Murray suggested that it would hurt Thomas Moore, their mutual friend. Appended to The Corsair were the "Verses to a Young Lady Weeping," which criticized the royal family. When the verses were attacked, mostly because they were

⁷Robert Southey, Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey, ed. John Wood Warter (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1856), III, 83-84.

⁸Ibid., p. 159.

written by Byron, Murray removed them from some of the later copies of the book. Byron, however, when he learned what had happened, was angry and made Murray replace them in the remaining copies.

When Byron sent him Don Juan, Murray was afraid that the poem would not sell as well as his earlier poems. Murray delayed publishing the poem as it was because he objected to a number of lines that he felt would decrease the sales. First, a few lines he deemed unfit for ladies to read. Second, there were lines that would offend the religious, and third, some lines attacked political figures.

These three objections point to serious moral dilemmas for the Romantic Period publishers. In an age when democratic movements were spreading, the publishers wished to allow a writer his freedom to write what he wished. At the same time, a publisher had moral, ethical, or religious scruples of his own. In some cases, he had to either violate them or persuade an author to change the manuscript. In any case, he had to concern himself with the future of his publishing house, and publishing any book that did not sell or that brought condemnation upon him or his publishing house was a dangerous undertaking.

Some authors became so piqued by the editing, the delays, the lack of communication, or rejected manuscripts that they frequently looked to other publishers rather than to the one who, they felt, was giving them too much trouble. Often

however, they returned to their original publisher. The situation was tenuous enough that the strain between two people, otherwise friendly, contributed to a regrettable uncomfortableness. It was in this situation, then, that the literary agent appeared a few years later. He served as an intermediary between author and publisher so that neither would have to deal face-to-face with the other. The period served as a transition between the eighteenth century patron and the literary agent. Often the publisher served both offices.

In spite of the quarrels, most of the relationships between authors and publishers proved to be enduring ones with genuine respect on both sides. Blackwood remained close friends with Hogg, Lockhart, and Wilson. Murray was respected by Scott, Hogg, Byron, and Campbell. Longman was liked by Southey, Scott, and Moore. Taylor found friends among authors such as Clare, DeQuincey, Keats, and Cary. The friendships endured in spite of the intense struggle that a business relationship between the two groups presented. These friendships, spiced with intermittent quarrels, characterize author-publisher relations during the period. The authors' frequent encomiums are proof that the publishers were genuinely respected.

Tim Chilcott recognized the state of author-publisher relations and concluded that publishers were victims of a myth: "Myth has reduced the publisher either to a shadowy

figure of little significance or to an intelligent parasite who perniciously lives off his authors."⁹ Thomas Rees and John Britton, contemporaries of the Romantic Period publishers, saw the situation first hand. One of them wrote:

Complaints have often been made of the sordid spirit of booksellers, and their inadequate remuneration of authors. No doubt writers are often very badly paid for works upon which they have bestowed much time, labour, and talent; and the cause of literature has, it may be believed, suffered on this account. [But] generally, I believe--and I speak from a very long experience--the booksellers act with commendable liberality.¹⁰

The publishers were not only liberal but genuinely interested in their authors. They frequently published outstanding works that gave little initial promise of popular success. They loaned money to their authors and gave them generous bonuses if a work proved to be more successful than was anticipated. In many ways publishers helped authors through difficult times. Therefore, I concluded that many publishers of the early nineteenth century have been unduly maligned.

⁹Tim Chilcott, A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. viii.

¹⁰Thomas Rees and John Britton, Reminiscences of Literary London from 1779 to 1853 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), p. 58.

MURRAY'S PUBLISHING HOUSE

John Murray I

At the opening of the nineteenth century, the firm of John Murray, established in 1768, had already provided leadership, stability, and reliable business practices in the publishing trade. The first proprietor was John MacMurray of Scotland, who had moved to London and bought a bookseller's shop on Fleet Street. The family name had once been Murray, but because Murray's father had decided to reside in Edinburgh, the "Mac" was added so that it would appear Scottish. John MacMurray, however, returned to the name of Murray, since he resided in London where the "Mac" was suspect. Adopting a ship in full sail as his symbol, he advertised his business:

John Murray, (successor to Mr. Sandby),
Bookseller and Stationer, at No. 32, over-against
St. Dunstan's Church in Fleet Street, London.
Sells all new Books and Publications. Fitts [sic]
up Public or Private Libraries in the neatest man-
ner with Books of the choicest editions, the best
Print, and the richest Bindings. Also, Executes
East India or Foreign Commission by an assortment
of Books and Stationary suited to the Market or
Purpose for which it is destined; all at the most
reasonable rates.¹

Murray tried to persuade William Falconer, who later became known for his Universal Marine Dictionary, to join

¹Henry Curwen, A History of Booksellers, The Old and the New (1873; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1968), p. 163.

him in the publishing venture. In 1768 he wrote to Falkner that he was confident the two of them could succeed in business as well as the "many Blockheads in the Trade" who were "making fortunes."² Murray himself was anything but a blockhead.

It soon became necessary for Murray to borrow money with which to operate. Friends helped finance him, and William Kerr of Scotland even sent along a bit of advice with his 150 pounds: "Conduct your business with activity, industry, and unremitting attention, without being irritated or vexed by unavoidable accidents or incidents."³ Whether or not Murray remembered the letter, these attributes became the guiding principles of the Murray publishing concern during the next two and one-half decades.

The firm became a prominent publishing house in London. Besides assisting authors, Murray also developed his own abilities to write. His letters were often masterpieces of prose. He wrote a number of pamphlets that "acquired much transient reputation."⁴ One of those was the "Letter to Mr. Mason on his Edition of Gray's Poems, and the Practice of Booksellers." Mason, the executor of Thomas Gray's estate,

²Samuel Smiles, A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray (London: John Murray, 1891), I, 5.

³Ibid., p. 9.

⁴Curwen, p. 165.

had sued Murray for publishing some lines from Gray's poems. Murray believed that by quoting from a poem, he was contributing to its sales. In the pamphlet Murray brilliantly defended his actions and also proved that Mason had actually lifted more lines from Murray's copyrighted poems than Murray had taken from Gray's.

Even with a good case, Murray offered to settle with Mason on the executor's terms, an offer spurned by Mason in favor of an injunction against any sale of Murray's book. Because of Murray's defense in the pamphlet, even Samuel Johnson "signified his displeasure"⁵ with Mason, whom he sarcastically wrote off as a "Whig." Murray's conciliatory offer to Mason foreshadowed the reputation for conciliation, generosity and amiability that later characterized the John Murray Publishing House. John Murray II, the head of the house during the Romantic Period, was particularly admired for these qualities.

John Murray II

John Murray II was nearly fifteen when his father died in 1793 at the age of forty-eight after twenty-five years in business. In accordance with the will, Murray's mother inherited the firm. Samuel Highley, John Murray I's assistant,

⁵James Boswell, Life of Johnson, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, (New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., Inc., 1887), III, 334.

actually ran the firm, however, until John Murray II, at seventeen, returned from school to join in partnership with Highley. Highley was very conservative, shying away from any risky business practices, and John Murray II, a daring young man, chafed under the partnership until it was dissolved in March 1803. He had waited nearly four years before making the break, and he treated Highley fairly in the settlement, in spite of his belief that he was "shackled to a drone of a partner."⁶

Murray wasted little time waiting for the dissolution date. His first solo attempt to secure a copyright occurred a few days before the dissolution. He offered George Colman, The Younger, 300 pounds for the copyright of John Bull. The offer would probably have been accepted, but custom dictated that Colman should first offer the copyright of the drama to the theater manager. Unfortunately, the man retained it. In replying to Murray's letter, Colman expressed his pleasure more at the "manner [of his] proposition than by its solidity."⁷ Although Murray had a short temper and often delayed his correspondence, the Murray "manner" was to become synonymous with energy, diplomacy, generosity, friendliness, and sagacity. These five factors, for the most part, determined his success.

First of all, in spite of frequent poor health, Murray had an almost boundless supply of energy. He quickly launched

⁶Smiles, I, 32. Letter to George Colman, March 1801.

⁷Ibid., p. 33. Letter of March 1803.