Musings without method : 'The Times' and the publisher, the real object of 'The Times'.

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MUSINGS WITHOUT METHOD.

'THE TIMES' AND THE PUBLISHER—THE REAL OBJECT OF 'THE TIMES.'

THE dispute which during the last few weeks has raged between the publishers and 'The Times' is at once narrow and technical, and had not one of the combatants been a newspaper, with equal facility and desire for advertisement, it might have been settled with speed and in silence. Only one question demanded an answer: Shall a private firm be permitted to offer a net book at a second-hand price immediately after publication? Said 'The Times,' in one of those outbursts of philanthropic eloquence with which it delights to obfuscate the world: "We habitually sell copies of net books, which have been in circulation among our subscribers, only a few weeks after publication, at a material reduction from the published price." To this boast the publishers replied with a resolution "that second-hand copies of net books shall not be offered for sale or sold at less than the published price within six months of publication." 'The Times,' in the determined attitude of one about to lead a forlorn hope, announced that it would supply its readers with the books they want at all costs or none. The members of our Book Club, it declared, "find the privilege of purchasing in Class B very welcome." The members would find the privilege still more welcome if they got the books for nothing. So the burglar takes comfort in his swag, but that comfort does not give housebreaking a place among the moral professions. And 'The Times,' in its ruthless attempt to cut prices, cannot take shelter behind the shameful greed of its subscribers. However, the Publishers Association, brushing aside all irrelevancies, made the only counter-stroke possible. It resolved that its members should withdraw their advertisements from 'The Times,' and refuse to supply such net books as they published to 'The Times' Book Club. 'The Times' professes to be perfectly satisfied with the arrangement. Its satisfaction may not be so great when it has been deprived of the publishers' advertisements for a year.

The Association could not have done otherwise than it did. Its members owe a certain allegiance to the authors on the one hand, and to the booksellers on the other. The author's chance of selling a serious work is small enough as it is. It would be smaller still if his market were spoilt by the appearance of second-hand copies "only a few weeks after publication." And as for the bookseller, the triumph of 'The Times' would mean his ruin. Now the booksellers' profits are none too large. By the fierce warfare of discounts they have already dealt a heavy blow at their own trade. And if 'The Times' were permitted to sell new books, after a brief sojourn in the lending library,

at the price of old, the booksellers would very soon be compelled to put their shutters up, and the distribution of books would thus become a practical monopoly of 'The Times.' Nor is the competition between the two parties in any sense equal. The booksellers depend for their livelihood upon the profit which the distribution of books brings to them. To 'The Times' books are no more than the eleemosynary teapots and the speculative pensions wherewith humbler tradesmen tempt their clients. Be virtuous, says 'The Times,' and subscribe to our threepenny paper, and you shall not merely read books for nothing, but buy them, if so disposed, at a price which would ruin the simple bookseller. Thus every shilling by which it undersells the booksellers has been repaid to 'The Times' over and over again in the shape of advertisement. Obviously, then, the fight is not fair, and the Publishers Association was in honour bound to insist that books published at net prices should not be sold at less than their published price before a reasonable fixed period.

To understand the motive and object of 'The Times,' it is necessary to recall the recent history of that eminent newspaper. Some years since, discontented (we suppose) with its circulation, 'The Times' attempted to enrol new subscribers by offering a small reduction in price. The sum of £3 entitled you to receive the paper every day in the year. But this method of tempting the public, which was fair to all and injurious to none, was found unsatisfactory. And 'The Times' determined to find another and a more cunning bait. It established a Book Club, which was free to all who subscribed to 'The Times,' at the old rate of three pence a-day. This change of policy was somewhat hard on those who wanted the newspaper and cared not for a free library. But the object of the manœuvre was clear enough: it was simply to increase the circulation of the paper by a bold system of advertisement. If there had been any doubt, the manager of the Book Club would have lulled it to rest. "We wish to double the circulation of 'The Times,'" said he, "and if the circulating library service costs us £100,000, we are quite prepared to expend that sum in order to double our circulation." At the outset the publishers were disposed to aid the scheme of 'The Times,' and for this indiscretion they must bear the full weight of blame. They consented to supply books at the usual rates; they refunded to 'The Times' 15 per cent of whatever monies it spent in exchange for advertisement; and in certain cases they sold to 'The Times' large editions of books at "exceptional prices." These privileges did not satisfy 'The Times,' which claimed the further right to sell the books which it bought at whatever price it chose. And thus the quarrel began.

As we have said, the issue was simple, but 'The Times' took the opportunity afforded by the dispute to raise a dozen inapposite questions. It declared, with an effrontery which is almost admirable, that in fighting the seventy

or eighty publishers who belong to the Association it was active in the service of mankind. It stepped boldly forward as the champion of cheap literature, and with a cynicism which could hardly deceive anybody, adopted the frank, hardy tone of the crusader. It represented the vast number of rival publishers, and the innumerable booksellers of England, as vile monopolists, who were trying, for evil purposes of their own, to keep up the price of books, to the double detriment of the public and the authors. "Cheap books!" was and is its cry, though, to be sure, the cry sounds oddly insincere in Printing House Square. 'The Times' costs six times as much as the most of our daily papers, and three times as much as the others. When it undertook to publish a 'History of the Boer War,' it was not above charging a guinea *net* a volume for the privilege of possessing this masterpiece. Nor has the world yet forgotten that it managed, by a system of adroit puffery, to sell the ninth edition of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica' at a price considerably higher than that at which it might be purchased second-hand round the corner. These simple facts persuade us that 'The Times'' love of cheapness is not disinterested. And, indeed, if the manager of the Book Club were prepared to go to the stake for the broader diffusion of literature, he has taken the wrong road to martyrdom. If books are to be cheaper,—a doubtful question, to be decided by experts,—the cheapening process must begin at the other end. But, of course, it is not for cheap books that 'The Times' is fighting; it is fighting for the privilege of selling books cheaper than others — a very different cause. Even if the price of books did fall, we should have no security that 'The Times' Book Club would not continue its policy of underselling. Suppose the publishers issued their new books at 2s. 6d. net, they would be hawked within a few weeks of publication at 6d. a-piece, if 'The Times' were permitted to have its way.

The controversy has been conducted by 'The Times' in a manner which, we are glad to think, is not consonant with the traditions of a great newspaper. The manager of the Book Club seems to have as little humour as courtesy. While he protests that the other side has lost its temper, the blows which he strikes are so wild and so ill-delivered that it is clear his own is past recovery. The figures by which he attempts to prove the greed of the publishers are naïveté itself. He declares that a biography which is sold at 36s. costs 4s. to produce, and that therefore the all-round profits on the transaction amount to 800 per cent. In other words, books are things of paper and ink. The brain of the author need not be taken into the calculation; the expenses of publishing and advertisement are immaterial. If a book cost 4s. in paper and ink, and be sold at 36s., the all-round profit is 800 per cent. It is a pretty fairy-story, and if the manager of 'The Times' believes it, then the monopoly of the book trade is worth fighting for.

But that there may be no doubt of 'The Times'' contempt for the author's rights, another interesting parallel is drawn in its manifesto. It points out that Lockhart's 'Life of Scott' has been recently published for 3s. 6d., and that Mr Churchill's 'Lord Randolph Churchill' costs as much as 36s. The inference is that, if this be a just scale, Mr Churchill's book should be worth ten times as much as Lockhart's. Was there ever a more pitiable confusion? The 'Life of Scott' is the world's possession, and anybody may print it who will. Mr Churchill's book is his own property, and he has a right to whatever reward his skill and industry may bring him. Does 'The Times' believe that if this recent edition of Lockhart's work had to earn £8000 for the author before it became profitable it would still be published at 3s. 6d.? Or is it merely intent to befog its readers? If it would make an intelligent comparison, let it set side by side the cost of Lockhart's 'Life of Scott' at its first publication and the cost of Mr Churchill's 'Lord Randolph,' take the probable sale into account, and then draw what conclusion it thinks proper.

But as the controversy has proceeded, the object of 'The Times' has become clearer. It cares as little for the author as for the bookseller. Cheap literature is, as we have said, a matter of complete indifference to its enterprise. What it would like to achieve, by underselling all competitors, is a vast monopoly. It boasts vaguely of the immense profits it would have made for Miss Corelli's *chef-d'œuvre*, if it had had the handling of a large edition. From the point of view of 'The Times' there is much to be said for such a monopoly. The headquarters of literature would be compact and accessible. The emperor of Printing House Square would be ready to produce, to advertise, to puff, and to review all the books which he wished to sell. There is no process in the distribution of books which it could not undertake. It would accommodate all the interests. Under one roof the author and the critic, the sheep and the wolf, would lie down in amity. Everybody would subscribe to 'The Times,' because against those who refused all the avenues of literature would be closed. And as there would be no competition—not even of the infamous publisher—books might be as dear as 'The Times' wished, and no questions asked.

It is a pleasant dream of autocracy and wealth, which happily will never be realised. Were it realised, there would be an end of literature. Never has there been a more determined effort to throttle a dignified and delicate craft. The arts of puffery and advertisement have done far more harm to letters than high prices and old-fashioned methods of distribution. And it is on the arts of puffery and advertisement, and on these arts alone, that 'The Times' relies and would rely. The manager of the Book Club declares that he would benefit the authors if he were permitted to take the control of their works. But what authors

would he benefit? Only those whom he deemed it worth while to belaud in his advertisement column; and experience does not persuade us to take a flattering view of his taste. There is no writer so foolish that he could not be intrigued into a commercial success. The world is still simple enough to believe what it finds standing in the panoply of print. It does not understand that falsehood is as cheap to print as truth. And if it be told often enough to buy this or that novel, or this or that patent medicine, it will obey with perfect cheerfulness, believing that it is curing its body or improving its mind in the process. But the only Free Trade in books is Free Choice, and if once the publishing of books be confided to the newspapers, the poor foolish public will be as powerless to choose the books which it wants to read as to dictate the news which it wishes to hear. And it is to Free Choice that 'The Times' is most resolutely opposed. It is now imploring its readers to boycott the books which it cannot buy and "handle" on its own terms.

There is but one kind of author who would find a profit in the scheme outlined by 'The Times'—the author of vast circulations and enormous payments, the author who delights to beat his own drum and to find another to beat it for him when his industrious arm falls helplessly to his side. But this author neither needs nor deserves the aid of others. He will grow rich while he lives, and be forgotten when he is dead, in this as in every other age. The authors who, in the rough and tumble of advertisement, would be crushed out of existence are those who devote themselves not to the subsidiary arts of puffing, but to the exercise of their craft, who think that their duty lies less in notoriety than in the perfection of their work. For these the monopolist of the newspaper would have no care or thought. Why should he waste his precious space upon a writer who had nothing else than talent to recommend him, who was not an easy subject for the flamboyant rhetoric of the American puff, and who would need twice as many columns for the exposition of his talents as his facile and more obvious colleague?

And even if publishing by newspaper could achieve all that it pretends to achieve, we should still oppose it. Books are not quite like pounds of tea or boxes of pills. They have other uses and other ends than to make money. The labourer, of course, is worthy his hire. The author, like any other craftsman, must earn his bread. But it may be said without cant that the author has another ambition besides gain. He does not estimate his success as a stockbroker estimates his—merely by the balance at his bank. Unless he be as famous as Mr Hall Caine, who, like another Quintus Curtius, is ready to leap into the abyss of dearness, with nothing but a play in his hand and the aureole of a free *réclame* about his head, he would probably renounce something for dignity and quietude of life. He does not desire to go down into the pit and fight for notoriety, nor

is he cheered at the clatter of interested adulation made by those who hope to profit by his exertions. Yet this is what 'The Times' would offer him, if in its mercy it condescended to make him the subject of a puff — noise, notoriety, and vulgar acclamation. Is it worth it? Is the loss of decency compensated for by the added wealth? We think not, and we believe that the most of self-respecting authors would prefer the tranquil method of to-day to the multi-coloured prospect which is offered them to-morrow. Consider what advertisement has made of the actor, and then ask yourself whether you would like to see the author following the same path.

The ambition of 'The Times' to publish is not new. Its exploit with the 'Encyclopædia Britannica' is still fresh in our memory, and it is a fair test of its interest in science and literature. We cannot forget with what insistence that immense mass of printed matter was thrust upon thousands of ignorant persons. No artifice was neglected which should persuade the unsuspecting citizen to purchase a work which was begun a quarter of a century before it fell into the hands of 'The Times,' and which therefore could not be expected to embody the most recent research. There were eloquent advertisements; there were private letters; in the last gasp there was the telegraph-boy's thunderous knock upon the door. Breathlessly we were told that the last chance of enlightenment was slipping from us. And so pliable is the will of man that thousands, who should have known better, fell into the snare of the advertiser. This, in fact, is the great achievement of 'The Times,' and by its past performance we may fairly judge its future intention. We freely acknowledge that those who bought the 'Encyclopædia Britannica' are not much better than those who sold it. Persons who cannot choose for themselves, who buy the books they are told to buy, are not worth a vast deal of consideration. But the triumphant sale of an outworn 'Encyclopædia' should be a sufficient warning. 'The Times' has reduced the forcing of its commodities upon an unwilling public to a fine art. It is the sophist of publishing. With a skill which we cordially admire, it can make the worse book appear the better. But this very skill is the clearest reason why the distribution of books should not be entrusted to its hands. A vast disservice will be done to letters if the familiar apparatus of puff, circular, and telegram be used to invent false reputations and to trick out the adroit man of business in the garb of a man of genius.

Worse still, 'The Times' takes its adventure with the 'Encyclopædia' very seriously. If it looked back upon the episode with a kindly cynicism, we would almost forgive it. But there is no cynicism in its retrospect. It still regards, with an ingenuous pride, its ample dissemination of knowledge. To say a word in dispraise of the solid work which fills many homes with a sense of discomfort, is to incur its instant

wrath. Here, for instance, is Mr Hugh Chisholm declaring that to describe the 'Encyclopædia Britannica' as antiquated in 1898 is "dishonourable," "libellous," "malicious," "dishonouring," and "ignorant." These are brave words, and they have a strange sound on the lips of one whose colleagues are quick to charge others with losing their temper. They are also irrelevant. An Encyclopædia is necessarily antiquated twenty-five years after its commencement and nine years after its completion. It is not Mr Chisholm's fault. It is the fault of time, and the statement of so plain a fact need not, one would have thought, have stirred anybody to anger. Nor, indeed, is it nowadays accounted a grave sin to offer a hopelessly antiquated book for sale. In the present state of commercial morality we can readily believe that to sell a damaged article is regarded as a far greater triumph than to get rid of something whose value is unimpaired. Besides, it is easy to murmur *caveat emptor*, and shift the blame on to the purchaser. Nobody is likely ever to buy two Encyclopædias, and when a simple soul does discover his error, no great harm is done to the vendor. But there are two questions which we cannot refrain from asking. Was the flood of rhetoric justified by which 'The Times' persuaded many thousands of illiterate persons to purchase an antiquated work? And did 'The Times' speak the truth when it asserted that it was offering its 'Encyclopædia' at less than half price? These questions 'The Times' will answer in accordance with its own standard of morals.

Mr Chisholm's anger, then, is the best possible proof that 'The Times' looks upon its virgin enterprise with a grave and serious eye. And at the end of his letter he gives us a solid reason, which hitherto had escaped us, why he should regard an attack upon the great work as a personal attack upon himself. His letter is signed by the "Editor of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,'" and if that achievement be his own, he naturally resents the slightest aspersion cast upon it. But since when has he been editor of this famous work? Many years ago we consulted its pages,—we hope with profit,—and neither of the editors was called Chisholm. Maybe the office of editor is retrospective. 'The Times' is an expert juggler. We all remember how, at a stroke of the wizard's wand, the Ninth Edition became the Tenth, and perhaps if it bought a remainder of Dr Johnson's 'Dictionary,' it would select a new name to decorate the title-page. But an explanation of Mr Chisholm's belated appointment would be welcome, if only for the sake of historical accuracy.

These sad episodes in the career of 'The Times' are recalled because they provide the best possible proof that that newspaper is not entirely fitted to be our sole arbiter in the matter of literature. "Times is money," says the French proverb, and Printing House Square has taken it to heart. It is merely "out for the stuff," as the American half of it might say, and we should have a far greater respect for

our high-priced journal if it did not pose as the benefactor of the author, who prefers to be left alone, and as the patron of the bookseller, whose prices it persistently cuts. Books do not seem to be the best material for the art of the advertiser. Patent pills are surely his proper province. What an opportunity for a glowing style is afforded by the bodily ailments of weak men and hysterical women! What composer of advertisements would lack eloquence when he explained the health-giving properties of Dr Jones's newest remedy! Moreover, quack medicines are more lucrative than books. If only 'The Times' would take them up and supply them free to all their subscribers, in consideration of a handsome rebate to be spent upon advertisement, no harm would be done to anybody, and 'The Times' might find the chemists easier adversaries than the publishers are like to prove. One word more, and we have done with 'The Times.' It has been said, and we have been pleased to believe it, that the Book Club was the property not of the journal itself, but of an American syndicate, which controlled the columns devoted to advertisement. Alas! the solace of this belief is denied us. The responsibility is all 'The Times' ' own;[1] and we wonder that the disquieting shades of John Walter the Great and of John Delane do not haunt the office, where their calling, once dignified, is brought thus low.

Much has been said during the present controversy concerning the declining sale of books. This decline has been attributed, with great recklessness, to the high price which authors and publishers put upon their wares. The attribution we believe to be wholly false. During the last fifty years the price of books has steadily decreased. Even in the last decade the novel, in the general eye the only form of literature, has dropped from 31s. 6d. to 6s., and drops, after a decent interval, from 6s. to 6d. And if we would explain the ruin which is said to stare authors, publishers, and booksellers in the face, we must look elsewhere. Nor have we far to look. Overproduction has been the curse of literature, as of many other industries. There are too many publishers and too many authors. Everybody writes a book nowadays who can hold a pen, and, as the cost of paper and ink is light enough, publication is not difficult. But this is an evil to be cured only by a change of fashion and a higher standard of merit. 'The Times' neither could nor would bring about a better state of things, and we look to the issue of the present struggle, confident that dignity and sobriety will win an easy victory over the wiles of the advertiser and the methods of the cheap-jack.

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[1] To arrive at the truth is not easy. 'The Times' is divided bitterly against itself. Mr Walter declares emphatically that 'The Times' is not "owned and controlled by persons other than the proprietors of that journal." Mr Moberley Bell is not so sure. "In this matter," says he, "'The Times,' as distinguished from 'The Times' Book Club, is acting independently as it did in 1852." Mr Hooper arrogantly ignores them all.