Hard-cover Reprint Publishing

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According to figures available to the Reprint Expediting Service, 866 formerly out-of-print books have been either reprinted or announced to be in preparation for reprinting in the United States since June 1955. Of this total 368 are paperback issues and 498 are hard-cover, some of which were simultaneously published in a paperback edition.

The Reprint Expediting Service makes no claim that the figure quoted represents the total number of books reprinted during the period. However, these statistics do give some indication of the trend of reprinting in this country. The ratio of hard-cover titles may not be so large if account is taken of the in-print books published in paperback editions.

The term reprint has been variously defined. It has been used as a synonym for “unauthorized edition” or “an edition issued without the consent of the author or the original publisher” and as a synonym for rebinds and popular copyrights. Rebind is an expression of nineteenth century vintage and denoted the practice of some publishers to rebind their most popular fiction titles in paper to sell for fifty cents or less. Popular copyrights, a term of later origin, relates to the publication of cheap editions by firms which reprinted popular books using the original plates by permission of the original publishers or copyright owners.

Strictly defined, a reprint is a new printing from the original plates in cheaper form than the original. This definition has been expanded within recent years to include books printed from newly set or re-set plates, not necessarily cheaper in price or form than the original edition.

In the years before 1850, most publishing firms in the United States,
including such old and respectable firms as Harper Brothers, Little, Brown & Company, D. Appleton & Company, G. P. Putnam's Sons, and Houghton Mifflin Company, were very largely hard-cover reprint houses. They relied heavily on English books, many of which were published in unauthorized editions.

Decreasing dependence on the use of English authors by American publishers is described to some extent by the following table provided by D. P. O'Harra in his series of articles, “Book Publishing in the United States to 1901.”

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O'Harra further illustrates this situation by observing that Harpers, previous to 1853, published 722 original works and 827 reprints, most of the reprints presumably British.

In this sense, therefore, American publishing can be said to have begun primarily as a reprinting business. Publishers earlier than 1840-50 were faced with two difficult conditions which forced them to indulge in a form of piracy.

First, there was little native literature available. The early years of the nineteenth century had provided relatively few writers with such popularity as that attained by Hawthorne, Emerson, Longfellow, and Whittier towards mid-century and later. There were relatively few people then in the United States or elsewhere who knew of, were interested in, or respected American writing.

Secondly, and by contrast, the reputation of English writers was undeniable, and their books published in England were in demand in this country. It was a relatively easy matter for an enterprising American publisher to obtain copies of British books, re-set them, and issue them under his own imprint without asking permission or making payment to author or original publisher.

The practice of piracy was fairly widespread during the later decades. It led to frequent chaos in publishing and produced cheap and shoddy books, poorly printed on inferior paper and full of errors. The almost simultaneous publication of identical titles by different firms competing with each other was common.
The period from 1850 to 1890 can be characterized as one of almost sheer abandon on the part of publishers, although the movement for self-regulation steadily gained strength. A number of firms, notably Harper, Dodd, Mead & Company, Holt, D. Appleton, Houghton Mifflin Company, and G. P. Putnam’s Sons, were careful to make some arrangements both among themselves and with the authors and publishers whose works they reprinted, but gentlemen’s agreements were not the rule.

Publishers of reprints competed with booksellers in the sale of their own books, frequently underselling them after allowing the bookseller a 30 to 35 per cent discount. All of this made the book buying public happy, since books sold frequently for less than list price. Publishers eventually began to lose both public esteem and profits and a number of them were forced out of business.

The need became urgent for publishers to organize themselves into a more cohesive group and to devise a set of rules and regulations to govern their activities. Both of these developments had occurred by 1891, the date of the first international copyright law, under the terms of which foreign authors would receive copyright protection in the United States if their countries granted similar rights to American writers. The importance of this law to the future of the publishing trade cannot be overemphasized as it effectively barred the practice of piracy and helped raise the standards of publishers. It also helped to drive out the cheap paper reprint and to raise book prices generally.

At about this time, the popular copyrights won wide acceptance, and the reprint, more or less as it is known today, began to appear. Conditions were ripe for this development since American writing had increased in volume and prestige. Chain and department stores offered new domestic outlets and foreign markets had also become increasingly receptive to American books.

To the restrictions imposed by the copyright law were added those established by the newly organized trade associations, the Publisher’s Board of Trade, and The American Book Trade Union, which attempted to govern such matters as author’s royalties, book dealer’s discounts, retail price maintenance, and other trade practices.

The first publishing firm of the Gilded Age to attempt cloth-bound reprints was J. B. Alden, who in 1879 introduced pocket-size books to be sold for fifty cents per copy. He was followed by J. W. Lovell, who in 1887 began binding his formerly paperbound reprints in
cloth, to be sold for twenty-five cents through certain department stores. This venture failed due to high manufacturing cost.

It remained for Alexander Grosset and George Dunlap in the early 1900's to develop a highly successful business of rebinding in cloth many of the cheap paper books dumped after the passage of the international copyright law, and selling them for thirty-nine or fifty cents. Later, they conceived the plan of renting plates of books on a royalty basis and issuing these in cloth. The A. L. Burt Company also adopted this plan, and the Home Library was the only line of reprints of classics to survive into the twentieth century.

These pioneers in the hard-cover reprint field were followed by many others including such names as F. N. Doubleday, Bennett Cerf, Donald Klopfer, Eugene Reynal, Max Salop, and Ben Zevin. The series of cloth-bound reprints associated with these names, many of them no longer now in print, have become the common coinage of the publishing and library fraternities.

Their were the books which were to become familiar to many Americans over the years, as the distinctive formats of Modern Library books, Sun Dial, Blue Ribbon, Star Dollar, Novels of Distinction, Appleton Dollar Library, and others rapidly began to dominate bookstore and library shelves. Indeed many a hue and cry were raised in the early twenties and thirties by firms which feared that the price competition offered by these cheaper but still handsome and durable books was making a shambles of the business prospects of publishers of originals. The pages of Publishers' Weekly during this period offer considerable testimony to this suspected competition. Years later, in 1940, Grosset and Dunlap and Garden City Publishing Company complained, in their turn, that hard-cover reprints of mysteries and westerns were being driven out of bookstores by the cheaper paperbacks.

Not only did publishers have native reprinters to fear, but the process was beginning to reverse itself. English firms, eager for American sales, established branches in this country. Three of these are particularly worthy of mention with respect to hard-cover reprints, namely E. M. Dent & Company with its Everyman Library sold through Dutton, the Oxford University Press with its World's Classics, and Thomas Nelson and Company which issued Nelson's Classics.

The battle for permission to reprint nonfiction titles was fought out during the Depression years. Publishers and booksellers ranged and
raged against each other. Some booksellers claimed that the lower-priced reprints tended to discourage the sale of the higher-priced originals and that the public, in general, seemed to be willing to wait for the reprint before it consented to buy. Some publishers, among whom were Eugene Reynal and Robert de Graff, took the opposite view, arguing that reprints on the whole stimulated book sales. The debate was eventually resolved when the American Booksellers Association and the Joint Board of the National Association of Book Publishers recommended in July 1931 that (1) no book of fiction should be reprinted until at least one year after original publication, and (2) that the period for nonfiction should be no less than two years, preferably three to five.

Reprint publishers had, however, other matters to contend with. To the rapid growth of chain stores, five-and-dime stores, and department stores were added newly born book clubs which opened new avenues to the book-buying public. As their sales increased, distribution costs rose. Candy and newspaper concessionaires in railroad stations, cigar stores, and the corner drugstores adopted books along with their other merchandise.

Costs continued to rise steadily in all sectors of the book publishing industry, particularly with respect to labor, paper, and binding. Retail prices, however, did not rise proportionately. Publishers depended more on larger editions and sales for profit. Reprints, in the editions mentioned above, sold usually for one dollar as against thirty-nine or fifty cents in former years.

Reprint publishers, as it was repeatedly and often enviously pointed out, had the added advantage of being able to capitalize on all the advertising and promotion given their books by the original publishers, thus lowering their selling and advertising costs. This was counterbalanced by the fact that while reprints accounted for a goodly proportion of bookstore sales, their publishers operated on a smaller profit margin. Royalty arrangements were customarily made with both the original publisher and author on the basis of 10 per cent of the retail price, half going to the author and half to the publisher.

Three firms dominated the hard-cover reprint field during most of the thirties and forties, Doubleday, Grosset and Dunlap, and the World Publishing Company of Cleveland. The development of the photo-offset method of reproduction and the typewriter-like typesetting machines encouraged many smaller firms to enter the reprint field. The chief advantages of these methods lay in the lower cost of
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manufacture. By virtue of this, publishers were enabled to issue small editions at low prices and still hope to recover their investment with profit. The availability of the original plates was no longer a major factor, nor a drawback in cases where the plates had been destroyed. It was only necessary to obtain a single copy of a book in good condition for the publisher to proceed.

Accordingly, during the past two decades, there has appeared on the scene, a number of small, new firms which are more or less exclusively engaged in the reprint of both hard- and soft-cover books, like Peter Smith, Frederick Ungar Press, Grove Press, and the Pageant Book Company fall into this category. These firms seek reprint rights for books from original publishers or authors depending upon the copyright ownership, and for varying fees depending on the parties involved.

In recent years many of the old-line firms have begun to place emphasis on reprinting out-of-print titles from their backlists in addition to those issued in series. These titles are being issued both in hard and soft covers, and produced either from the original plates or by newer techniques.

The increased interest of librarians and the growing importance of the library market to publishers have influenced them to reprint some titles. Pressures from the library world for hard-cover reprints did not begin to materialize until the early thirties when they made concerted moves towards encouraging publishers in this direction.

The first of these attempts occurred in 1931 when the Committee on Book Buying of the American Library Association proposed collecting from librarians lists of out-of-print books which they considered worthy of reprinting. Titles would be gathered from want lists or culled from standard bibliographical sources, and estimates would be made as to the number of copies which would be bought should the books be reprinted. All this information would then be forwarded to the National Association of Book Publishers for distribution among the publishers of the titles in question.

Another proposal, one year later, offered publishers access to librarians through the American Library Association for their advice on the publication of new as well as out-of-print books in advance of publication. Under this plan, a clearinghouse would be set up by the American Library Association and a special assistant would be appointed on a salary to coordinate the work of compiling lists of popular, scholarly, and children’s books together with indications for
transmission to the copyright owning publishers of the number of copies of each title which could be sold to libraries. The A.L.A. Bulletin and the Booklist were proposed as media of communication.

In 1933, C. L. Cannon, chairman of the Committee on Book Buying, distributed questionnaires containing lists of out-of-print books to 100 public, college, and university libraries. The returns were, however, very disappointing as only half the librarians answered the questionnaires, and very little consistent demand was noted for any one title from these returns.

These proposals and others like them proved to be unworkable because of the desultory response from librarians. In 1939, the Committee on Out-of-Print Books was established by the American Library Association which had received a grant of $10,000 from the Carnegie Corporation to finance the reprinting of selected out-of-print titles.

This Committee, which operated for thirteen years, was successful in having only four books reprinted. The Committee solicited titles from libraries, and the American Library Association from the $10,000 grant paid all manufacturing costs, rewarding the publisher for his services at the rate of 10 per cent of the costs plus a 33½ per cent commission on all sales. The publisher employed under these terms was Peter Smith, who had years earlier pioneered the library market for reprints on his own initiative. In 1930, he had begun to reprint out-of-print books selected upon consultation with the New York Public Library and other libraries. He either leased plates from original publishers or used the offset method when they were not available.

As late as 1953, there were approximately fifteen different committees within the American Library Association concerned with promoting reprinting of books in various fields. The clamor of so many competing voices failed to attract the notice of publishers whose interest could be aroused only by a coordinated, unified agency representing national library needs.

In an effort to provide such an agency, the former Board on Acquisitions of Library Materials persuaded these committees to disband. It established in April 1955 a Committee on Reprinting, charged with the task of setting up an agency which would be responsible for (1) regularly soliciting out-of-print titles from libraries of all types all over the country, (2) compiling the necessary information concerning library demand for these titles, (3) transmitting this information to the publishers concerned, and (4) regularly publicizing news of its activities and publishers' efforts in the area of reprinting.
Consequently the Reprint Expediting Service was established with an office in The Cooper Union Library in New York City to be operated on a part-time basis for an experimental two-year period. Funds were solicited from libraries and publishers to finance the costs of a small part-time staff and the publication of the quarterly Reprint Expediting Service Bulletin. The Service has since been put on a subscription basis at nominal rates. More than three hundred libraries have currently subscribed to the Bulletin and forty-five publishing firms have memberships.

Questionnaires containing titles submitted by librarians, publishers, and scholars are mailed quarterly to several hundred libraries which indicate their interest in any or all of the titles listed by signifying their willingness to purchase one or more copies should they be reprinted. According to the returns, publishers are notified concerning the votes tabulated and asked to state their willingness to reprint or to release reprint rights to other interested parties. This information and lists of newly reprinted or announced reprints are published in the Bulletin.

By means of this program librarians are afforded continual access to publishers, and publishers are offered a mechanism which they may use to assess library opinion for out-of-print titles which they may wish to reprint. Since its establishment the Reprint Expediting Service has polled libraries with respect to almost four hundred books, approximately one-fourth of which have been reprinted.

The augmentation of the Service—in terms of wider participation by libraries and publishers alike, an extension of its facilities to other areas such as that of establishing a regular book reviewing medium for reprints and compiling marketing and statistical information—can do much to aid and encourage publishers.

The Service can be of help by selecting books for publication. There is at present no very accurate method of determining which out-of-print books are most in demand, but with the facilities provided by the Reprint Expediting Service, a means for determining such titles plus a measure of library demand for them is made possible.

Because of the increased book budgets of school, college, and public libraries, many reprint firms consider them a permanent market, and a significant number of reprints are being brought back with this in mind. Library response is, therefore, important to the continuation of hard-cover reprinting. This is especially true in view of the growth in school enrollment since World War II and the resulting expansion.

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Consequently, many libraries find it difficult to obtain copies of older standard works now out-of-print.

In an address before the 1957 meeting of the American Book Publishers Council, F. H. Wagman stated, "The demands of this market will be heavy for books published during the preceding 30 years. For a new university library, publishers' backlists, the out-of-print market and reprint editions are very important." This augurs well for the future of the hard-cover reprint, since the majority of libraries seem to prefer them to paperbacks.

Other potential markets for these publishers, besides those provided by the regular trade channels, are the U.S. government via such agencies as the U.S. Information Agency and the armed services. In 1954, for example, the U.S. Air Force launched its Book Program designed to "... encourage and support the writing and publication of a book literature of the air. One of the important elements of the Program is promoting hard-cover air books throughout the Air Force World-wide and establishing means for publishers to market hard-cover literature within the Air Force ..." The out-of-print book comes within the scope of this effort since many now classic books which are desired are no longer in print. Overseas markets have also been growing within recent years for all types of American books.

Manufacturing costs, paper, binding, and advertising costs show no signs of decreasing. Since reprints rarely receive attention in the usual book-reviewing media, extensive advertising is essential. Prices of hard-cover reprints have therefore tended to remain high—in most cases higher than the originals but usually much lower than the prices added and obtained for these books in the antiquarian market.

Present indications seem to point to an increase of hard-cover reprinting in the immediate future. Many publishers, both for original and reprint titles, have evinced more than casual interest in the efforts of the Reprint Expediting Service, and their response to the reports of titles in demand by librarians has been encouraging. It remains for librarians to support their interest by purchasing copies of reprinted books. Assuming that this will be the case, the future of the hard-cover reprint will be assured as publishers consider reprinting increasingly as a normal activity of their program.

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