

Abstract

Joseph John McAleer, Jr.

D.Phil., Modern History

St. John's College

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Popular Literature and Reading Habits in Britain, 1914-1950

This thesis is an examination of the mass-market publishing industry in Britain after the First World War and of the 'literature' read by the lower-middle and working classes: novels and weekly magazines. We chronicle the development of the industry both generally and through the experiences of three publishers, examine the activity and motivations of the reading public and consider the treatment of contemporary issues and attitudes within popular fiction as a useful barometer for the historian.

There are seven chapters. Chapter 1 considers the period before 1914 in order to provide the necessary background for an understanding of the focus of this study, 1914-1950. The origins of the popular publishing industry and Wilkie Collins' 'Unknown Public' are examined and continuities with post-1914 popular literature traced. In Chapter 2 a broad overview of our period is conducted: the development of the industry and of the market, the influence of war and the depression, and the effect on reading of the growth of other leisure activities. Chapters 3 and 5 look at the reading habits of adults and children/adolescents from the lower-middle and working classes. In both cases contemporaries and readers themselves seemed to think 'escapism' was paramount in the selection of 'light' fiction and there was therefore a significant continuity between child and adult reading. Finally, Chapters 4, 6 and 7 focus on the histories and influence of three publishers of popular fiction during this period. These include two of the most successful (Mills and Boon, D.C. Thomson) and in contrast, a prominent but declining firm (The Religious Tract Society). In each case the complex relationship between market forces and editorial policies is discussed. We conclude that a reciprocal relationship existed between publisher and reader, with the latter dictating much of what was published. Popular fiction, moreover, served to reinforce predominant stereotypes and ideological views of society rather than to impose specific doctrine.

Long Abstract

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Popular Literature and Reading Habits in Britain, 1914-1950

This thesis is an attempt to examine a somewhat neglected area of modern British social and cultural history. Admittedly, it is not surprising that the 'popular' (as opposed to 'quality') publishing industry, its publications (mainly 'light' fiction), and its largely lower-middle and working-class readership have been overlooked. After all, the debuts of broadcasting and the cinema were more dramatic, and the 'low-brow', 'disposable' characteristics of popular literature have militated against serious study. But reading was nonetheless one of the most popular sources of leisure for the poorer classes. In fact, the strong growth of the publishing industry between the wars was linked directly to the activity of this 'new reading public' which appears to have read less for instruction than for entertainment, and even an 'escape' to a world brighter than its own. The most active section of this market was 'light' fiction, in novel and weekly magazine form: thrillers, Westerns, detective stories, romances; Ruby M. Ayres, Edgar Wallace, Peg's Paper, The Hotspur.

In this thesis we will examine popular literature and reading habits during the period from ca. 1914 to ca. 1950. Given

the vastness of a subject such as 'popular literature', we have confined our attention to two of the most popular and active genres: romantic fiction for women (in novel and magazine form) and the 'boys' weeklies' described by George Orwell in his famous 1940 essay. Our primary intentions are three. Firstly, we will chronicle the development of the publishing industry within the mass market, considering in turn its reaction to market forces and to the competition from other leisure activities, especially during the 1930s. Secondly, we will attempt to describe reading habits of adults and children in terms of motivation, selection and taste. The lower-middle and working classes were perhaps more dependent upon light fiction as a source of comfort and escape than were more refined readers. Finally, we will examine the history of three publishers which were representative of the age: Mills and Boon, D.C. Thomson and the Religious Tract Society. In each case we will look at their progress, response to market forces, problems faced, and the complex relationship between publisher and reader which governed editorial policy.

In some respects the foundations for this thesis have already been laid. Wilkie Collins' 1858 essay on 'The Unknown Public' was a revelation, an attempt to dispel the assumption that the reading public was comprised solely of the upper and middle classes, readers of The Times and patrons of Mudie's Library. Rather, the thriving market in genres such as 'penny dreadfuls', 'yellow-backs' and weekly papers like the Family Herald was an indication of the burgeoning demand of the poorer but newly literate

classes. The 1870 Education Act, while not responsible for the spread of literacy (and therefore reading) as many contemporaries had claimed, nonetheless focused attention on reading habits, provoking much comment and criticism from writers such as Helen Bosanquet and Edward Salmon. In fact, the two genres which we have selected have always been the source of controversy; women's and children's reading represented markets which contemporaries have always felt must be managed or regulated in an instructive, 'wholesome' way. Q.D. Leavis' 1932 work on Fiction and the Reading Public was a call to arms which, like Collins' essay, tried to expose the excesses of popular fiction; Leavis regarded the dependence on trashy novels as detrimental to the health of society. Similarly, Orwell's 1940 essay concluded that children were being indoctrinated by the publishers of the so-called 'tuppenny bloods'; regressive values and world-views were presented and apparently endorsed in such fiction and instilled in future citizens a resistance to change and endorsement of the Conservative status quo.

Although this analysis is indebted to these and other studies, we have tried to differ in terms of depth and approach to the subject. In examining reading habits, for example, we try to look beyond the amorphous term 'escapism' to reveal that in some cases 'escapist' fiction implied more than just a happy ending. Romantic fiction is one genre which changed considerably after the First World War. The sensational love stories by such authors as Marie Corelli and Elinor Glyn were largely surpassed in popularity by more realistic, plausible, 'middle-class' plots. Hence, it is

reasonable to argue that escapism resembled aspiration for the lower-middle and working-class readers of such novels. This assertion is bolstered by the fact that the popular romantic novels, issued by such firms as Mills and Boon, contained and endorsed the predominant ideological views of sexual relations between the wars: companionate marriage and full-time motherhood.

Our discussion of editorial policy and the assumed influence of publishers and their views upon readers will also take a different approach. In the past many critics of popular literature, including Leavis, Orwell, Richard Hoggart and more recently Kirsten Drotner, have depended wholly on detailed analyses of the contents of romantic novels, detective stories and children's fiction in passing judgments on the intentions of publishers and the components of editorial policy. Some critics have inferred that the rosy world-views and high moral tone in popular fiction represented a conscious attempt at social control. In this thesis we have tried to test these and other conclusions by considering the publishers themselves, their editorial policies and the fruits of these policies. Our three 'test cases' include the two market leaders in romantic novels (Mills and Boon) and letterpress weekly papers for women and for boys (D.C. Thomson) and as a contrast, a once mighty but declining firm (The Religious Tract Society). Through interviews with editors current and retired and examination of archival evidence, we have been able to draw several conclusions on the extent of the popular publisher's influence. For example, the relationship between publisher and reader was not as one-sided and authoritarian

as Orwell maintained and feared. Rather, it was reciprocal: the reader often dictated much of what was published through opinions expressed in letters, surveys and sales. The primary concern of any publisher was, after all, financial gain, and therefore his product had to be interesting and acceptable to the consumer. Hence, the successful publisher researched his readership aggressively, kept a 'firm finger on the national pulse' (according to one D.C. Thomson editor) and was receptive to change within moral reason, of course. Bolder plots and sensational characters were only introduced when no longer socially unacceptable; the lead of the cinema was often followed. 'Indoctrination' was therefore difficult and was no guarantee of financial success: the Religious Tract Society, in refusing to accommodate the pious nature of its (declining) periodicals to an increasingly secular society, relinquished its once dominant position in the market. We have also tried to reveal one of the most important considerations in children's publishing during this period: that parental supervision of children's reading was common and strict. D.C. Thomson editors worked as much to please boys as their parents; the constant fear was of a mother objecting to a publication and banning it from the house.

There are seven chapters in this thesis. In chapter 1 we will look at the period before 1914 in order to provide the background essential for an understanding of the focus of this thesis. The publishing industry benefitted from the spread of literacy and the general commercialization of leisure which characterized the late nineteenth century. Shrewd entrepreneurs

such as Alfred Harmsworth exploited the newly literate masses with a spate of interesting, educative penny publications: Tit-Bits and Answers were two of the biggest sellers. The strong public outcry against the excesses of the existing popular literature was reflected in the 'quality control' movement in publishing, which has left a lasting legacy. The Boy's Own Paper (1879), for example, was an enormous success, illustrating that a market existed for quality production and 'wholesome' fiction. By 1914 two well-defined markets had emerged, for women and children. Traditionally these groups were neglected by publishers in favour of men (the daily newspapers) or middle-class women (patrons of the circulating libraries Mudie's and W.H. Smith).

A broad overview of the period 1914-1950 will be conducted in the second chapter. We have selected this period as the focus of the thesis because it represents in many respects a relatively calm interval between two turbulent stages: the foundation of the popular Press before 1914 and the strong response to reading from such media as the cinema and television after 1950. The main influence upon the publishing industry during this period was war. Although paper was rationed during each world war (and to a far greater degree during the Second), the demand for reading was sustained when other leisure activities were curtailed or restricted. Furthermore, the need to 'escape' was probably increased and this promoted the kind of 'light' literature which is the subject of this thesis. But the wars had other, more lasting effects. The First World War served not only to reduce the number of publishers and encourage concentration of

ownership, but postwar price increases accelerated trends in the industry and general public towards the commercialization of literature and the production of cheaper editions. The need to replenish financial reserves after the war led to the conscious promotion of books as 'commodities' with an eye on the greatest return. The object was to tap the active 'new reading public' comprised of the lower-middle and working classes and traditionally not purchasers of books, given their high price and reputation as luxuries. During the 1930s, when pocket money was spread over all sorts of leisure activities, the commercial or 'tuppenny' libraries provided an inexpensive means of distribution to this public. For the price of a tuppenny magazine, a novel could be borrowed, and this reading public was quite voracious. We will also consider the genuine paradox of this period: the decline of magazine sales between the wars. The weekly magazines were essentially victims of poor production techniques and strong competition from other leisure activities such as the cinema, which consumed the extra tuppence which formerly was spent on a paper.

We have devoted two chapters to a discussion of the reading habits of the lower-middle and working classes, the chief patrons of popular literature. Chapter 3 looks at adults, chapter 5 children and adolescents (roughly, ages 10-16). It is possible to identify several characteristics which were 'unique' to this reading public. For example, in most cases these classes identified magazines as 'books', just as for many 'books' implied fiction. According to Mass-Observation and other surveyors, the low-brow

tastes of the poorer classes were in part a product of their environment. Home libraries were rare, and this 'bookless' quality engendered a disrespect for books which was manifested in the preference for 'disposable' magazines and inferior fiction. Some of the most successful authors of children's books, including Captain W.E. Johns ('Biggles') and Richmal Crompton ('William'), probably owe their success to the fact that their series resembled tuppenny bloods in book form. Judging from reading surveys, the opinions of contemporaries, and readers themselves, 'escapism' appears to have been the principal motive in reading. Consequently, an important continuity can be established between the child reader and the adult reader as both consumed prodigious amounts of light fiction. We can also conclude that the cinema and the wireless encouraged rather than detracted from reading, as they also treated the Western, the thriller, the detective story and the romance. Adaptations of classical fiction and current best-sellers also promoted reading ('the book of the film').

In the remaining three chapters (4, 6 and 7) we will try to place these and other views in perspective by examining the experiences of three publishing houses. Mills and Boon was the leading publisher of romantic fiction during our period, as it is today. Originally founded as a multi-disciplinary publishing house, Mills and Boon was transformed in the 1930s to a 'library house' specializing in one genre and tagging all of its sales to the tuppenny libraries. A bold commercial move, this specialization has brought Mills and Boon a loyal readership and financial success for

fifty years. Similarly, D.C. Thomson was also a leading publisher of fiction for women (The People's Friend) as well as for boys (The Hotspur). Among the reasons for this firm's success were the novelty of its unusual publications and the aggressive attention paid to its readership, both young and old. This attention was not forthcoming from our third case, the Religious Tract Society. In many respects the nineteenth-century ancestor of D.C. Thomson as publishers of the best-selling Boy's Own Paper and Girl's Own Paper, the R.T.S. displayed an astonishing amateurishness and ignorance of market forces in the twentieth century and a resistance to change which was the key to success for any popular publisher.

We have tried to explore the complex relationship between publisher and reader in these three cases. While it is true that publishers during this period were conscious to present conventionally 'moral' and 'wholesome' views in their fiction with a view to influencing their readers towards their concept of the 'better good', editorial policy was actually much more complex. The successful publisher, as we show, was willing to compromise in order to maintain the interest of a reading public whose tastes were changing through two world wars. While this is hardly surprising, as the primary purpose of any business is to make money, it does explain the longevity of some publishing houses (Mills and Boon and D.C. Thomson have been in existence over eighty years) and the failure of others. This close attention, moreover, does indicate that popular literature can serve as a useful barometer, if not of the genuine attitudes of its readers (in this case, the lower-middle

and working classes), of their ideals and aspirations.



'The Fiction Department', D. C. Thomson, Dundee, c. 1925

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POPULAR LITERATURE AND READING HABITS IN BRITAIN, 1914-1950

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Joseph John McAleer, Jr.
St. John's College, Oxford

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To my Father
and
the memory of my Mother

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List of Abbreviations

- AA-1 Alfred Anderson (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 10/4/86
- AA-2 Alfred Anderson (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 11/8/87
- AB-1 Alan Boon (Mills and Boon). interviewed 30/5/86
- AB-2 Alan Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 5/8/86
- AB-3 Alan Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 4/12/86
- AB-4 Alan Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 10/8/88
- B. The Bookseller (London)
- B.O.P. The Boy's Own Paper (Religious Tract Society)
- GM-1 George Moonie (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 17/7/86
- GM-2 George Moonie (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 14/8/87
- G.O.P. The Girl's Own Paper (Religious Tract Society)
- JB-1 John Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 30/5/86
- JB-2 John Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 4/12/86
- JB-3 John Boon (Mills and Boon), interviewed 10/8/88
- JM-1 Jack Mackersie (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 10/4/86
- JM-2 Jack Mackersie (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 11/8/87
- M-0 The Mass-Observation archives, University of Sussex
(In footnotes, followed by 'Topic Collection';
concluded by initials of Mass-Observer, identity
withheld, who collected the material)
- MP-1 Maurice Paterson (D.C Thomson), interviewed 10/4/86
- MP-2 Maurice Paterson (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 16/7/86
- MP-3 Maurice Paterson (D.C. Thomson), interviewed 12/8/87
- P.C. The Publishers' Circular and Booksellers' Record
(London)
- R.T.S. The Religious Tract Society

- Sunday The Sunday at Home (Religious Tract Society)
- T.C. The Trade Circular (W.H. Smith & Son, Ltd.)
- USCL The United Society for Christian Literature archives,
 University of London
 (In footnotes, followed by archive
 classification number)
- W.M. The Woman's Magazine (Religious Tract Society)

Introduction

The preoccupations of this thesis have been anticipated by two authors: Wilkie Collins and George Orwell. At first glance these writers seem poles apart: Collins the author of gothic thrillers (The Woman in White, The Moonstone), Orwell of satirical novels (Animal Farm, 1984). And yet, each wrote a single essay which blended literary criticism with social commentary and which has changed the way we look at popular (i.e. 'lower-middle/working-class') culture. As one was published close to the beginning of our discussion and one towards the end, their common points of reference are significant. It is important here to recount briefly each argument, as the points raised are central to any study of popular literature and reading habits.

Wilkie Collins' essay was published anonymously in Household Words, Charles Dickens' weekly journal, in 1858, two years before The Woman in White.¹ The title of the essay coined a phrase which has been used repeatedly by critics since: 'The Unknown Public'. Collins was anxious to dispel an illusion about reading habits: that the 'great bulk of the reading public of England' was composed of 'the subscribers to this journal, the customers at the

1 'The Unknown Public', Household Words 18 (21 August 1858), pp. 217-222

eminent publishing-houses, the members of book-clubs and circulating libraries, and the purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews'. His discovery to the contrary was made upon closer inspection of what Collins called 'penny-novel Journals', publications which occupied the windows of stationers' and tobacconists' shops in 'the second and third rate neighbourhoods' of London, and in 'every town, large or small', about England. These nameless papers contained, for one penny, a mixture of serial and short stories, 'snippets' of information (household hints, riddles, trivia), and a large section offering answers to readers' queries. These resembled, in other words, any number of modern weekly entertainment magazines. Collins was informed ('without exaggeration') that five of these journals had a combined weekly circulation of 1,000,000 copies. Estimating three readers to each copy sold, he was amazed at the result - 'a public of three millions - a public unknown to the literary world...'

'Arguing carefully by inference', through interviews with shopowners and an analysis of published replies to readers, Collins drew several conclusions on the composition of this 'Unknown Public'. These readers were clearly working-class, judging from 'the social and intellectual materials' evident in their queries ('A reader who is not certain what the word Poems means...A speculative reader, who wishes to know if he can sell lemonade without a license...Two timid girls, who are respectively afraid of a French invasion and dragon-flies'). Apparently, they read for their own amusement rather than for information, and quantity was more important than quality: shopowners could not advise on the contents of the journals, only

that they were 'good pennorths'. In fact, any improvement in the type of fiction published spelled commercial disaster: an attempt by one journal to serialize The Count of Monte Cristo resulted in a 'serious decrease' in circulation. The serial story, which Collins argued was the chief attraction of the papers, was conventional, melodramatic, sentimental, undistinguished - but moral:

The one thing which it is possible to advance in their favour is, that there is apparently no wickedness in them. There seems to be an intense in-dwelling respectability in their dulness. If they lead to no intellectual result, even of the humblest kind, they may have, at least, this negative advantage, that they can do no moral harm.

Collins concluded on a surprisingly positive note. Although he pitied the ignorance of this reading public, which clearly had never been taught how to read and was therefore unaccustomed 'to the delicacies and subtleties of literary art', he was convinced that, in time and with proper guidance, this group would develop into a formidable market for literary genius:

it is perhaps hardly too much to say, that the future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad. It is probably a question of time only. The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate.

When that period comes, the readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time. A great, an unparalleled prospect awaits, perhaps, the coming generation of English novelists. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public

shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known.

It is important to recall that Collins was writing at a time when the mass-market publishing industry was still in its infancy. He could not have foreseen the prodigious expansion of the periodical trade after 1870, when a spate of new publications encouraged not discrimination and refinement but demand for more of the same, 'light' entertainment.

George Orwell's now classic essay on 'Boys' Weeklies' was first published in Horizon in March 1940.² As an examination of publications which appealed to working-class readers, Orwell's essay can be regarded as a direct descendant of Collins'. Although he was not the first critic since 1858 to explore this subject (Helen Bosanquet, Edward Salmon, Margaret Phillips and Q.D. Leavis, for example, had already done so), Orwell's essay has attracted the most attention: he was an author and literary critic of stature and persuasion, and his essay was published during the war at a time when interest in the sociology of popular culture was high.

Like Collins, Orwell first became interested in working-class reading habits through close scrutiny of the newsagent's shop, a fixture in 'any poor quarter in any big town'. He was clearly impressed by the 'unbelievable' quantity and variety of the tuppenny weekly magazines. 'Probably the contents of these shops is the best available indication of what the mass of the English people really

² 'Boys' Weeklies', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (ed), The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell I (Penguin edn, 1987), pp. 505-531

feels and thinks. Certainly nothing half so revealing exists in documentary form', he wrote. With this in mind, Orwell proceeded to examine one type of publication which was then immensely popular: 'boys' papers', commonly called 'dreadfuls' or 'bloods'. Looking in turn at titles published by the Amalgamated Press (Gem, Magnet), and by D.C. Thomson (Wizard, Hotspur), Orwell sought to highlight differences as well as similarities. In general, he criticized the unrealistic, over-optimistic world-view expressed in these papers, which excluded any mention of contemporary political, social and moral issues. Consequently, in his opinion these failed to prepare young men for their future responsibilities as citizens. 'The clock has stopped at 1910', he observed. 'Britannia rules the waves, and no one has heard of slumps, booms, unemployment, dictatorships, purges or concentration camps'. Instead, old-fashioned views and stereotypes were reinforced, especially in terms of class relationships and a jingoistic patriotism. The Amalgamated Press papers (which, Orwell admitted, were no longer very popular in 1940, as they had been in the 1910s and 1920s) were wholly concerned with a middle-class fantasy world of posh public schools, cricket matches, silly masters, huge teas and fun-pranks: 'Everything is safe, solid and unquestionable. Everything will be the same forever'. Although the contents of the Thomson papers (the best-selling titles throughout the interwar period) were more varied and stylistically superior, they perpetuated these same attitudes. They were, however, more influenced by the cinema and the 'bolder' magazines published in America, in their promotion of bully-worship and a cult of violence:

Instead of identifying with a schoolboy of more or less his own age, the reader of the Skipper, Hotspur, etc. is led to identify with a G-man, with a Foreign Legionary, with some variant of

Tarzan, with an air ace, a master spy, an explorer, a pugilist - at any rate with some single all-powerful character who dominates everyone about him and whose usual method of solving any problem is a sock on the jaw.

Orwell admitted that 'on its level the moral code of the English boys' papers is a decent one. Crime and dishonesty are never held up to admiration, there is none of the cynicism and corruption of the American gangster story'. But while conceding that no one 'in his senses would want to turn the so-called penny dreadful into a realistic novel or a Socialist tract' ('An adventure story must of its nature be more or less remote from real life'), Orwell nonetheless was disturbed by the huge demand for such inferior fiction among boys, of all classes, and the distorted view of a sanitized reality which they were absorbing:

To what extent people draw their ideas from fiction is disputable. Personally I believe that most people are influenced far more than they care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point of view the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in life.

It was, in effect, a form of social control, even more worrying given the obvious right-wing bias in the magazines.

in England, popular imaginative literature is a field that left-wing thought has never begun to enter. All fiction from the novels in the mushroom libraries downwards is censored in the interests of the ruling class. And boys' fiction above all, the blood-and-thunder stuff which nearly every boy devours at some time or other, is sodden in the worst illusions of 1910. The fact is only unimportant if one believes that what is read in childhood leaves no impression behind.

In concluding, Orwell called attention to a similar type of publication for women (Peg's Paper, Family Star). These also avoided

any mention of current affairs, sex, and domestic problems in their 'escapist' fiction, were usually rags-to-riches tales involving office workers or factory girls. The ubiquitous happy ending added to the lack of realism: 'Always the dark clouds roll away, the kind employer raises Alfred's wages, and there are jobs for everybody except the drunks. It is still the world of the Wizard and the Gem, except that there are orange-blossoms instead of machine guns'.

This thesis is concerned with the reading public which Collins and Orwell tried to describe, during the period when Orwell wrote and which Collins would have recognized: from ca. 1914 to ca. 1950. A number of questions will be considered: Was reading as popular a leisure activity among the lower-middle and working classes as both writers contended? How extensive, and exclusive, was this demand? Did the 'Unknown Public' learn to 'discriminate', as Collins hoped, and graduate to the works of the 'best writers'? Were the publishers of such 'popular' fiction, in both book and magazine form, guided purely by commercial concerns, or did they seek to influence their innocent readers as well? Indeed, what was the relationship between publisher and reader: were their tastes and views compatible? To what extent can the social and cultural views of the lower-middle and working classes be inferred from what they read?

In considering these and other questions, three main conclusions will be drawn. Firstly, reading was one of the most popular leisure activities among the lower-middle and working classes; it was an inexpensive way of passing spare time, and one of

the easiest to accommodate around a job. 'Light' fiction, in book and magazine form, was the chief preference, and 'escapism' appears to have been the principal motive of both adults and children. Secondly, the publishing industry, while displaying the resilience to war and the economic depression which most light service industries did, won its prosperity only through considerable restructuring. This is best illustrated by the commercialization of popular literature in the 1920s and 1930s, and the corresponding growth of agents of distribution such as the 'tuppenny libraries'. The exception, however, was the magazine trade, which suffered from the aggressive development of other leisure activities. Finally, a reciprocal relationship, founded upon commercial concerns, existed between publisher and reader, with the latter directing much of what was published. Consequently (successful) popular fiction often embodied a mixture of realism and fantasy, finely tuned according to demand. In order to gauge the intentions of publishers and the likely influence such fiction had upon its readers, we will rely less on conjecture and content analyses, and examine instead three representative publishers of the period, and their complicated editorial policies within an increasingly 'mass' market.

Mass reading habits have not been the subject of much sustained historical inquiry, though something can be learned, for example, from Q.D. Leavis, Richard Hoggart or Richard Altick.³ Histories of leisure have considered the development of public libraries, for instance, but not the magazine and fiction trades.

3 Q.D. Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public (London, 1932); Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (Penguin edn, 1957); Richard Altick, The English Common Reader (Chicago, 1957)

The newspaper industry, on the other hand, has been well documented.⁴ One reason why popular literature has been overlooked is its diminished scholarly appeal compared with two other leisure activities, the wireless and the cinema, whose impact has been more dramatic. Despite this historians have recognized its social importance. Detective stories, according to A.J.P. Taylor, 'often provide for the historian clearer and more accurate social detail than can be found in more literary works'.⁵ Similarly, Rowntree and Lavers believed that 'the reading habits of a nation have a double significance, for what a man reads not only reveals his present intellectual and cultural standards, but also helps to determine what they will be in the future'.⁶ More recently, Kirsten Drotner, in examining children's magazines, found these to be 'excellent "seismographs of child taste", for an unwelcome change in characters or an unexpected development of events may immediately be registered by a sudden drop in circulation figures'.⁷

The period 1914-1950 has been selected because it represents the first time the mass reading public was commercially managed and exploited in a recognizably modern way. It was also in some respects a calm interval between two turbulent periods: the

4 See especially Alan J. Lee, The Origins of the Popular Press in England 1855-1914 (London, 1976); Stephen Koss, The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain (London, 1981-1983)

5 A.J.P. Taylor, English History 1914-1945 (Oxford, 1965), p. 312

6 B. Seebohm Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, English Life and Leisure (London, 1951), p. 286

7 Kirsten Drotner, 'Schoolgirls, Madcaps, and Air Aces: English Girls and their Magazine Reading Between the Wars', Feminist Studies IX (Spring 1983), p. 34

foundation and consolidation of the 'Unknown Public' before 1914, and the challenge to reading by such popular entertainments as the cinema and television during the 1950s. Although the origins of the modern popular Press can be traced much earlier, 1870 has conventionally been regarded by historians as the great watershed. Forster's Education Act during that year was blamed by contemporaries for unleashing literacy (and inferior reading habits) among the masses. In fact, this legislation only accelerated existing trends towards full literacy, a trend much higher in Scotland than in England and Wales. Better events to mark the launch of the modern popular press would be the foundation of specific pioneering publications, such as the Boy's Own Paper (1879); Tit-Bits (1881); and the Daily Mail (1896). Nonetheless, the decades after 1870 did witness a strong growth in popular publishing in Britain as many firms traded to meet this new demand. The outbreak of war in 1914 can also be considered a turning point. After forty years the market for popular literature had matured; the war and its restrictions on trading and paper pared the number of publishing houses and accelerated trends towards concentration of ownership and cheaper-priced fiction which characterized the period to 1950. Finally, from 1950 new types of publications emerged with the final lifting of restrictions imposed during the Second World War which had retarded development. These included women's papers containing more 'realistic' fiction, and the picture-story paper or 'comic'.

What was the market for popular literature? 'Popular' does not imply 'common'; this fiction, in book and magazine form, did not attempt to appeal to all classes. D.L. LeMahieu has identified

the cinema, and such 'popular' large-circulation newspapers as the Daily Mail and the Daily Express, as the best examples of 'common culture'. The wireless, moreover, saturated British homes in a way television would after the Second World War.⁸ Rather, popular literature was directed principally at what Sidney Dark (like Collins) in 1922 called the 'New Reading Public...that ever-increasing company drawn from what we commonly call the lower-middle class and the working class'.⁹ The term implied 'low-brow',¹⁰ often sensational and critically unacclaimed works - and therefore not 'common' in the LeMahieu sense. Romantic novels and tuppenny magazines were aimed at middle and working-class readers in a way that (say) Graham Greene and The Lady were not.¹¹ John Boon, a Director of Mills and Boon, perhaps best characterized the market for this type of fiction when, in 1945, he condemned a movement in the industry to ban 'popular' books in order to release more rationed paper for 'quality' works. Boon emphasized the significant role such fiction played in the general market and the distinctive nature of its readership:

The dealers in popular books do a service to the trade. They are the missionaries who preach the reading habit. The readers of quality books form a fairly constant group; they are less set in their tastes, and less inclined to be distracted by cheap modern

8 D.L. LeMahieu, A Culture for Democracy (Oxford, 1988), p. 227

9 Sidney Dark, The New Reading Public (London, 1922), pp. 5-6

10 The adjectives 'low-brow' and 'high-brow', used by literary critics throughout this period, are American, first popularized in Britain by H.G. Wells. (Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, The Long Weekend [London, 1941], p. 50)

11 The exception was detective fiction, which, as today, seemed to span all classes of readers. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy L. Sayers were especially popular.

entertainments. The popular reader more often than not represents what is called in politics the 'floating vote'. He has to be won from football pools, the dogs, the cinema, the wireless and kindred temptations. In fact, the popular trade bears the brunt of the competition with those forces which tend to make people read less...Every new reader of Edgar Wallace does not mean one less of Proust. ¹²

Philothea Thompson, former editor of The Bookseller, graphically described what she called 'the cheap stuff'. Referring to a novel by the 'Prince of Storytellers', E. Phillips Oppenheim, in the Yellow Jackets series issued by Hodder and Stoughton, she said, 'It really is representative of the period: in appearance, in absolutely ghastly writing, in ghastly sentiment - you know, money. All that was revolting'.¹³ Occasionally some novels, periodicals and authors transcended these barriers: most notably, Gone with the Wind and Rebecca¹⁴; the Picture Post; Georgette Heyer and P.G. Wodehouse.

Popular literature, therefore, is a vast subject.¹⁵ In addition to romantic fiction and detective stories, it includes Westerns, thrillers, adventure tales, historical and children's fiction - novels, novelettes and serial stories in magazines. Variations of the above, moreover, were aimed at certain audiences:

12 John Boon, 'A plague o' both your houses!' B. 18 October 1945 pp. 498-499

13 Philothea Thompson was interviewed in Woodstock, Oxon. on 26 February 1987. She joined The Bookseller in 1945, eventually succeeding Edmond Segrave as Editor.

14 Thompson claimed that Daphne du Maurier's 1938 best-seller was a publishing enigma which appealed to readers in all classes, and would have broken sales records in each. Rebecca, published by Gollancz, has never been out of print.

15 Willing's Press Guide, for example, lists nearly 7,500 newspapers and periodicals published in Britain in 1939.

women and children, for example. Given this variety, some kind of concentration has to be made in terms of genre and readership. In this thesis we will look at two types: romantic fiction for women (both novels and weekly magazines) and boys' weekly magazines. Of all the popular reading genres, these two were especially 'managed' and 'targeted'. From the 1870s, and the launch of a 'quality movement' in popular literature, publishers, parents and critics have all believed that this popular fiction has had to be regulated with great care. The more successful publishers adopted a paternalistic approach to their readers, dispensing conventional attitudes and ideals in their publications, which were often marketed as a kind of personal companion and guide. The affinity between publisher and reader was reinforced by vigorous market research; publishers were continually 'testing the waters' in order to maintain an up-to-date and interesting product in a competitive market. It is because we can see how publishers both managed their products and reacted to changing tastes of the reader that popular literature can be regarded as a useful barometer of the tastes, ideals and aspirations of its readers. In the case of boys' weeklies, moreover, these may have reflected the desires of the parent (the unseen but all-powerful factor) as much as the child.

The selection of publishing houses to act as 'test cases' in this thesis has been conducted according to these considerations. Publishing archives are scrappy: not only did the 'disposable' nature of popular fiction militate against the saving of records, but many offices and warehouses - including the premises of Cassell, Ward Lock, and Collins - were destroyed in the blitz. The records-

editorial and financial - of the Religious Tract Society (publishers of the Boy's Own Paper and the Girl's Own Paper), however, are almost complete, having been evacuated to Surrey in 1940. The archives of two market leaders, Mills and Boon (romantic fiction) and D.C. Thomson (weekly magazines, including My Weekly and the Wizard), are less so. In order to supplement existing evidence, a wide range of interviews has been conducted with current and retired executives, editors, writers and employees of each firm, as well as workers in related fields such as newsagents and literary agents. As such, we have constructed 'new' archives, comprising what has survived and what we have been able to recreate. The latter, however, by its nature has been used with discretion.

Before we proceed, several other methodological and archival points should be clarified. Our discussion of children's reading habits will concentrate on boys and girls aged 10-14, which has been called 'the period of a child's greatest reading'.¹⁶ Tastes in reading were considered to have formed by the school-leaving age. Judging from evidence that many children as young as twelve were already enjoying 'adult' authors and weekly magazines, an important continuity can be established between the child reader and the adult reader. In fact, critics lamented the so-called 'gap': this apparent lack of a bridge between children's books and classical fiction, which encouraged so many young readers to take up light fiction. In

16 'Favourite Books of Children: "Treasure Island" A First Choice', The Times 8 September 1932 p. 12 Given our age restriction, some famous children's authors whose principal readership was younger than age 10, will not be mentioned: Enid Blyton is the most famous example.

1930 The Librarian warned that 'children of all classes, not of the poor alone', were at risk:

Our children's books are amongst the best in the world. But it is in that transition stage from childhood to manhood and womanhood, from twelve or fourteen to eighteen or twenty that the fondness for tripe is to be found. Our literature for that stage is lamentable, poor both in numbers and quality.

It is because of that gap, bridged, if it is bridged at all, by the worst of both classes of literature that so many children who in their young days are intelligent and eager readers, become non-readers or avid devourers of the grown up story of action - the detective tale, or the romance which is but a poor variant of Cinderella, substituting the slime of the sex novel for the romance of the fairy tale.

17

It is legitimate to study together book and magazine reading as often no distinction was made between the two among lower-middle and working-class readers of all ages. 'Reading' frequently meant magazine reading; twopenny weeklies were referred to as 'books', just as for most people 'books' meant works of fiction. In her survey of reading habits Q.D. Leavis noted that 'It is not an exaggeration to say that for most people "a book" means a novel'.¹⁸ Similarly, during the 1940s a typical reply to the question, 'Do you read books?', posed by Mass-Observation, was, 'Yes. What you call magazines. I call them books... well, girls' books'.¹⁹ Interviewers preparing a Gallup Poll in February 1940 were surprised by the

17 'Reading Rationally: The Adolescent's Chance', The Librarian and Book World 19 (March 1930), p. 243

18 Leavis, p. 6

19 F/25/D, Chelsea. Mass-Observation classified interview subjects according to standard sociological groupings: Class B: upper and middle classes; Class C: artisan, lower-middle and upper-working class; Class D: unskilled working class.

'large' percentage (15%) of people who said they had bought the book they were reading. Gallup suspected - almost certainly - that some people included magazines and periodicals in their definition of 'books'.²⁰

The period after 1937 is much better documented on the subject of reading habits. Although disappointing, this need not be discouraging, given the apparent resistance of reading habits to change. Consequently, important material from the Mass-Observation archives in particular is used extensively. The London evidence from the boroughs of Fulham, Chelsea and Tottenham is especially full, indeed invaluable. From other sources it is easy to conclude that light fiction sold well, but only through Mass-Observation material is it possible to assess how it was regarded by its audience, and what impression it made on them.²¹ The statistical data, however, has been regarded with care, as much does not stand up to close scrutiny despite the organization's reputation. Where possible, such data has been compared with Gallup Polls. (A satirical cartoon in the News Chronicle, entitled 'Last-Minute Mess Observation', was reproduced [maliciously?] in a 1951 Gallup reference book.)²²

20 B. 21 March 1940 p. 380

21 The Mass-Observers were notoriously bad spellers and typists; these deficiencies, coupled with the poor quality of paper used during the war, make difficult reading. To facilitate examination of the evidence in this thesis, therefore, elementary spelling mistakes have been corrected.

22 The News Chronicle, Behind the Gallup Poll (London, 1951), p. 18. Gallup Polls were conducted along more scientific lines than Mass-Observation. Normally 2,300 people were interviewed at 230 places across the country. The results claimed to represent an accurate cross-section of the population: 'If a sample is accurately selected,

Like Orwell, Mass-Observation believed that popular literature had a great influence upon its readership beyond its obvious entertainment value. 'I have always felt that the literary weeklies have dangerously ignored the growth of a mass literature', Tom Harrisson, the organization's co-founder, wrote in 1941.²³ Harrisson and his colleagues argued that popular fiction could promote definite attitudes (such as patriotism) and stereotypes (Bulldog Drummond, the 'intelligent tough', or the 'mad scientist'), through several repetitions. Kathleen Box, a full-time investigator and author of several of the early reports on reading, prefaced a 1940 study on book-reading in Fulham with similar observations on magazine-reading:

Book buyers and members of book clubs are largely middle class and largely intellectual ...That there is a gulf between the types of books read and what 'reading' means to middle class (especially intellectuals) and working class people is evident especially from the types of magazines stocked in the shops in different districts...Intellectuals may imagine that 'pamphlets' are a force in determining public opinion. Few working class people even know what these are. Much more can be found out (about) what people like reading from public libraries, twopenny libraries, and grubby little sweet shops, than from Charing Cross Road.

24

it represents a near replica of the entire population...a miniature electorate with the same proportion of farmers, doctors, lawyers, Catholics, Protestants, old people, young people, businessmen, labourers, and so on, as to be found in the entire population'. The maximum normal error in a sample of 1,500 was 4 percent; of 5,000, 2.5 percent. No breakdown was given in terms of class, region, etc. (George Gallup, A Guide to Public Opinion Polls [Princeton, 1948], pp. 22-24)

23 M-O 'Reading' Box 3 (22 June 1941), pp. 2-4

24 Kathleen Box, 'Wartime Reading', M-O File Report 47 (March 1940), p. 27

She concluded that weekly papers such as Red Star Weekly and Oracle 'must have an enormous influence in forming opinion and determining shape(s) of wish-pictures and symbols in people's minds'.²⁵

Several sources have been consulted extensively in order to analyze the development of the publishing industry and the popular fiction market. These include trade publications and relevant archives. Three weekly journals, for example, have yielded much information. The Bookseller and The Publishers' Circular were, and remain, the organs of the book trade. These provide not only a continuous record of the publishing industry throughout the period, but a forum for views on reading habits from leading commentators in different fields, including publishers, booksellers, librarians, authors and, of course, readers themselves. The Trade Circular, published by W.H. Smith & Son (the largest wholesale newsagent supplier in England and Wales), is the corresponding source for the magazine trade. The archives of W.H. Smith near Abingdon have also been consulted, as have the records of John Menzies (the largest distributor in Scotland) in Edinburgh. The W.H. Smith archives have also been useful on the subject of that firm's lending library; similar information on a rival, the Boots Booklovers Library, has been obtained at The Boots Co. in Nottingham.

The most popular books, magazines and authors during this period can be discovered from a variety of sources, including advertisements, sales figures, bookshop reports and library surveys.

25 Box, M-0 'Reading' Box 3 File A (4 March 1940), p. 1

Best-seller lists are rare. An American invention (begun in The Bookman in 1895 and, as such, criticized here as 'unEnglish'), these were introduced in Britain by the wholesale suppliers Simpkin Marshall in 1931 with much controversy. J.B. Priestley led the campaign against misuse of the term 'best-seller' in advertisements, calling for a minimum requirement of sales of 25,000 copies (an enormous number for the time) in the first three months.²⁶ Priestley's suggestions were not adopted, and the lack of standard rules means that reliable 'best-seller lists' are few. Sources of magazine circulations are also rare. Although the Audit Bureau of Circulations was founded in 1931, registration was voluntary and low. Few children's papers were registered; by nature these did not carry the significant percentage of advertising that the women's magazines did, so that the demand for audited figures was minimal. Advertising yearbooks, including The Advertisers' A.B.C. and The Newspaper Press Directory, contain some figures.

Surveys of popular fiction issues from public libraries, although numerous, must be regarded with care. Public libraries did not attract a large lower-middle and working-class following until after the Second World War, when most of the commercial ('tuppenny') libraries - the principal source of 'light' fiction - closed. Until this time public libraries usually stocked only 'better' fiction, a policy which engendered much debate and criticism during the 1930s. In 1931, for example, the Publishers' Circular urged public librarians to attract readers 'of undeveloped tastes' by supplying 'admittedly inferior' fiction:

26 J.B. Priestley, 'No More "Best-Seller"!'
B. 2 March 1934 p. 146

We also have a duty to those ratepayers who desire entertainment and recreation only. Many a tired mill-girl finds her little hour of romance in a novel by Ethel M. Dell or Olive Wadsley. Many a weary miner lives for an evening in a thrilling world of adventure created by Edgar Wallace or Jackson Gregory. Who can say that the provision of such entertainment is not the function of a public library?

27

The assumptions inherent in such public library policy illustrate a problem which faces the historian of popular culture. Although not unexpected, given the nature of popular fiction, literary snobbery, layered over decades, can potentially colour critical interpretations. For example, on the death of the romantic fiction writer Ethel M. Dell in 1939, The Times made a rare admission in placing her alongside Charles Garvice, Nat Gould, and Edgar Wallace as 'the most popular novelists in the English-speaking world'.²⁸ And yet these authors - the favourites of the 'New Reading Public'- cannot be found in surveys of English literature. The book which probably had the largest sale and widest readership of any novel in Britain during the Second World War - James Hadley Chase's grisly thriller No Orchids for Miss Blandish - has received similar treatment, as has Mills and Boon. The firm even conceded so in a 1950 advertisement: 'Many people still disapprove of romantic fiction. Perhaps you are one, but all the same it remains a necessary part of any circulating library'.²⁹ John Boon expressed his resentment over such treatment by literary critics. 'I suppose

27 'What IS the Function of the Public Library?' P.C. 18 April 1931 p. 465

28 Penelope Dell, Nettie and Sissie: The Biography of Ethel M. Dell and her sister Ella (London, 1977), p. 164

29 T.C. 14 January 1950 p. 9

of any genre we have the biggest readership in the world, but you'll never see us mentioned'.³⁰ In many cases investigators of reading habits during this period were apparently reluctant to admit that the poorer classes, and especially children, were enjoying inferior fiction. Consequently, the conclusions drawn were largely 'wishful thinking' and must be regarded with care. Two examples can be cited. In 1916 the reading habits of working-class factory employees, aged 21 and under, were observed by their company supervisor. Given only the run of his private library (which was well-stocked with 'boys' books... temptingly displayed'), these workers preferred Queen Mary's Gift Book, Scotland for ever (a Red Cross volume), and Princess Mary's Gift Book over the others. The investigator was cheered by the selections of his workers, members of the 'humbler but intelligent classes';³¹ this conclusion is unwarranted and absurd. Similarly, in 1927 Foyle's, the London bookseller, distributed questionnaires to schools and clubs across the country to determine the most popular authors of boys' books. The top ten were Ballantyne, Henty, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Strang, Verne, Marryat, Kipling, Dickens, and -first of the 'moderns' - Percy Westerman. 'The result seems to indicate that the average boy is conservative in his reading tastes, that he is quite satisfied with his father's old favourites, and is slow to adventure into new

30 John Boon was interviewed in London on 10 August 1988 (JB-3). Apparently, one exception was Sir John Betjeman. 'He got so fed up with reviewing what he called obscene books or unpleasant subjects, he was always pleased when he got a Mills and Boon - not that I think he got very many of them', Boon said.

31 Peter Playfair, 'The Literary Tastes of Working Lads', letter, The Times Literary Supplement 30 November 1916 p. 574

literary fields',³² the Publishers' Circular commented. What was not mentioned, however, was that the field of 25 authors was selected (as above) by Foyle's, and a number of critics, including the Publishers' Circular, suspected that many ballot papers were filled in by parents. In a rebuttal, Gunby Hadath, a writer of school stories, criticised the survey, noting that six of the 25 in the list could not truly be classed as boys' authors: Conan Doyle, Scott, Kipling, Stevenson, Dickens and Rider Haggard.³³

There are seven chapters in this thesis. Chapter 1 will consider the period before 1914, in order to provide the necessary background for an understanding of the focus of this study, 1914-1950. The origins of the popular publishing industry and the 'Unknown Public' will be examined, and continuities with post-1914 popular literature will be traced. In Chapter 2 a broad overview of our period will be conducted. We will look at the development of the industry and the market, the influence of war and the depression, and the effect on reading of the growth of other leisure activities, notably the cinema and wireless. Chapters 3 and 5 will consider, respectively, the reading habits of adults and children/adolescents from the lower-middle and working classes. In addition to documenting the extent of reading as a leisure activity, and the preferred authors and publications, these chapters will also look at the principal motives for reading. In both cases, contemporaries and

32 'Who are the Most Popular Authors of Boy's Books?' P.C. 16 April 1927 p. 452

33 P.C. 1 October 1927 pp. 477, 479. John Stevenson, in British Society 1914-45 (London, 1984), refers to a 1926 survey which attained exactly the same results; this may be the Foyle's study. (p. 399)

readers themselves seemed to think 'escapism' was paramount in selection of 'light' fiction, and there was, therefore, a significant continuity between child and adult reading. Finally. Chapters 4, 6 and 7 will focus on the histories and influence of three publishers of popular fiction during this period. These include two of the most successful (Mills and Boon; D.C. Thomson), and, as an interesting contrast, a prominent but declining firm (The Religious Tract Society). In each case the complex relationship between market forces and editorial policies will be discussed.

Chapter 1

'Simply to Listen and Be Thrilled':

Pre-1914 Background and Continuities

Wilkie Collins certainly would have agreed with the assertion that, during the nineteenth century, one 'of the most far-reaching inventions of an inventive age was the paragraph'.¹ As exploited by such entrepreneurs as Newnes and Harmsworth, this simple, easily digestible device was responsible for bringing entertainment and enlightenment to the 'Unknown Public', through tabloid newspapers (Daily Mail), weekly service magazines (Tit-Bits), and popular fiction, in the form of novels and the infamous 'penny dreadfuls'. In this chapter we will consider the origins, generally and in terms of specific genres, of the market for post-1914 popular literature which is the principal focus of this thesis. By presenting such background material, this chapter will, therefore, in some respects inevitably be a work of synthesis. We will consider the growth and development of publishing in Britain, in order to demonstrate the existence before 1914 of a popular literature for women and children in both book and magazine form, and of certain continuities between this and the literature of the post-1914 period.

¹ Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth, Northcliffe (London, 1959). p. 65

The twentieth century, we will conclude, inherited an established market for 'light' literature and a proven readership. Best-selling authors such as Marie Corelli and Hall Caine, moreover, set important precedents. According to Amy Cruse:

They immensely strengthened the taste for a literature superficial, flashy and untrue, yet presenting itself as the exponent of high moral ideals...they enforced the lesson that the reader's part was simply to listen and be thrilled without making any effort to understand...Yet it would be unfair to say that the work they did was entirely unfortunate in its tendency. They gave a vast amount of pleasure to a large number of people, many of them people whose sources of pleasure were few. ²

In other words, they helped to establish a trend, just as the popular prewar magazines did, towards 'light' yet apparently 'wholesome' reading which characterized the mass-market publishing industry in the twentieth century.

I

The years around 1870 separated two distinct periods in British publishing history. The first of these, from (roughly) 1840-1870, witnessed significant developments in mass market publishing and distribution, including the expansion of W.H. Smith in the retail and library trades, and the popularizing of the 'penny-dreadful' and 'sensation-novel' genres. The second period, 1870-1914, contained three movements which shaped directly the modern market: a marked increase in the quality and sophistication of composition and

² Amy Cruse, After the Victorians (London, 1938), p. 186

production; a trend towards cheaper and more widely-available books; and a concentration of ownership of periodicals and books in a handful of large firms.

Prior to 1870, as Collins had argued, a thriving market existed for popular fiction. In general there were three classes: 'penny dreadfuls', 'yellow-backs' (or 'railway novels') and the 'sensation novels'. They represent the direct ancestors of the popular literature of the twentieth century, and reached the apex of their popularity in the 1860s. Penny dreadfuls (so named for their price and poor quality) catered largely to a young audience, working-class boys and girls. The pejorative was used to describe both magazines issued in parts (such as Sweeney Todd) and bloodthirsty weeklies such as The Boys of England with its legendary character, Jack Harkaway (1866). Yellow-backs (so named for the colour of their lurid covers) contained complete stories of a similar type, although with more adult themes. Reminiscent of the American 'dime novels', they are an early example of inexpensive popular fiction, bound in stiff or paper covers and sold mainly on railway bookstalls for the benefit of travellers. Sensation novels, on the other hand, were proper full-length hardcover works distributed largely through public libraries and the three principal subscription libraries: Mudie's, W.H. Smith and Boots. These novels, written more by women than men, inspired writers of light fiction intended for users of the 'tuppenny libraries' during the 1930s.

Given their low price and sensational subject matter penny dreadfuls and yellow-backs were aimed at the lower-middle and working

classes, the 'Unknown Public'. They were sold through traditional bookstalls and on a more personal level, by hand outside factories or through tobacconists, sweets vendors and corner-shop grocers. Discounts of more than double the customary 25 percent were offered by publishers to shopkeepers who gave these papers high exposure in their windows.³ Popular penny dreadfuls included Seduction, or the Perils of a Woman's Life; Wild Will, or the Pirates of the Thames; and two well-known thrillers, The Blue Dwarf and Dick Turpin.⁴ The tone of the yellow-backs is suggested by two of G.W.M. Reynolds' publications: 'Loves of the Harem' and 'Bronze Statue, or the Virgin's Kiss'. The size of edition of both types of publications varied between 1,000 and 10,000 copies; one can assume that copies were passed around and the actual readership was much higher.⁵ Edward Lloyd, one of the most prolific of these publishers (known in the trade as the 'Salisbury Square School') perhaps best characterized the lowly status of his patrons:

You see, our publications circulate amongst a class so different in education and social position to the readers of three-volume novels, that we sometimes distrust our own judgement, and place the manuscript in the hands of an illiterate person - a servant or a machine boy.

3 James Greenwood, The Wilds of London (London, 1874), pp. 159-160. Lady Bell's 1907 description of the large number of 'small composite shops' in poorer districts which, in addition to selling groceries and other goods, 'put before their public an unfailing supply of daily and weekly newspapers suited to their tastes, and penny novelettes', is relevant here. (At the Works [Virago edn, 1985], p. 144)

4 According to E.S. Turner, Black Bess, or The Knight of the Road, published by E. Harrison, is, at 254 weekly parts, 2,028 pages and over 2.5 million words, the longest penny dreadful by one author on record. (Boys Will Be Boys [London, 1975], p. 48)

5 See 'The Literature of Vice', B. 28 February 1867 pp. 121-123; Michael Sadleir, 'Yellow-Backs', in John Carter (ed), New Paths in Book Collecting (London, 1934), p. 150

for instance. If they pronounce favourably upon it, we think it will do. ⁶

Richard Altick claimed that by the 1850s the first truly mass reading public in Britain had been established, due largely to such publishers as Lloyd and Reynolds. 'It was only around the fifties that the familiar phrase of "literature for the millions" ceased to be mere hyperbole and came to have a basis in sober fact'.⁷ A popular interest in reading, promoted by the radical press during the periods of the Reform Bill and Chartism, was now exploited and enhanced by publishers of penny papers, and the sensational storylines and extensive advertising served to increase demand. Indeed, in 1852 Charles Knight said that the average weekly sale of four popular magazines exceeded 200,000 per week: Cassell's Paper, Reynolds' Miscellany, The Family Herald and The London Journal, the latter selling 450,000.⁸

Circulation figures, the most useful indices of popularity, do not exist for penny dreadfuls or yellow-backs. There is no reason to doubt, however, that they were read in large numbers; the literary 'establishment' certainly thought they were, and with harmful effects. Thomas Wright, for example, regarded penny dreadfuls as 'such utter, unredeemed rot...we are more inclined to believe that their "pull" must lie, not in interesting boys, but in

6 Quoted in Thomas Frost, Forty Years' Recollections: Literary and Political (London, 1880), p. 90

7 Richard Altick, 'English Publishing and the Mass Audience in 1852', Studies in Bibliography VI (1954), pp. 4-5

8 Quoted in 'The Sale of Penny Periodicals in Victoria's Young Days', P.C. 21 April 1923 p. 421

flattering them, pandering to their weaknesses and want of sense'.⁹ The Quarterly Review even blamed them for the increase in juvenile crime. 'The story is always the same. An errand boy or an office lad is caught in the act of robbing his master...In his desk are found sundry numbers of these romances of the road'.¹⁰ George Humphery, however, claimed that such literature filled young people's heads with exalted and unobtainable dreams, such as how to become a duke or a countess. 'The effect of this is seen', he claimed, 'in the exalted opinions the young people entertain of themselves, even to the disuse of ordinary politeness. Out of ten boys who applied for work, only one said "Please" or "Thank you."'¹¹

If penny dreadfuls and yellow-backs characterized much of the retail trade prior to the 1870s, sensation novels were the mainstays of the circulating libraries. In essence, these were similar in style and content to the penny publications (indeed, many were issued initially in parts, serialised in such periodicals as The Sixpenny Magazine), but extended to three volumes. The prime exponents of this genre were Mrs. Henry Wood (East Lynne, 1861) Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Lady Audley's Secret, 1862) and 'Ouida' (Under Two Flags, 1867). Charles Knight described well the typical elements in such novels:

In a sensation novel of the genuine sort, are to be found a pleasant distillation of the

9 Thomas Wright, 'On a Possible Popular Culture', The Contemporary Review 40 (July 1881), p. 35

10 'Penny Fiction', The Quarterly Review 171 (July 1890), pp. 154-155

11 George R. Humphery, 'The Reading of the Working Classes', The Nineteenth Century 33 (January-June 1893), pp. 692-693

topics that daily present themselves in the records of the criminal courts and police offices, all so softened down and made easy to juvenile capacities, that murders, forgeries, burglaries, arson, breach of trust, adulteries, seductions, elopements, appear the common incidents of an English household.

12

The greatest sensation these novels caused was the fact that the criminals were seemingly moral and upright people. Nonetheless, good always triumphed over evil, and despite the strong overtones of sex and violence these were essentially morality tales, structured around a love story. Evil Lady Audley is exposed for attempting to murder her husband (by pushing him down a well); Lady Isabel in East Lynne repents on her deathbed for abandoning her husband and children. Sales were unprecedented: East Lynne, for example, sold over 500,000 copies, in addition to being circulated by Mudie's.¹³ Lady Audley's Secret sold out eight editions in three months.¹⁴ Given the fact that these novels were published in three volumes (price: 31s. 6d.), obtainable mainly at the subscription libraries (patronised by the middle and upper classes), and serialized only in the more expensive (6d.) magazines, it is unlikely that these authors attracted a large working-class audience at this time, though their sales demonstrate just how big was the non-working-class reading public. Their popularity and influence later, when cheaper editions were available, is, however, evident. In 1880 Thomas Frost claimed that 'the authors whose works are most in demand among the subscribers to Mudie's are also those which stand highest in favour of the readers of the penny

12 Charles Knight, Passages of a Working Life During Half a Century III (London, 1873), pp. 180-181

13 Introduction, East Lynne (Everyman edn, 1984), pp. v-vi

14 Introduction, Lady Audley's Secret (Virago edn, 1985), p. ix

periodicals, so far at least as they have been brought within their reach'.¹⁵ Wood, moreover, was the author most favoured by working-class men and women according to Lady Bell's 1901 survey of Middlesbrough.¹⁶

As with the penny publications, critics expressed much scorn for the sensation novels. 'A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made - so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season',¹⁷ the Quarterly Review claimed. Slick advertising techniques which nurtured cults of personality around best-selling authors were satirized by another critic: 'a well-known and much-esteemed author of to-day "with the proceeds of some blueberries, sold to the mother of her future husband, bought the pencil with which her first story was written." This is the fabulous and vulgar trash which takes the place of history and criticism'.¹⁸

Several developments - educational, technical, and organizational - facilitated the growth of the market for this kind of popular fiction. The elimination of stamp duties on newspapers,

15 Frost, p. 323

16 Bell, pp. 165-166. Similarly, in Lark Rise to Candleford Laura described 'the more daring and up to date' girls in Candleford town 'who liked a thrill in their reading, devoured the novels of Ouida in secret, hiding the book beneath the mattresses of their beds between whiles, For their public reading they had the Girl's Own Paper'. (Flora Thompson [Penguin edn, 1987], p. 497)

17 'Sensation Novels', The Quarterly Review 113 (April 1863). p. 483

18 'The Literature of Snippets', The Saturday Review 87 (15 April 1899), p. 456

for example, was an encouragement not only to that genre but to all types of reading matter. The growth of the railways, and extension of the telegraph, helped in better distribution and communication. Increased rail travel created a market for light reading to while away the journey. Improved methods of lighting, in the home and in public areas, also encouraged reading. In the 1850s better paper-making machinery was developed, and paper was cheapened with the use of woodpulp. The invention of the rotary printing press, which printed on continuous rolls of paper, speeded production considerably, and made possible larger editions.¹⁹ A changing occupational structure persuaded many proprietors to develop storypapers featuring characters that would appeal to certain workers, such as mill girls, shop-assistants and domestic help. Finally, literacy levels were increasing throughout the nineteenth century. By 1870, the formal literacy rate in England and Wales (i.e. the ability to sign one's name) was estimated at 80 percent, and in Scotland 90 percent. By 1900 these figures had increased to 97 and 98 percent,²⁰ and contemporaries were apt to blame the spread of literacy for the degraded tastes of the poor. 'The intellectual faculties of the bulk of the nation were too long in bondage; it should not cause any wonder that when the shackles of ignorance were

19 Herbert Tracey (ed), The British Press (London, 1929). pp. 15-16

20 Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900', Past and Present 42 (February 1969), p. 120. Stone added that with the spread of education, by the late nineteenth century 'the ratios between name-signing and an adequate reading capacity, and between reading capacity and writing capacity, tended rapidly to converge'. Indeed, R.K. Webb has suggested that, as early as the 1840s, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the working class were fully literate, i.e. able to read. (R.K. Webb, 'Working Class Readers in Early Victorian England', English Historical Review 65 [1950], pp. 333-351; The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848 [London, 1955])

struck off there was a rush to the Elysian fields of fancy and pleasure', one wrote.²¹ James Haslam measured the optimistic expectations of the 1870 Education Act against the facts of working-class reading habits in Manchester. 'The Three Rs' were to lead magically to higher planes of morality, politer manners, purer thoughts', he wrote. 'The contrast between these expectations and the present reality is enough to make the most robust optimist a temporary cynic'.²²

Booksellers quickly saw the possibilities of this new market and moved to exploit it. In 1848 the first W.H. Smith railway bookstall, at Euston Station, was opened, the beginning of an impressive network of stalls and bookshops throughout England and Wales.²³ In early years this firm prided itself in stocking a 'better' selection of reading matter than just the vulgar penny papers in great demand; in later years it carried the full range of popular fiction. In 1860 the W.H. Smith Circulating Library was founded, operating through each bookstall, as an alternative to Mudie's Library (1842). Both libraries were the principal purchasers of the first three-volume editions of novels. Given the cost of an annual subscription (at least £1 per year, for one volume), patrons

21 Joseph Ackland, 'Elementary Education and the Decay of Literature', The Nineteenth Century 35 (March 1894), p. 423

22 James Haslam, The Press and the People (Manchester, 1906), p. 3. Haslam, something of an idealist, correlated poor living conditions with low-brow reading tastes. 'When the slum-dweller delights in reading Milton and Shakespeare then there will be no more slums', he believed.

23 W.H. Smith's Scottish counterpart, John Menzies, opened his first bookstalls at Perth and Stirling in 1857. Unlike Smith's, Menzies did not offer a circulating library.

of the circulating libraries were largely middle-class. William Faux, the librarian of W.H. Smith in 1903, noted the distinct difference between his customers and users of the free public libraries. 'Now those folks can have the best of English literature to read for nothing, but middle-class people prefer to join a circulating library which, you see, must supply volumes in good condition and without having hair-pins, bread-crusts, and such trifles lodged among the pages'.²⁴ In 1899 the main competitor of Mudie's and W.H. Smith, Boots Booklovers Library, was founded.

Simultaneous to the expansion of the subscription libraries were the growth of similar facilities for the working class. These included the free public libraries (authorized by Parliament in 1850), libraries of Mechanics' Institutes, and the myriad of shop lending libraries which were the precursors of the 'tuppenny libraries' of the 1930s. The latter were supplied by large firms, mainly London-based, such as the Imperial Book Club Libraries ('A Necessary Addition to every Newsagency. Good profits and no risk') and the Tabard Inn Library Ltd. ('current fiction on loan at cheap rates - frequent exchanges').²⁵ Although the free library system experienced strong growth - between 1896 and 1911 the number of loans doubled, to 54 million, and expenditure increased threefold

24 'A Great Librarian: Mr. William Faux On His Half-Century's Experiences', The Book Monthly October 1903 p. 27. Hygiene was indeed an attraction of the circulating libraries; Boots vowed to destroy by fire any returned volume that had come into contact with an infected person or area.

25 Advertisements in The National Newsagent, Bookseller, Stationer and Fancy Trades Journal, 1920 and 1935 edns

- less than five percent of the population were registered borrowers.²⁶ Annual subscriptions to the Mechanics' Institute libraries varied between 15 shillings and £1, and the subscriptions probably excluded much of the working class, although one such library in Candleford town introduced Laura to the works of Dickens, Scott, Austen and Trollope.²⁷ It was thus the shop lending libraries or the penny publications which met most working-class demand.

This new mass market for low-grade fiction provoked a strong opposition to its apparent excesses. This precipitated a kind of 'quality-control' movement during the 1870s and 1880s. The weekly magazine trade was the first to be reorganized and 'sanitized' in this fashion. Leading the crusade against the penny dreadfuls was the Religious Tract Society, publishers of The Boy's Own Paper (1879) and The Girl's Own Paper (1880). The success of these papers (each achieved an initial weekly sale of 200,000, equal to the most popular dreadfuls) was a revelation to the industry, illustrating the attractions of high-quality production and the seeming size of the market for 'wholesome' fiction. The Edinburgh

26 P.J. Waller, Town City and Nation (Oxford, 1983), p. 314. In 1895 George H. Elliott, the public librarian in Belfast, said that less than three percent of the population of the city (7,152 of 285,000) were registered borrowers. Although these readers came from 'nearly every section of the community', Elliott noted that, as 'in most of the other public libraries in England and elsewhere so it is here - the class most largely represented is that of bookkeepers or clerks, and not mechanics and factory workers as some suppose'. (George H. Elliott, 'Our Readers and What They Read', The Library 7 [1895], p. 276)

27 Thompson, p. 415. The fierce one-legged librarian 'seemed to bear a positive grudge against frequent borrowers,' Thompson wrote. "'Carn't y'make up y're mind?" he would growl at some lingerer at the shelves. "Te-ak th'first one y'comes to. It won't be no fuller o'lies than t'others.'"

Review must have had the B.O.P. in mind when it made this inspired appeal to publishers:

Carry the war into the enemy's camp; flood the market with good, wholesome literature instead of the poisonous stuff to which hapless purchasers are now condemned. The battle must be fought out by the purveyors of fiction, and it must be made as easy and profitable to provide a dainty, harmless, and well-seasoned repast as a dish of poison.

28

Helen Bosanquet in 1901 recognised the improving trend in popular literature and gave credit where it was due. 'We have to thank the business man rather than the philanthropist. Publishers of some standing are finding out that it is profitable to cater for the million, and they are learning also that the million prefers good to bad, when good implies some positive merit and is not merely goody'.²⁹

28 'The Literature of the Streets', The Edinburgh Review 165 (January 1887), p. 63. The Boy's Own Paper was not founded without much deliberation in the Religious Tract Society about publishing a 'secular' paper (which really resembled a much-tamer penny dreadful). In 1900 the Chairman of the R.T.S., responding perhaps to dissension, defended the magazines for confronting the 'terrible literature' of the competition (which, he claimed, encouraged gambling and suicides) on common ground. 'We have tried to face and counteract...That is really the ground-work of our publications, which are not strictly religious ones, such as the B.O.P. and the G.O.P.; we feel justified in meeting this difficulty in that way'. See chapter 7. (The Religious Tract Society Record June 1900 p. 44)

29 Helen Bosanquet, 'Cheap Literature', The Contemporary Review 79 (May 1901), p. 681. This 'quality' movement in publishing may be included as part of the general trend towards middle-class control of mass leisure habits through commercial ownership and direct regulation. According to W. Hamish Fraser, 'Undoubtedly many of the middle classes had feared what the workers might do with their leisure time, and as a result pubs were controlled by licensing, music halls were censored, beaches were cleaned up [bathers were clothed], sports and games were formalised and moderated. In other ways, however, the process was a self-imposed one, as perspectives broadened through travel and reading "educated" working-class families into generally "acceptable" behaviour'. (The Coming of the Mass Market [London, 1981], p. 231)

A triumvirate of shrewd entrepreneurs recognised this new trend towards quality and, in effect, transformed magazine journalism in Britain. Their success initiated the trend towards a quasi-middle class domination of popular culture in Britain as well as the monopolizing of the market by a handful of large firms. George Newnes was the first, with Tit-Bits in 1881, the widely-imitated 'snippet' paper, filled with easy-to-read trivia and useful information. The Editor described the paper's intentions in the first issue (22 October 1881):

The business of the conductors of Tit-Bits will be like that of the dentist - an organized system of extracting ...Any person who takes in Tit-Bits for three months will at the end of that time be an entertaining companion, as he will then have at his command a stock of smart sayings and a fund of anecdotes which will make his society agreeable.

Here, then, was a simple method towards social acceptance for all classes. Flora Thompson noted how Tit-Bits was taken by 'almost every family', and how people delighted in the trivial knowledge dispensed by these 'Yellow Books'.³⁰ Tit-Bits was praised as a unique source of edification for the masses, and derided as the beginning of the decline of English journalism. Nonetheless, by 1888 it was selling an average of 350,000 copies per week,³¹ an enormous number, and prompted a host of imitations: the other members of the triumvirate, C. Arthur Pearson and Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe), achieved their initial successes with similar papers, Pearson's Weekly (1890) and Harmsworth's Answers to Correspondents (1888). Competition between rival papers was great and ingenious

30 Thompson, pp. 498-499

31 Successful Advertising 9th edn (London, 1888), p. 414

prize competitions served to boost circulation. Answers offered a macabre insurance scheme for their readers; if injured in a railway accident while bearing a copy of the publication, the victim would be paid £1,000; by 1892 the payment had risen to £2,600.³² During an influenza epidemic eucalyptus oil, considered a preventative, was sprayed on copies of Pearson's Weekly.³³

Of this triumvirate, Harmsworth was the most prolific and innovative. His achievements in magazine journalism stand beside his landmark newspaper foundations, the Daily Mail (1896) and the Daily Mirror (1903). By 1909, he published nearly 50 titles that sold 8.5 million copies weekly.³⁴ His firm, the Amalgamated Press, founded boys' papers such as the Wonder (1892), Marvel (1893, which introduced Sexton Blake, Detective), Union Jack (1894), and The Magnet (1908), and established a magazine market for women with titles such as Forget-Me-Not (1891), Home Chat (1895), and Woman's Weekly (1911).³⁵ Forget-Me-Not was one of the first weekly penny magazines targeted specifically at women. With a pale blue wrapper and perfumed paper, it promised to be 'as bright and pure as the flower from which it gets its name'. Subtitled 'A Pictorial Journal for Ladies', among its features were romantic fiction ('Diary of a

32 Answers 26 November 1892 p. 1

33 Sidney Dark, The Life of Sir Arthur Pearson (London, 1922), pp. 57-58

34 Souvenir of Banquet, Held at Fleetway House (London, 1912), no p.

35 Circulation figures, July 1894: Marvel 144,000; Union Jack 132,000; Wonder 184,000, Answers 335,000; Comic Cuts 425,000; Chips 282,000; Forget-Me-Not 141,000. The boys' papers were described as selling 'in the hundreds of thousands and yielded their quota of profits'. (Pound and Harmsworth, p. 165)

Professional Beauty' and 'Confession of a Wallflower'), and articles on etiquette, fashion, and household topics. The editors flattered the largely lower-middle class readership by always using the term of address, 'Ladies'. Harmsworth's women's magazines inspired many imitations, all designed for wives and mothers with limited means - middle and working-class women who required domestic and maternal guidance, as well as 'wholesome' entertainment. One of his many innovations, opposed by newsagents, was starting a serial story in one paper, and continuing it in another, thereby boosting sales - but increasing customer complaints.³⁶

The magazine market expanded prodigiously along with the reading public before the First World War. By 1914 there were 200 publishers of weekly and monthly periodicals active in Britain. Francis Hitchman estimated in 1881 that between five and six million penny publications - weeklies and monthlies - circulated in London alone every week, in what he described as 'a remarkable phenomenon of modern times'.³⁷ In 1898 Blackwood's Magazine counted over thirty weekly fiction publications costing a penny or less, each containing no less than 20,000 words of romance and adventure.³⁸ Ralph Rollington, himself a former proprietor of boys' papers, observed in

36 Ibid., p. 117

37 Francis Hitchman, 'The Penny Press', Macmillan's Magazine 43 (1881), p. 396. He added that 'some 14 or 15 papers' for boys were published each week, with a total circulation 'of at least a million and a half. It is somewhat melancholy to have to add that, with few exceptions, these papers are silly and vulgar in the extreme, and that two or three are positively vicious'.

38 'Penny Fiction', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 164 (December 1898). Such magazines as Tit-Bits and Home Notes were excluded from the list, as these were not exclusively fiction-orientated.

1913 how this market had grown since the appearance of Edwin J. Brett's The Boys of England in 1866. Whereas writing for boys used to be an adventure and a lark, now writers could earn between £500 and £1,000 annually.³⁹

The major development in book publishing during this period was the displacement of the costly three-volume novel, or 'three-decker', by a one-volume, six-shilling edition, which was followed by even cheaper editions if demand warranted. This encouraged the distribution of literature among all classes. The fall of the three-decker occurred in the mid-1890s, under the pressure of increasing public demand for cheaper first editions, and of the circulating libraries, faced with rising storage costs and budget restraints. Heinemann published one of the first new one-volume novels, Hall Caine's The Manxman, at 6s. in 1894.⁴⁰ As we shall see in Chapter 2, this move, although profitable for the industry, was as detrimental to new writers and quality books as the cheap pricing movement was after the First World War. A modest sale of between 350 and 500 copies of three-volume novels to the libraries would cover costs; by 1920 this threshold had increased to 2,000.⁴¹ Although cheaper editions were now established, the Net Book Agreement, introduced in 1900, prevented pricing wars between booksellers and publishers in forbidding the sale of any new book at less than the established net price.

39 Ralph Rollington, A Brief History of Boys' Journals (Leicester, 1913), p. 85

40 Guinevere L. Griest, Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel (Newton Abbot, 1970), p. 182

41 'First Novels', P.C. 18 October 1919 p. 331

Most of the new houses which published popular literature were family foundations run by a strong, influential proprietor. Often a publisher achieved great success with an individual author or a particular series, such as the Sixpenny Blacks, classic literature issued by Hutchinson (founded 1887); in format and price this series pre-dated the success of Penguin Books by some fifty years.⁴² Cassell, incorporated in 1883, achieved a string of juvenile successes beginning with Treasure Island (1883) and King Solomon's Mines (1885). Heinemann established an author and an imprint simultaneously with the publication of Hall Caine's The Bondman (1890), which had been turned down by Cassell. Similarly, Methuen, in 1895, published Marie Corelli's The Sorrows of Satan, which had an initial sale greater than any previous novel, bestowing upon it the (largely symbolic) title of the first bestseller in English history. Sales of this novel reached 202,000 copies by 1919.⁴³ Several book firms also published magazines, including the Religious Tract Society (B.O.P., G.O.P.) and Cassell (Chums).

With greater competition, novel methods of advertising and publicity gimmicks were widely used; superlatives were common. For example, in the 1890s the Aldine Publishing Company produced several

42 See chapter 2. Penguin was the first successful paperback series in Britain, but not the first paperbacks.

43 Brian Masters, Now Barabbas was a Rotter (London, 1978), p. 3. Corelli weaned an entire generation on florid, if inferior, fiction. Miss Clarinda, in The Mighty Atom (1896), is outspoken on the evils of popular literature, in this excerpt that captures Corelli's turgid prose: 'To see the young gels nowadays with their books an' their penny papers, all a-gabblin' of a parcel of rubbish as doesn't consarn 'em, - it dew drive me wild, I can tell you!' (pp. 44-45)

'libraries' of thrilling stories for boys, priced between one and six pence, depending on the length. The Aldine O'er Land and Sea Library, 64 pages for 2d., was described as 'the largest (containing more good reading), the Cheapest, and Best Twopenny Library in the World'. Newnes' British Boys (1896) was heralded as 'The Best and Biggest Halfpenny Boys' Paper in the World', while W. Lucas' Ching Ching's Own (1888, 1d.) was called a 'Journal that will please the boys. Four Serials, Novelette, Short Stories - Liberally Illustrated'. For ladies, Pearson's Home Notes, which was 'Profusely Illustrated', was subtitled 'The hand that rocks the Cradle Rules the World'. Horace Marshall's oddly-titled Ladies' Bits (1892) and Book-Bits (1896) obviously preyed upon Newnes' success. T. Harrison Roberts' Gainsborough Novels at 1/2d. were described as the 'Sensation of the Century', with such titles as 'A Passionate Wooing'. Like yellow-backs, pocket-sized 'Complete Novelettes' were a common publication at this time, often published in connection with weekly magazines such as Bow Bells or The Family Herald.⁴⁴ Some authors ran their own papers: Both W.H.G. Kingston and G.A. Henty edited the Union Jack (1880-1883), and Captain Mayne Reid The Boy's Illustrated News. The marketing of series of books, or 'libraries', was common: Methuen's 1/- Library (featuring Marie Corelli), Everyman's Library, Nelson's Library, as well as groups of sevenpenny fiction offered by Hutchinson, Hurst and Blackett, Macmillan and Ward & Lock. Cassell's People's Library, which included in its list

⁴⁴ Laura's grandmother in Lark Rise was an avid reader of novelettes, including such titles as His Ice Queen. 'Except when engaged in housework, she was never seen without a book in her hand. It was always a novelette, and she had a large assortment of these which she kept tied up in flat parcels, ready to exchange with other novelette readers'. (Thompson, p. 94)

Wuthering Heights, was offered at 1s. 6d. leather and 8d. cloth, and sold 850,000 copies by 1909.⁴⁵ The promotion of publishing imprints rather than individual authors in this fashion would be put to best use by Mills and Boon, founded in 1908. Nat Gould attributed his million sales in Britain, his largest market, to publicity. 'My publisher, Mr. John Long, pushes them vigorously and advertises them effectively here. You have, no doubt, seen the very taking posters and bills that he puts up at the railway stations and elsewhere'.⁴⁶

Which authors were most popular in the decades before the First World War? Officially, there were four best-selling authors during this period: Marie Corelli, Hall Caine, Charles Garvice and Nat Gould. Corelli's sales averaged 100,000 copies per year; Caine's 45,000.⁴⁷ Caine, like Corelli, interlaced a throbbing romance with wider social issues; total sales of his works by 1921 had passed the five million mark.⁴⁸ Garvice, author of Just a Girl and other light romances, sold between 1899 and 1920 over seven million copies; the standard size of his cheap reprint edition was 125,000 copies.⁴⁹ In 1914 alone he sold 1,750,000 books.⁵⁰ Similarly, Gould's novels of

45 P.C. 13 February 1909 p. 220

46 B. 5 April 1912 pp. 462-463

47 Masters, p. 6

48 J.A. Stewart, 'Sir Hall Caine: Our Most Popular Novelist', P.C. 4 June 1921 p. 571. In 1898 H.G. Wells complained bitterly to George Gissing of Caine's latest success, The Christian: 'His damned infernal...book has sold 100,000 (one hundred thousand) copies... Otherwise he has no claim upon our attention'. (Parrinder and Philmus (ed), H.G. Well's Literary Criticism [Sussex, 1980], p. 78)

49 B. March 1920 p. 156

50 Douglas Sladen, My Long Life (London, 1939), p. 281

the turf sold in the 'millions' by 1912. His output averaged between 4-5 books and one annual per year.⁵¹

Several retailers recalled the best-selling authors at this time. The manager of the W.H. Smith bookshop in Berkhamstead from 1906-1945 commented that with the advent of the six-shilling novel 'we were never short of a best seller'. Stanley Weyman, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Corelli, Kipling and Caine were most popular.⁵² The recollections of a London newsagent confirmed the demand for 'light fiction':

My most persistent recollection is of the holiday reading that found favour with the crowds that thronged the piers and promenades of Morecambe, Blackpool, Bridlington and Scarborough. It seems to me, as I look back, that every other person I met was reading a book by Charles Garvice...Those who weren't were probably reading Effie Adelaide Rowlands or a 'thriller' by Fred M. White, Headon Hill or Richard Marsh.

53

Among Garvice's competitors were those revealed in a seven-month survey of 'Best-Selling Books' at 64 W.H. Smith bookshops and railway bookstalls in 1912. 'Firm favourites' included John Masefield, Arnold Bennett (Matador of the Five Towns) and Harold Begbie (Broken Earthenware). Romantic fiction by Baroness Orzcy (Fire in Stubble), Mrs. Belloc Lowndes (Chink in the Armour), and Elinor Glyn (Halycone) also sold well, as did new editions of Bram Stoker's Dracula. In fact, the number of new editions of popular works, selling from 7d. to 2s.6d., illustrate the trend towards wider and cheaper

51 B. 5 April 1912 pp. 462-463

52 The Newsbasket March 1948 p. 47

53 T.C. 16 October 1943 p. 8

distribution. Florence Barclay's emergence as the pre-eminent romantic novelist was also recognised: 'Florence Barclay's books are now more popular than the well-known authoress Marie Corelli'.⁵⁴ The Rosary, published in 1909, sold over one million copies; the Publishers' Circular estimated in 1921 that 20 million people had read it.⁵⁵

Of the most popular children's authors and magazines, an 1884 survey of 2,000 boys and girls aged 11-19 ('from the ordinary Board schoolboy to the young collegian') is a rare source of information, though its conclusions have to be handled with care. Traditional children's authors ranked alongside popular sensation novelists. The most popular authors among 790 boys polled were, in order, Charles Dickens (223 votes), W.H.G. Kingston (179), Sir Walter Scott (128), Jules Verne (114) and Captain Marryat (102). Robinson Crusoe was cited as most favorite book, and the B.O.P. was the

54 The Newsbasket March 1912 p. 67. Florence Barclay included among her fans the Tsar and Tsaritsa of Russia. The Tsar was especially enamoured of Through the Postern Gate, and was called by his wife 'Boy Blue' after the protagonist. 'I had to resort to my handkerchief several times. I like to re-read some of the parts separately, although I know them practically by heart. I find them so pretty and true!' he wrote to the Tsaritsa on 31 March 1916. (C.E. Vulliamy (ed), The Letters of the Tsar to the Tsaritsa 1914-1917 [London, 1929], p. 162. According to Vulliamy, 'This book seems to have appealed profoundly to the Tsar and Tsaritsa, and there are several pathetic and playful allusions to it in their correspondence'. [p. 164])

55 'Mrs. Florence Barclay', P.C. 19 March 1921 p. 309. The unusual title was taken from a popular song of the period. In 1911, with sales already topping 300,000, the publisher, Putnams, announced there were no plans for an edition cheaper than the published one at six shillings. 'It is sufficiently obvious that there is no reason why they should, and the large sale is an eloquent corroboration of Mr. Heinemann's opinion that six shillings is and is likely to remain the proper price for a new novel', the B. noted. (20 October 1911 p. 1447)

overwhelmingly preferred magazine, with 404 votes; Tit-Bits (27) was a distant second. Girls preferred Dickens (355 votes), Scott (248), Charles Kingsley (103), and Charlotte M. Yonge (100); Wood ranked sixth (58) and Braddon 25th (13). Westward Ho! was the favoured book, and the G.O.P., with 315 votes, the best magazine, followed surprisingly by the B.O.P. (88).⁵⁶ The results of this survey, on the whole, support what we know about the sales of children's literature, but probably not with much exactness, since it is unlikely that the sample was constructed with much exactness.

II

T.H.S. Escott noted in 1897 how significantly the so-called 'New Journalism' had transformed the reading habits of the nation: 'For very many Englishmen of all classes, the periodical, daily, weekly, or monthly, is practically an exclusive synonym for literature itself'.⁵⁷ This characteristic certainly applied to the reading public after 1914. Similarly, Lady Bell, following her 1907 Middlesbrough survey, concluded that it 'seems undeniable that for the great majority of people reading means recreation, not study: it is a pity we have only the one word to designate the two pursuits'.⁵⁸ She was encouraged, however, that the poor read anything at all.

⁵⁶ Edward Salmon, Juvenile Literature As It Is (London, 1888) pp. 14-16; 21-24

⁵⁷ T.H.S. Escott, Social Transformations of the Victorian Age (London, 1897), p. 375

⁵⁸ Bell, p. 170

Why did people read what they did? According to contemporaries, the lower-middle and working classes read as a means of 'escape', and popular literature soon became called 'escapist' - as it was after 1914 as well. Salmon noted that crime and love were essential ingredients in popular fiction:

The same dish is served up again and again, and the surprising thing is that the readers do not tire of the ceaseless record of wrong-doing on the part of the wealthy which forms the staple of these nonsensical, if not nauseating, stories.

59

Bosanquet found that while boys' papers were concerned largely with violence and sport, 'The girls are satisfied with one or two good murders, a rescue, and a deathbed, so long as hero and heroine are married or reconciled in the last chapter'. She also discovered that women enjoyed papers intended for girls: 'There are probably as many adults as juveniles amongst the readers; and, indeed, the "Girls' Friend" is careful to state in its title that it is a paper for readers of all ages'.⁶⁰ Lady Bell quoted one Middlesbrough woman as favouring penny dreadfuls, which she found 'thrilling, as they give such a good account of high life and elopements'.⁶¹ Haslam interviewed a similar woman in Ancoats, who admitted, 'It is the chief pleasure of my life...to read these tales - they're lovely!'⁶² Margaret Loane found that descriptions of crime, in newspapers or magazines, appealed to the working class in particular; the poor

59 Edward Salmon, 'What the Working Classes Read,' The Nineteenth Century 20 (July-December 1886), p. 113

60 Bosanquet, pp. 673, 675

61 Bell, p. 147.

62 Haslam, p. 7

would spend a much-needed penny on a paper with a 'good murder' in it.⁶³

Several critics identified restorative and instructional qualities in 'escapist' fiction. The happy ending, a fixture of romantic fiction, was praised in Blackwood's Magazine in 1898: 'So long as to be happily married and to "get on in the world" are the secret or avowed ideals of...the working classes, so long will any dangerous and far-reaching scheme of communism remain an impossibility'.⁶⁴ Flora Thompson noted that the 'mental fare' of 'most of the younger women and some of the older ones' consisted almost exclusively of the romantic novelette, stories of poor governesses who married the duke, much in the Jane Eyre mould. These were passed around constantly, it would seem - a large library always in circulation, although they were looked upon as a vice, and hidden from public view. 'They did the women good, for, as they said, they took them out of themselves', she wrote.⁶⁵ Others were tolerant of light fiction as a type of safety valve, a harmless method of improving the temper of the working class. Bosanquet, for example, while critical of the genre, recognised a restorative quality among the young in particular:

The cashier-boy relieves the monotony of counting out other people's change by snatches of breathless excitement; the shop-girl soothes away the irritation of the long day's toil by soaring with a heroine (in whom she finds a glorified self) into a heaven of luxury and sentimentality; and the author, if he has

63 Margaret Loane, An Englishman's Castle (London, 1909), pp. 32-33

64 'Penny Fiction', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, p. 811

65 Thompson, p. 110

reaped neither glory nor money, has, at any rate, made difficult lives a little easier. ⁶⁶

Similarly, Charles Dickens, personally reconciled to the new literature by composing a mystery novel at the time of his death, defended reading habits: 'The English are, so far as I know, the hardest worked people on whom the sun shines. Be content if in their wretched intervals of leisure they read for amusement and do no worse'.⁶⁷ Lord Randolph Churchill praised Harmsworth's work as instructive for boys, even inspiring. 'There is no reason at all why he should not go from your pages to the pages of the monthly magazines, from those to the quarterlies, and again from those all through the English classics'.⁶⁸

In 1897 The Academy surveyed readers in a style reminiscent of Mass-Observation, and its conclusions, in fact, are strikingly similar to those of Mass-Observation during the Second World War. One woman, a waitress, preferred love stories with happy endings. 'She looks upon a story, I suppose, not from the outside, as a work of art, a presentment of another life than her own, but rather as a suggestion of what her own life might be with a little more money and the requisite hero', the reporter commented.⁶⁹ A publisher scorned novels, which were read by 'only half-educated

66 Bosanquet, p. 674

67 Quoted in Knight, III, p. 17

68 Quoted in G.A. Cranfield, The Press and Society (London, 1978), p. 219

69 C.R., 'What the People Read', The Academy 52 (16 October 1897), p. 303

women' and then as 'a form of opium taking'.⁷⁰ Finally, a sea-faring man, described as an Ambassador of Commerce, satisfied his boredom at sea with annuals of such women's papers as the Family Herald. 'Oh, don't you make any mistake! I always lend them, when I've done with them, to other men on board, and they like 'em better than anything. They're the most popular things on the ship', he said, adding, 'I read to prevent myself thinking. That's the difference'.⁷¹

Lastly, it was recognised that girls were enthusiastic readers of boys' papers, some fifty years before A.J. Jenkinson's noteworthy survey of the tuppenny 'bloods' confirmed this. In 1886 Salmon commented on surveys which revealed that nearly as many girls as boys read Robinson Crusoe, Tom Brown's Schooldays, Sandford and Merton, and 'other long-lived "boys'" stories'. Girls, he believed, sought in such books the adventure and insight lacking in their own literature; such preferences should not be discouraged. 'It ought to impart vigour and breadth to a girl's nature, and to give sisters a sympathetic knowledge of the scenes wherein their brothers live and work'.⁷² Henty valued the many letters received from girls more than the boys'. 'Where there is a girl in the same family the brothers' books are generally common stock, and are carefully read, appreciated, and judged',⁷³ he observed. During the First World War The Times, noting that 'the tastes of the working-girl reader incline

70 Ibid., 4 December 1897 p. 499

71 Ibid., 53 (19 February 1898), p. 209

72 Edward Salmon, 'What Girls Read', The Nineteenth Century 20 (July-December 1886), p. 524

73 Quoted in G. Manville Fenn, 'Henty and His Books', in Lance Salway (ed), A Peculiar Gift (London, 1976). p. 431

to the adventurous and the romantic', claimed that she possessed, 'like other little girls of her age, a keen appreciation of boys' books, and it is she who reads the volumes of adventures given by the soldier'.⁷⁴

In terms of romantic fiction for women published during this time, the continuities with the literature of the post-1914 age are as important as the discontinuities. There are two obvious similarities: in both periods many women wrote romantic fiction in great quantities, and modern authors such as Barbara Cartland and Mary Burchell have admitted the debt owed to such pioneering women as Wood and Elinor Glyn. Burchell, one of the most successful Mills and Boon authors, acknowledged that Wood 'worked exactly as I did. She was not of course of the Austen or Bronte standard, she was a talespinner...she always had a story to tell; you must read on'.⁷⁵ Cartland, who by 1950 was on the verge of her present world stardom, frankly admitted her inspiration came from two best-selling romantic novelists of this period: Glyn and Ethel M. Dell. Their kinds of stories are credited with turning Cartland into a passionate romantic. Of Dell, who wrote over 40 novels, Cartland said,

I have copied her formula all my life. What she said was a revelation - that men were strong, silent, passionate heroes. And really my whole life has been geared to that. She believed, and I believed, that a woman, in order to be a good woman, was pure and

74 'Working Girls' Reading', The Times 7 August 1917 p. 9

75 Mary Burchell was interviewed in London on 18 June 1986. See chapter 4.

innocent, and that God answered her prayers,
sooner or later. 76

But although authors such as Cartland and Burchell may claim to have been influenced by the late Victorian and Edwardian romance novelists, their style was actually much tamer, as were the contents of their novels, and it is here, and perhaps only here, that the pre-1914 period, as we shall see, differs significantly from the period after the First World War. Marie Corelli, for example, combined escapist romance and adventure with heavy-handed sermons on contemporary issues. In The Mighty Atom she weaves her love story around the evils of cramming and secular education. The central theme of Ziska (1897) is reincarnation. Other authors wrote about sex and love with a remarkable frankness, often considered obscene, which would have been avoided by Cartland and Burchell. Glyn achieved notoriety as author of Three Weeks (1907), a sensual story of an illicit affair between a Balkan princess and a young Englishman which sold two million copies.⁷⁷ This excerpt is typical:

Then a madness of tender caressing seized her. She purred as a tiger might have done, while she undulated like a snake. She touched him with her fingertips, she kissed his throat, his wrists, the palms of his hands, his eyelids, his hair. And often, between her purrings, she murmured love-words in some strange fierce language of her own, brushing his ears and his eyes with her lips the while. 78

76 Henry Cloud, Barbara Cartland: Crusader in Pink (London, 1979), pp. 23-24

77 Anthony Glyn, Elinor Glyn (London, 1956), p. 126. Glyn's reputation for frank writing gave rise to a popular verse: 'Would you care to sin/With Elinor Glyn/On a leopard skin? Or would you prefer/To err/With her/On some other fur?'

78 Elinor Glyn, Three Weeks (Duckworth edn, 1974), p. 134

Barbara Cartland never wrote anything like that. Similarly, Dell also wrote a bolder fiction than the average Mills and Boon author. In The Knave of Diamonds (1912), the American rogue-hero openly takes advantage of the unhappily-married heroine:

His quick breath scorched her face, and in a moment almost before she knew what was happening, his lips were on her own. He kissed her as she had never been kissed before - a single fiery kiss that sent all the blood in tumult to her heart. She shrank and quivered under it, but she was powerless to escape. There was sheer unshackled savagery in the holding of his arms, and dismay thrilled her through and through.

79

The 'romance' in penny dreadfuls and yellow-backs would also have been considered shocking in Britain after the First World War. With its mixture of eroticism and violence, it was more in the gothic vein. Scantly-clad heroines with enormous breasts abounded. 'Her white bosom rose and fell in tremulous pulsations, and Ned Wilmot observing it, leered hideously'; 'In appearance she was of a great beauty - tall, with long, sweeping limbs, broad, rounded shoulders, and an exquisitely-developed and voluptuous bust'.⁸⁰

Romantic serial stories, on the other hand, had more enduring characteristics. Blackwood's Magazine in 1898 attempted to summarize these. There were two types of heroine: one shapely, divine, gorgeous and dreamy ('A notable race of women, in good sooth...true to the core'), the other a long-haired schoolgirl in a short skirt. Female villains had to be 'the most abandoned hussies. You can tell them from a distance by their hair of raven blackness,

79 Ethel M. Dell, The Knave of Diamonds (1912), p. 180

80 Spring-Heeled Jack, the Terror of London, by the author of Turnpike Dick (London, c.1870s), pp. 6, 8

and by their dusty cheeks tinted with vivid carmine. They look like beautiful demons'.⁸¹ These types were to become familiar in such publications as Red Letter from the D.C. Thomson stable. Finally, the heroes were 'pleasant and presentable specimens of English manhood' and 'splendid types of the true-born English gentleman'. Sample names, which could have come from a Mills and Boon or a Barbara Cartland novel, were Lord Straithland, Captain Carton, Pierrepont Pinion, Herbert Hardress and Rosslyn Cheyne.⁸²

Continuities between boys' fiction of this period, and from 1914-1950, are actually more striking than those for romantic fiction. In this case the crusade against penny dreadfuls initiated by the Religious Tract Society and Alfred Harmsworth left lasting impressions on the genre. The boys' papers of D.C. Thomson were certainly inspired more by the Amalgamated Press titles and the B.O.P., not to mention novels such as Tom Brown's Schooldays and Robinson Crusoe, than by the penny dreadfuls, although their spirit was retained in the form of daring adventure and larger-than-life characterizations, but with the gore discarded and the morals enhanced. Perhaps this is why the epithet 'dreadful' continued to be applied to boys' papers by the literary establishment after 1914. A.A. Milne, for example, wrote, 'It was Lord Northcliffe who killed the "penny dreadful" by the simple process of producing a "ha'penny dreadfuler"'.⁸³

81 'Penny Fiction', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, p. 811.

82 Ibid.

83 Quoted in Turner, p. 115

'There is the detective interest, the school interest, the supernatural interest, the theatrical interest, the fighting interest, and even the historical interest', Bosanquet observed in the pages of a typical boys' paper.⁸⁴ All of these were also passed down to the next century. One legacy of the B.O.P., for example, was the public school story, of the type crafted by such masters as Talbot Baines Reed. The Harmsworth papers, although designed for office boys, nonetheless used the school story with great success, particularly in the Gem and Magnet. In this case, as in the penny dreadfuls, their working-class readers seemed happy to read about upper class life and traditions. Harmsworth's main contribution, if that is what it was, was the extreme patriotism of his papers for boys. As his biographers put it:

The editorial policy was the same in each instance: the cultivation of physical fitness in the young, the encouragement of adventure abroad and enterprise at home. In all of them the bugle-call of patriotism was loudly sounded, pride in Great Britain and the Empire. ⁸⁵

Harmsworth's ascendancy coincided with the 1897 jubilee, the Boer War, and Anglo-German rivalry, and his own politics were heavily impressed on the boys' papers. The reminiscences of a London newsagent suggest how effectively he did this:

From back there in 1911 or 1912, I recall a specially rousing Boy's Friend feature serial. This yarn, entitled 'Kaiser or King?' was grimly prophetic of the Great War that was to break out in August 1914 - although William II's spike-helmeted legions did not (as they did in the story) manage to land on the beaches of Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. ⁸⁶

84 Bosanquet, p. 678

85 Pound and Harmsworth, p. 160

86 T.C. 11 September 1943 p. 3

Indeed, the firm itself never concealed its intentions:

These journals aimed from the first at the encouragement of physical strength, of patriotism, of interest in travel and exploration, and of pride in our Empire.

It has been said that the boys' papers of The Amalgamated Press have done more to provide recruits for our Navy and Army and to keep up the estimation of the sister Services in the eyes of our people, than anything else.

87

Given the number of papers for boys, competition was strong, and various techniques were used to 'pull' in readers and increase circulation, as after the war. But it is important to note that the newer commercial journals were careful to distinguish themselves from the older 'dreadfuls'. The Garfield Library ('Full of Glorious Fun! Adventure! Exploration! And Exploit!') carried an endorsement from a Reverend Schoolmaster: 'They make bad boys into good boys, and good boys into better boys, and we all thank you heartily'.⁸⁸ In an 'Address to Our Readers', The Boys' Guide wrote: 'Our principal aim has been to produce a journal of which no boy need be ashamed...There will be no occasion for any surreptitious indulgence in the luxury of poring over these columns, for THE BOYS' GUIDE may be introduced into any home or school'.⁸⁹ Similarly, the first number of Every Boy's Favorite Journal in 1892 contained the following notice:

87 Souvenir of Banquet..., p. 9

88 Broadsheet, n.d., John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library ('First Numbers: Boy's Papers', Box I)

89 First issue, c. 1890, John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library ('First Numbers: Boys' Papers', Box I)

THE SERIAL STORIES are written by men well trained to the task of providing the young with a wholesome sensation which shall leave no taint of evil on their minds, and if in the course of any of the novels it is necessary to introduce a blackened character, a villain, be sure that villain will be served as he was in the good old days, that is, his bad life will end badly for him, right will triumph over might, virtue and innocence will be triumphant in the end.

90

Clearly, such notices were intended as much for their parents as for the boys. They are the first signs of what was to be an important assumption of post-1914 publishing: that parents effectively determined what their children read, and that publishers could not alienate them by departing from conventional moral standards. Morality 'improved', therefore, with technical quality.

The more powerful of the new publishers accelerated this. They selected fiction for publication not solely for financial gain, but also for what they took to be the better moral 'good'. Harmsworth and D.C. Thomson, and George Hutchinson and Charles Boon, are two examples of these types. Even authors such as Corelli and Caine were eager to impress a strong moral and religious message. Annie S. Swan took pride in the fact that her books were reputable. 'I had always been regarded as a "safe" writer, whose books could be put into the hands of young persons without any fear of deleterious consequences to the readers'.⁹¹ Barclay's personal vow in writing was, 'Never to write a line which could introduce the taint of sin or

90 Every Boy's Favorite Journal 7 January 1892 p. 16

91 Annie S. Swan, My Life: An Autobiography (London, 1934), p. 281

the shadow of shame into any home'.⁹² Given the sales of their books, they probably shared the views of their public, too.

Children's authors and editors were also wary of the potential influence upon their readers. There was nothing 'namby-pamby' in Henty's writings, for example. 'I never touch on the love interest. Once I ventured to make a boy of twelve kiss a girl of eleven, and I received a very indignant letter from a dissenting minister!' he recalled.⁹³ An amusing article in The Anglo-Saxon, on 'How I Drew for a Boys' Paper', recounted the author's frustrations in his attempts to illustrate for an unnamed paper specialising in rousing adventure, all according to the strict editorial rules then in vogue. Pirates were to be armed with no less than 15 weapons; the bully was fat, puffy and mean-faced, a perfect contrast to the hero:

I had to depict the hero being wrecked. My younger brother patiently submitted to lying on the floor with a horror-stricken expression on his face, whilst I sketched him. The hero was shown utterly crushed. Nevertheless, my drawing came back with the curt message that I must obey the office rules - 'Whenever a hero is wrecked he must always safely reach shore - usually a desert island - with a cheerful face, a peak-cap, and immaculate, unwrinkled trousers. He must bear the outward and visible sign of a hero'. The peak-cap and pressed trousers seemed to be his trade-mark. How could one be original under these circumstances?

94

This attitude can be contrasted with that held by the editors of the bloodthirsty Brett journals, including The Boys of England. One

92 Quoted in Rachel Anderson, The Purple Heart Throbs: the sub-literature of love (London, 1974), p. 131

93 Quoted in Fenn, p. 429

94 'How I Drew for a Boys' Paper', The Anglo-Saxon 27 May 1899 p. 18

artist recalled receiving some firm advice from his editor: 'In future, we must beg of you to be good enough to make your scimitars more curly and your drops of blood bigger!'⁹⁵

This chapter has established the existence before 1914 of a mass market for three popular genres: penny dreadfuls, yellow-backs and sensation novels. The penny dreadfuls and yellow-backs, amorphous terms comprising an array of sensational fiction, were the precursors of modern magazines. After 1870 a reaction against their 'racy' prose prompted such publishers as Newnes, Harmsworth and Pearson to lead a drive for more 'wholesome', but no less entertaining or expensive, equivalents. The change was most profound in the new market for boys' weeklies, illustrated by the success of the Boy's Own Paper and its imitators. Similarly, sensation novels established the pattern of women novelists writing prolifically for a mass audience made possible by the introduction of the one-volume novel, and cheaper editions. Essentially morality tales, these works satisfied a readership accustomed to a mixture of romance, morality and happy endings, with some excitement and adventure. This was to be an unvarying mixture, as we shall see. The circulating libraries and newsagencies succeeded in supporting and distributing cheaper literature at all levels of society.

95 Quoted in P.C. 4 December 1920 p. 670

Continuities can also be established between romantic literature and boys' papers of this period and the postwar era. Romantic novelists of the 1920s and 1930s have claimed inspiration from such authors as Mrs. Henry Wood and Marie Corelli. However, while the concepts of wholesome morals and the happy ending at the church door remained standard, sensational subplots and allusions to contemporary social issues did not, for the most part, survive the war. After 1914, fiction in women's magazines and novels became more domestic and realistic, less violent. Contemporary drama replaced gothic romance, although there were exceptions. The reasons for such changes in focus will be examined in the next chapter. The boys' papers after 1914, on the other hand, were profoundly influenced by the pre-1914 publications of the Religious Tract Society and the Amalgamated Press. Quality production values, better fiction, new advertising techniques, and fervent patriotism were among the things adopted by publishers such as D.C. Thomson. Finally, the continued increase in literacy and the growth of a new, but naive reading public broadened the market for light, sensational fiction, which encouraged the foundation of new publishing houses. In all, the major legacy of this period was a mass market organised in a refined and sophisticated manner, supported by a readership accustomed to light, escapist literature. The three publishers which this thesis will examine in detail - Mills and Boon, D.C. Thomson and the Religious Tract Society - all had to cope with this legacy. The first two were flexible enough to adjust it to market changes after 1918; but the Religious Tract Society was not and went into steady decline.

Chapter 2

'Books Are a Commodity':

The Commercialization of Popular Literature 1914-1950

Despite two world wars and the economic depression, publishing, like most service industries, displayed a remarkable resilience. Factors which should have deflated the market - paper rationing, almost prohibitive production costs, mass unemployment, and the growing dominance of the cinema and wireless - probably had the opposite effect: they perhaps unexpectedly promoted the reading habit, and thereby preserved demand. This continued demand of all classes for light fiction, coupled with the necessity to restore revenues drained during the First World War, accelerated the process of commercialization and allowed a more intense exploitation of the market. Record levels of production and the introduction of 'commodity-style' publishing techniques gave popular fiction an exposure to such a degree that it was woven into the cultural fabric of the nation. In a landmark leading article in 1930, the Publishers' Circular ranked books with the 'indispensible necessities of life', and condemned the 'intellectual snobbery' of booksellers and publishers who still regarded the trade as a sacred luxury - despite declining sales:

Books are a commodity, and we cannot get away from that fundamental fact...

The idea that books are some superior sort of article presumably arose from a belief that it was wrong to try to make a profit out of the product of a man's genius, intelligence or wit. But every article offered for sale is surely the product of someone's brains, and why try and place books in an entirely different category from everything else that is made and sold[?]....

Authors, with rare exceptions, do not write books for their own amusement: they hope to make a living thereby. Publishers do not risk large sums of money for the sheer love of signing cheques. Booksellers do not fill their shelves with books merely to oblige authors and publishers. Author, publisher and bookseller alike are engaged in business, the business of selling, or trying to sell, something that may bring them a reasonable profit. ¹

This chapter will attempt to show how the mass commercialization of popular publishing, the turning of books into 'commodities', occurred, and why it occurred. It will also examine the genuine paradox of publishing in this period - the depression of the magazine market between the wars.

I

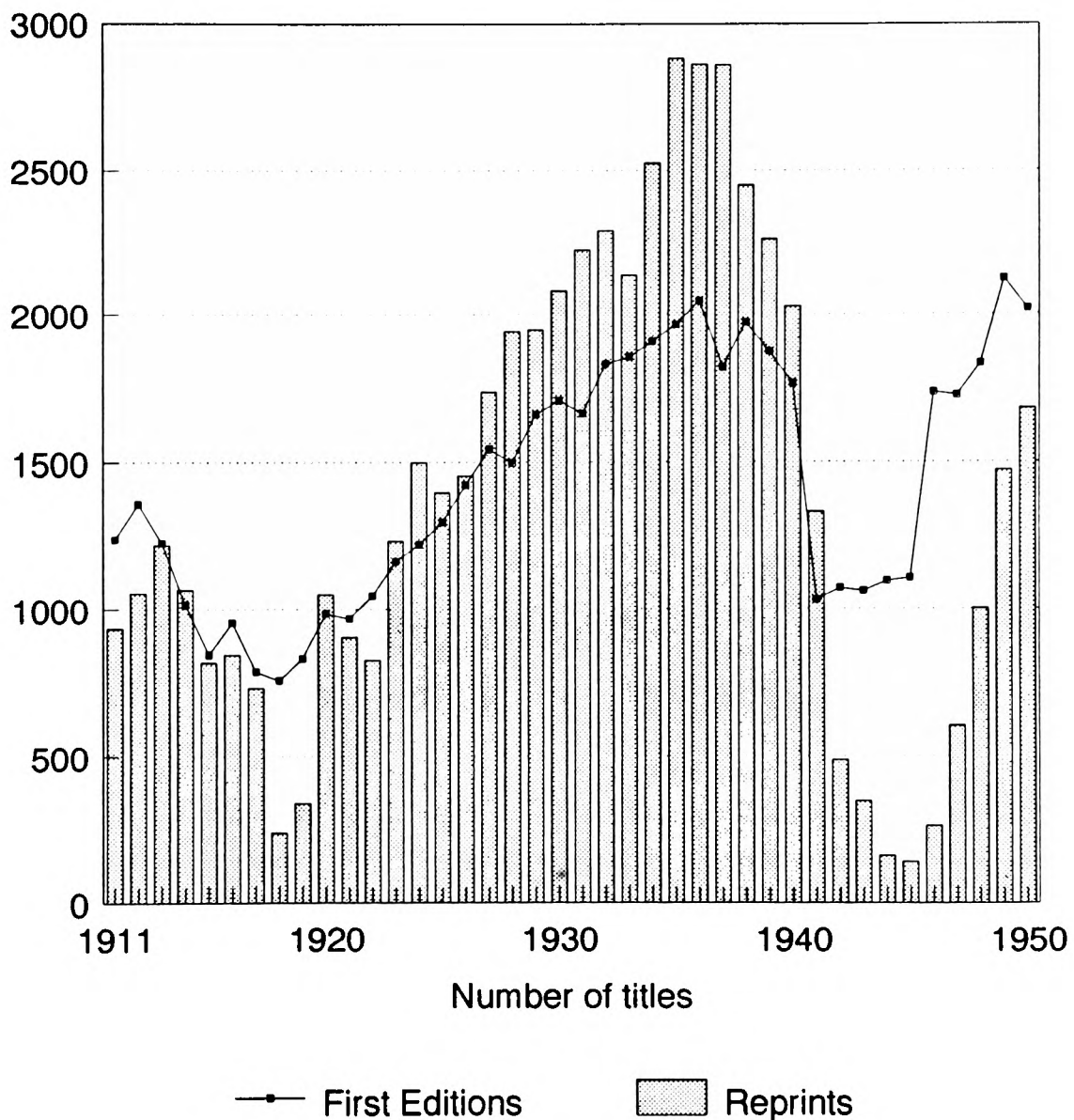
The reading 'boom' in Britain after 1870 was hardly diminished by the First World War. Rather, as during the Second War

1 "'Books are a Commodity'", P.C. 11 October 1930 pp. 513-514. Significantly, the P.C.'s views were also endorsed by the National Book Council.

the restrictions on all leisure activities and expenditure only served to intensify the demand for reading, the least expensive and most adaptable of leisure activities. This demand was sustained in peacetime, was largely unaffected by the depression, and nurtured by the cinema and by the growth in facilities for inexpensive book borrowing. There is a good deal of statistical evidence which supports this. In Figures 2-1 and 2-2 the annual production totals of works (i.e. individual titles) of 'adult' fiction and of children's fiction, both new and reprinted, are presented for the years 1912-1950. Figures for 1912-1937 are from the Publishers' Circular, thereafter from the Bookseller.² 'Fiction' was consistently the highest total in the detailed list of categories which included 'Educational', 'History', 'Biography and Memoirs', even 'Veterinary Science, Farming and Stock-keeping'. These figures should be viewed in the context of the list of totals for production of all kinds of books contained in Figure 2-3. It should be noted that these figures are not an indication of sales but of industrial output; low production in wartime, for example, is not an indication of low demand. For example, personal expenditure on books, newspapers and magazines by the end of the Second World War had considerably increased:

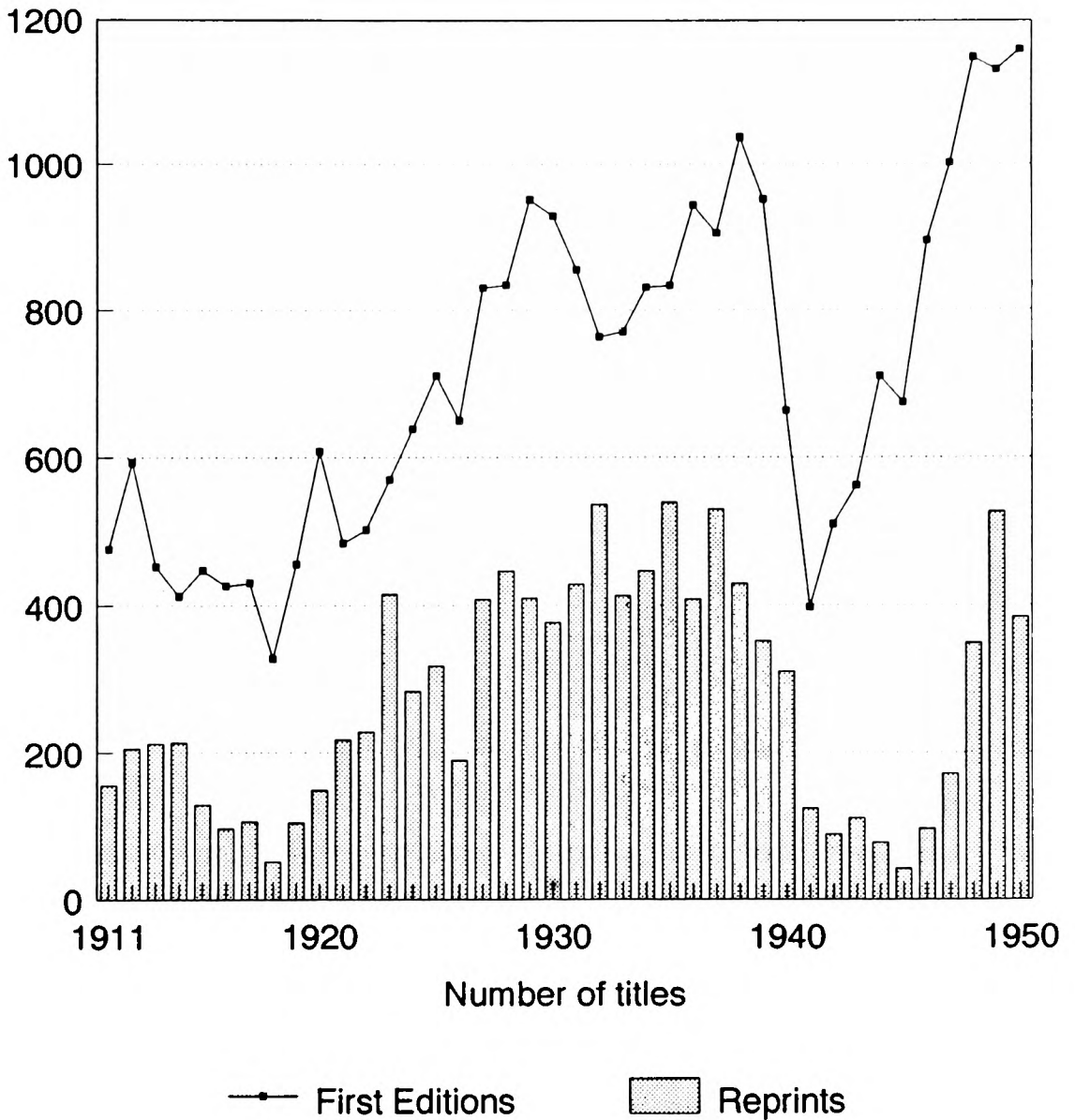
2 Only P.C. offers an uninterrupted series of annual publications lists prior to 1929, when B., in conjunction with Whittaker's Cumulative Book List, established its own list, which had been published infrequently before this date. Unfortunately, P.C. lists were discontinued during the Second World War. These figures are perhaps the more precise, as they listed 'Fiction' totals separately from 'Literature' (presumably classics, and high-brow works) and 'Poetry and Drama'. The B., on the other hand, did not list 'Literature' separately from 'Fiction'. Similarly, B. lists contained two categories for children, 'Children's Books and Minor Fiction' (included here) and 'Annuals and Serials'; P.C. lumped everything under 'Juvenile'.

Figure 2-1
Annual Production of
Adult Fiction 1911-1950



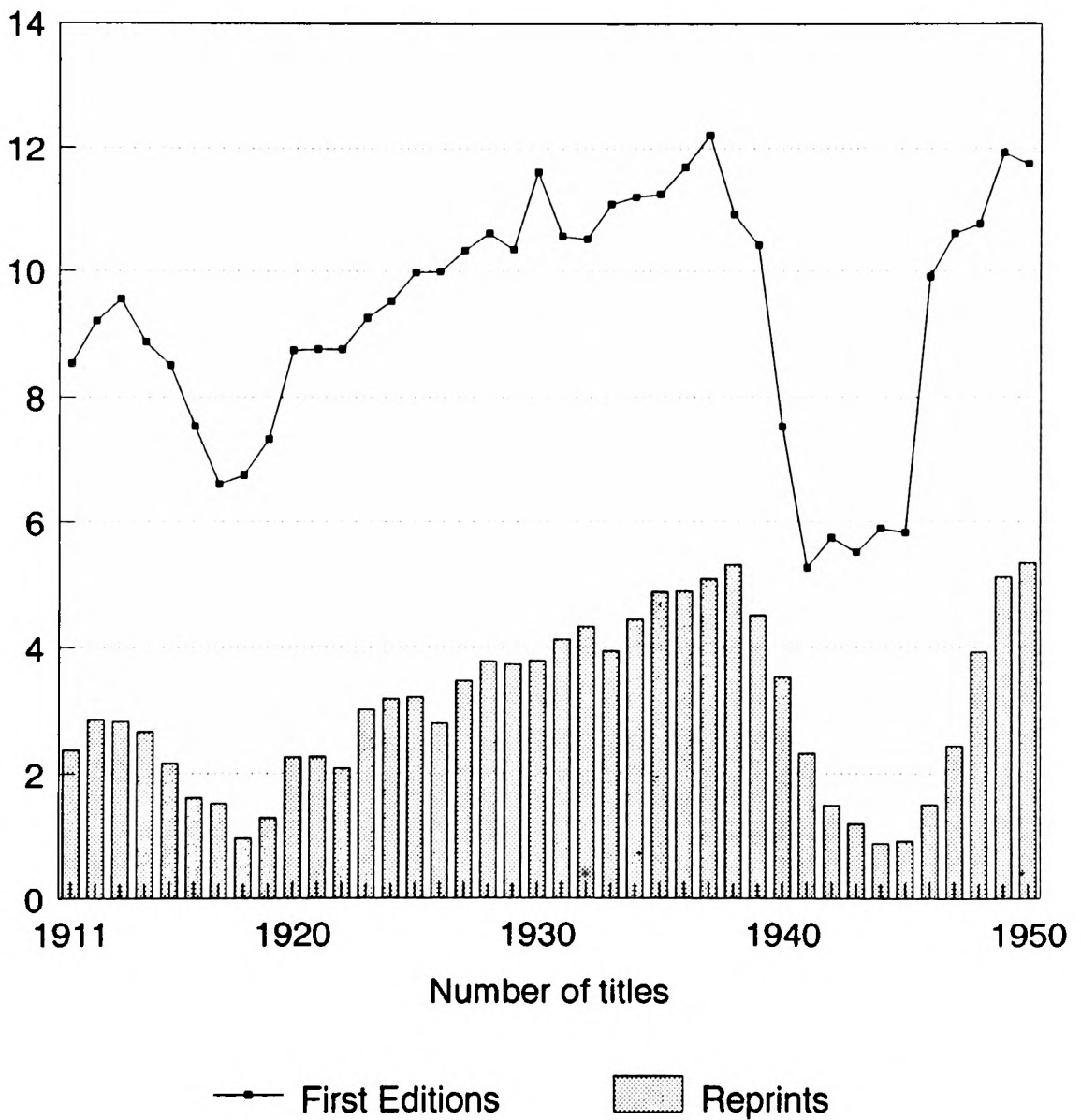
Sources: P.C. 1911-1937;
B. 1938-1950

Figure 2-2
Annual Production of
Children's Fiction 1911-1950



Sources: P.C. 1911-1937;
B. 1938-1950

Figure 2-3
Annual Production, All Classes
of Books 1911-1950



Sources: P.C. 1911-1937
 B. 1938-1950

1938	£ 64 million	1944	£ 73 million	
1940	59 million	1946	89 million	
1942	63 million	1948	105 million	3

A comparison of Figures 2-1 and 2-2 reveal two rather striking features of book production and market differentiation. Firstly, the significant but not spectacular decline in production of fiction in general during the First World War as opposed to the Second is evident. This was due, we shall see, in large part to the different degrees of wartime restrictions on paper and printing. Recovery after the First World War was immediate, and throughout the 1920s production in all categories of books attained record levels, only interrupted briefly by strikes. New editions of adult fiction rose from a total of 1,051 in 1920, to 2,081 in 1930, and reached a peak plateau from 1935-1937 of over 2,800. That these levels were maintained despite the depression confirms the extent to which the consumption-based industries in Britain were comparatively unaffected by it. Presumably, but for the second war, production would have proceeded along these lines at least until the ascendancy of television in the early 1950s. It is also evident from Figure 2-2 that juvenile demand was more stable than the fluctuating adult market, but at a generally lower level. Consequently, production of

3 Central Statistical Office, Annual Abstract of Statistics no. 86 (1938-1948), p. 246. All figures revalued at 1938 prices. Robert Hewison in Under Siege (Methuen edn, 1988) commented on the inherent difficulty in using statistics of book production as a measure of consumer expenditure. 'These statistics relate only to the production and sale of books; there was an overall increase in reading simply as an activity. Librarians reported a much greater demand, but it is impossible to calculate how often a book might be read, or by how many people'. (p. 86) The P.C. would agree: 'Naturally, it does not follow that because more books were published, more books were sold, but in the long run sales do govern production, and our tables for many years, with occasional lapses, show a continuous increase'. (27 December 1930 p. 877)

children's books during the Second World War did not suffer as severe a relative fall as other lines.

The second significant feature concerns the role of reprinted works in both categories. Reprinted books were new and cheaper editions of (already published) best-selling novels or of revived works. In children's books these were consistently fewer than new and original titles, which is in accordance with the apparent tastes of children. In general they craved new, 'up-to-date' works which offered opportunities to such prolific authors as Captain W.E. Johns and Enid Blyton.⁴ But in adult fiction new editions consistently outsold new works. As will be explained, this was due in large part to restrictive financial conditions which encouraged the publication of cheaper editions of proven books, over the considerable financial risks involved in launching a new work by an unestablished author.

While there was a considerable increase in book publication during this period, the level of magazine publication remained steady. In the absence of reliable statistics, the classified indices of newspapers and magazines contained in two trade handbooks, The Writers' and Artists' Year Book and Willing's Press Guide, have been used. According to The Writers' and Artists' Year Book magazines containing 'Serial or Long Stories' or 'Feminine' interest totaled 76 in 1914; 82 in 1925; 107 in 1935 and 88 in 1939. Production declined before the Second World War due to competition from other leisure activities, and during the war as a result of

⁴ See chapter 5

paper rationing. By 1951 there were 77 titles. 'Boys and Girls' titles remained at more or less a constant level throughout this period: 38 in both 1919 and 1935, and 33 in 1951, another indication of the stable (if stagnant) publishing market for children. Figures in Willing's Press Guide, although of a different scale according to its classification rules, display similar trends.

The number of British publishers also remained fairly stable until the Second World War. The Writers' and Artists' Year Book listed 335 British and Irish publishers in 1914; 263 in 1930; and 320 in 1939. After the war this figure increased considerably: 412 in 1945; 572 in 1950. As in the newspaper industry, a main feature of the publishing trade was the concentration of ownership of houses and publications, and the endurance of nineteenth-century foundations, although some in altered forms.⁵ In magazine publishing, this period was still dominated by firms established before the war, including the Amalgamated Press, the descendant of the Harmsworth organization. This was the largest publisher of periodicals in Britain, with a list of some 90 titles, which by 1931 had a circulation of over 8,000,000 copies per week.⁶ Other

5 In 1921, for example, the Amalgamated Press was owned jointly by Lords Northcliffe (The Times, Daily Mail) and Rothermere (Daily Mirror). The Hulton Press also published the Daily Sketch, and Odhams the Daily Herald. Thomson-Leng owned several papers in Dundee, as well as the Glasgow Sunday Post.

6 Advertising Weekly 59 (June 1931) p. 445. A 1931 advertisement described the Amalgamated Press as 'The Greatest Self-contained PUBLICITY MACHINE in Great Britain... Through the widely read publications of the Amalgamated Press, you can appeal to every section of the community without waste and with a certainty that you are reaching your own particular public. Through the various groups you can APPEAL DIRECTLY TO WOMEN or MEN, WIRELESS ENTHUSIASTS, CINEMA PATRONS, HOME and GARDEN LOVERS, BOYS or GIRLS. There are MONTHLY JOURNALS FOR WOMEN, MONTHLY MAGAZINES FOR MEN, FASHION PAPERS, WEEKLY

publishers' lists paled in comparison, despite containing some of the best-selling publications. In 1932, for example, George Newnes, Ltd. published 17 titles, including Radio Times (the bestselling periodical, over two million weekly) and John O'London's Weekly, and the old standard Tit-Bits. C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd. had Home Notes and Peg's Paper among 15 titles; Thomson-Leng boasted 12. Odhams Press, Ltd. by 1938 had the best-selling woman's paper, Woman's Own, the first women's magazine printed in colour gravure. During the Second World War the Picture Post, the flagship of the Hulton Press, outsold most weeklies. Hulton also introduced the Eagle picture-paper in 1950, with its unprecedented print run for a boy's paper of one million copies.

The major publishers of popular fiction included some of the most respectable houses of 'quality' fiction. During this period Hutchinson expanded prodigiously, absorbing such firms as Jarrolds, John S. Shaw, Hurst and Blackett, and Stanley Paul. The figure of Walter Hutchinson, in fact, loomed as large as did Lord Northcliffe's before the First World War. Hutchinson's 'Shilling Novels' series included works by Ethel M. Dell, Sydney Horler and E.M. Savi. A Mass-Observer lurking about London bookshops in 1941 noticed 'a veering towards Penguins and, especially, Hutchinson's 1/- "horribles"'.⁷ The principal series of the age, however, and the envy of most publishers, was the two shilling "Yellow Jacket" list

PERIODICALS FOR MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN'.

7 M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File B (18 February 1941) p. 1; D.S.

issued by Hodder and Stoughton.⁸ 'Wise librarians place a standing order for all Hodder and Stoughton novels as issued', a John Menzies trade publication advised in 1935.⁹ Mills and Boon and Collins were the principal publishers of romantic fiction. Methuen published Sax Rohmer's adventures of Dr. Fu Manchu, as well as the series featuring the most popular fictional character in Britain in the 1920s, Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan.¹⁰

The remarkable growth in lending libraries, which most of these publishers supplied with popular fiction, is an excellent barometer of reading activity. Both the public and subscription libraries, patronized principally by the middle class until the Second World War, expanded rapidly. The abolition of the penny rate in England and Wales in 1919, along with benefactions from the Andrew Carnegie and J. Passmore Edwards foundations, encouraged the establishment of public libraries in every county. In 1920 there were 551 library authorities with 5,730 service points; the number of books in stock by 1924 totalled 15 million. In 1949 590 library authorities provided 23,000 service points with 42 million books in stock. Over 12 million readers borrowed nearly 300 million books a year, as compared with seven million readers and 208 million books in 1935. It was estimated that by 1949 only 60,000 people in Great Britain were not provided with library service, and that nearly 25

8 John Boon noted that the success and wide distribution of this series led to a common conception that all fiction in England was published by Hodder and Stoughton.

9 A Selected List of Popular Fiction Suitable for Lending Libraries (Edinburgh, April 1935)

10 Graves and Hodge, p. 51

percent of the population were registered borrowers, amounting to an average stock of 5.98 books per head of population. The largest number of issues from public libraries was consistently in the 'Fiction' category, although as we have noted these were usually the works of 'acceptable' authors. With the exception of Mudie's, which closed in 1937, the principal subscription libraries also thrived. Subscribers to the Boots Booklovers Library, for example, increased from 116,224 in 1922, to 362,032 in 1932, 440,234 in 1940, and 893,956 in 1946. Average issues per month rose from 453,326 in 1932 to 901,493 in 1946. Figures for the total number of subscribers at individual branches illustrate that these increases occurred everywhere:

Branch	1931	1935	1939	1944	1948	
Nottingham	5359	5761	5626	8191	7876	
Sheffield	4513	4642	5101	5745	5423	
Aberystwyth	411	511	583	1167	1218	
Exeter	2502	2807	3148	6108	4987	
London, Regent St	7013	6468	5647	8891	8296	
Folkestone	1381	1251	1027	318	1232	
Blackpool	1986	2343	2884	7448	5670	
Glasgow	8790	7794	5537	8176	8502	
Aberdeen	2046	2626	2863	4605	4912	11

In particular, seaside resorts such as Blackpool enjoyed brisk business from holiday makers. The considerable expansion during the war years should also be noted (branches such as Folkestone, however, suffered reduced business during the war as a result of evacuation and south coast invasion fears).

One of the most accurate indications of reading activity among the lower-middle and working classes, however, was the great

11 Subscriber and Volume Statistics, The Boots Co. archives, Nottingham

expansion of 'Pay-as-you-read', 'No Deposit', 'tuppenny' libraries during the 1930s. These libraries were mostly run as adjuncts to newsagencies, tobacconists, or department stores.¹² They offered a greater selection of light fiction than the public libraries for as little as twopence per volume per week (no deposit), or the cost of a weekly magazine; as such they were suited to accommodate the demands of the 'new reading public'. The sources of books were twofold: purchased and recycled by the owner of the shop, or (more common) by a wholesale agent. Although the concept of a local commercial library was not new, the first of this aggressive new generation was opened in Harlesden, London, by Ray Smith in 1930. Among the larger wholesale library suppliers were Argosy and Sundial Libraries Ltd., London and Liverpool (2,217 branches and 1,350,000 books in circulation in 1934),¹³ and Foyle's Libraries Ltd., London (747 branches with an average supply of 200 books in 1934).¹⁴ The Commercial Libraries' Association, founded in 1937 to watch over the interests of the myriad of tuppenny organizations, boasted that by

12 The principal motive in opening a library in a shop was to attract potential customers. 'Books appear to have a fatal attraction as "loss-leaders," to use the American term', W.G. Taylor observed in 1935. But such motivation was not new: Jesse Boot founded the Booklovers Library in 1899 for just this purpose, to increase traffic in his chemist's shops. (W.G. Taylor, 'Publishing', in The Book World ed. John Hampden [London, 1935], p. 79)

13 B. 20 February 1935 p. 182. This firm was the union of two companies founded at the turn of the century: the Argosy Library Co. and the Sundial Library Co. Their service, which supplied 'everything but the shelves', was administered by the shopkeepers who acted as agents for the firm throughout the country.

14 Prospectus, Foyle's Libraries Limited (June 1934), John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library. In addition to the 'several hundred newsagents, stationers, tobacconists' supplied, Foyle's also serviced London branches of the Co-op, factories (J. Wellwork and Son, Manchester; Ellison and Co., Birmingham), and military vessels (H.M.S. 'Eagle' and 'Cormorant').

1938 in 'practically every town in England there is now a well run commercial library'.¹⁵ The poor relations of the organized tuppenny libraries were the 'perambulating libraries on street barrows' which also lent and exchanged books at 1d. or 2d. per volume. These were a common sight in the poorer districts of east London, for example.¹⁶

The Second World War rationalised library usage in Britain. The shortage of books, propaganda against unwise spending, difficulties of supply and an increase in non-fiction interests, such as current affairs, all worked in the public libraries' favour. Public libraries across the country all recorded increased levels of usage. Issues at Halifax Public Libraries, for example, increased from 716,000 in 1938 to 1,070,000 in 1945; in West Ham from 990,000 to 1,280,000.¹⁷ In Coventry, one commentator noted the importance given to restoring bombed-out services through mobile libraries: 'the distribution of reading matter to the people has become almost as

15 E.J. Olson, Association Secretary, B. 24 March 1938 p. 342

16 Terence Young, Becontree and Dagenham (London, 1934), p. 176; The New Survey of London Life and Labour IX (London, 1935), p. 119. The activity of the tuppenny libraries were sufficient to force reorganizations at both Boots and W.H. Smith during the 1930s. In a confidential report, the W.H. Smith Management in 1933 admitted that the competition was formidable: 'There seems every reason to believe that the "Twopenny Library" has come to stay: some are of considerable size and well organized, and much thought has accordingly been given to this branch of the Library work.' Consequently, the W.H. Smith Library made its rates of subscription more competitive, in line with the tuppennies; 2d. per volume for five days became the basic charge, and the customary half-crown deposit was eliminated. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that working-class readers switched. (W.H. Smith archives, no. 182, p. 20)

17 T.C. 2 March 1946 p. 14

necessary as the distribution of food'.¹⁸ The decline of the tuppenny and subscription libraries, and the recovery of the public libraries, is evident in three Gallup Polls. Asked of people reading a novel ('a large majority') or other book at the moment, 'Did you borrow it, or is it your own?':

	<u>Feb. 1940</u>	<u>Nov. 1947</u>	<u>Dec. 1949</u>
Pub. Library	35%	9%	21%
2d. Library	20	5	5
Sub. Library	9	4	6
Own	15	12	16
Borrowed from friend	21	15	7
Response	100%	45%	55%

The reduced figures for 1947 and 1949 were probably influenced by the continuance of paper rationing and a chronic shortage of books.

Economic circumstances during this period enabled a more dense exploitation of the publishing market. This was in part obviously due to rising living standards. The average work week was reduced in 1919 to 48 hours, permitting more leisure. Consumer expenditure increased, as did living standards: average real wages in 1938 were one-third higher than in 1913. The growth of commercial libraries during the 1930s is one indication that the lower-middle and working classes were now able to spend sums on reading, although they did not progress to the book-buying stage. Finally, in addition to the growth of such chains as W.H. Smith and John Menzies, there was a considerable expansion in the number of local newsagents. In 1919 the National Federation of Retail Newsagents, Booksellers and Stationers was founded, the union of several regional unions, the

¹⁸ Frederick Cowles (Chief Librarian, Swinton and Pendlebury Public Libraries), 'Libraries in Wartime', P.C. 24 May 1941 p. 221

first of which was founded in 1891. Significantly, this body reflected the varied trade of the newsagent which increasingly involved the sale of cheap fiction and the administration of a lending library. Membership grew rapidly, from 4,797 in 1919 to 26,117 in 1950. It was estimated that there were more than 50,000 newsagents in Great Britain by 1947.¹⁹

II

These figures, however, conceal the fact that the publishing industry won its prosperity only at the expense of considerable restructuring. Although wartime encouraged reading as a leisure activity and boosted sales, it was an easily-won, artificial prosperity that did not long survive the peace. Dramatic increases in production costs and restricted profits forced publishers after the First World War to accelerate the movement towards cheaper-priced books, and accommodate more closely the tastes of the lower-middle and working classes, the 'new reading public'.

Restrictions which affected the publishing industry were of varying degrees during each war. The major question was one of supply, and the rationing of paper. The ramifications of reduced paper supply and increased production costs were far-reaching, influencing the trade between the wars as much as after 1945. A

¹⁹ Sources: The National Federation Year Book 1921-1951 edns; 'The Future of the Newsagent-Bookseller', B. 1 February 1947 pp. 114-116

comparison of figures representing the number of individual works of fiction published during selected years in Britain will illustrate this point. Totals for 1913 and 1936 are pre-war apogees:

	<u>1913</u>	<u>1918</u>	<u>1924</u>	<u>1936</u>	<u>1944</u>	<u>1950</u>
New Fiction (Adult)	1226	755	1220	2046	1095	2018
Reprints (Adult)	1220	237	1499	2862	160	1679
New Fiction (Children)	452	328	638	943	709	1159
Reprints (Children)	212	50	283	408	76	384 ²⁰

Hence, it took the book trade 11 years to recover from the First World War, and at least 14 to recover from the Second. The decline in book production (as, indeed, in magazines and newspapers) precipitated by paper rationing, however, did not correspondingly depress the market; in most cases sales were stronger than ever. During the Second World War, for example, the publishing industry enjoyed a 'curious bonanza', according to Michael Foxell of the Lutterworth Press. Paper rationing did limit supply and therefore output, but in so doing significantly increased demand for any output. 'You just sold out', Foxell recalled. 'You didn't have to do anything in fact - people begged you for them, the suppliers, the booksellers, the wholesalers'.²¹

Paper rationing during the First World War was not as severe or as extensive as during the Second. Unlike in 1940, the principal concern was not the source of paper but the need to

20 Sources: P.C.; B.

21 Michael Foxell was interviewed in Farnham, Surrey on 22 June 1988. Lutterworth Press was the book publishing arm of the Religious Tract Society, and sister firm to Lutterworth Periodicals Limited. See chapter 7.

economise in order to release all available shipping tonnage for military use. In March 1916 the Royal Commission on Paper was appointed to reduce imports of paper and paper-making materials to one-third of their 1914 levels. Additional edicts further restricted supply, authorised collection of waste paper, and encouraged the manufacture of paper from home-produced materials. By 1918 the Board of Trade reported that imports had been successfully reduced by more than two-thirds:

	1914 <u>(tons)</u>	1916-7 <u>(tons)</u>	1917-8 <u>(tons)</u>	Decrease <u>over '14</u>	
Paper-making Materials	1,207,478	737,253	456,901	62.0%	
Paper and Board	590,871	409,471	126,261	78.5%	
Total	1,798,349	1,146,724	583,162	67.5%	²²

The Commission was dissolved in 1918, but paper rationing was not ended until May 1919.

Despite these restrictions both publishers and retailers thrived during the war. Many publishers capitalised on strong interest in 'war books' and stories related to the conflict. One ambitious series, Deeds That Thrill the Empire, consisted of 20 parts, issued fortnightly. Its publisher, Hutchinson, guaranteed newsagents a circulation of at least 100,000 of each exciting part, containing 'True stories of the most glorious acts of heroism of the Empire's soldiers and sailors during the Great War'.²³ Sales of weekly magazines in particular increased during the war, partly due

²² The Board of Trade Journal 11 April 1918 pp. 430-432

²³ B. 14 January 1916 p. 6

to more efficient methods of purchase. The Prohibition of Returns Order of May 1918 was designed to protect the newsagent as well as to save paper by reducing the number of unsold copies of magazines at the end of the week. By urging readers to arrange standing orders this act not only promoted the newsagent's business but nurtured a regular habit of reading by subscription. Publishing profits, however, were kept in check. Advertising revenues (still regarded as the lifeblood of any publication) inevitably declined. For example, in 1916 one of the largest periodical publishers, George Newnes, announced reduced profits due to a drop in revenues, the high costs of paper and printing, and restricted cash flow, despite 'exceptionally large' sales of 6d., 7d., and 1s. novels, and the maintenance of its magazine circulations.²⁴ Hence, although most publishers emerged from the war with expanded readerships, their depleted financial reserves hindered development for some time.

Social and demographic changes created by the First World War served indirectly to promote the market in popular fiction for women. For example, women achieved economic independence through participation in the work force during the war. Their spending power increased; weekly wages for women of over £2 were not uncommon by the end of the war, compared with the average pre-war salary of nine shillings. This fact, coupled with the postwar surplus of single women (unmarried and widowed), presented a large, captive market ready to be exploited by advertisers and by magazine publishers dispensing romance and adventure. In promoting three of its magazines (Woman's World, Woman's Own and Home Companion) in 1915,

24 P.C. 9 September 1916 p. 252

the Amalgamated Press reminded potential advertisers that 'each woman holds the purse strings of a whole family'.²⁵ Cynthia White has suggested that two new reading publics emerged from the First World War: the 'New Rich': middle and working-class women whose spending power had increased; and the 'New Poor': mainly single working women in the factories.²⁶ New weekly magazines such as Woman's Illustrated (Amalgamated Press) catered to the former with cheery service-orientated journals with plenty of romantic fiction. At the opposite end of the market, the so-called 'blood-and-thunder' papers were designed to appeal to poorer women in need of thrilling fiction to enliven an apparently mundane existence. Peg's Paper (Pearson), Secrets (Thomson-Leng) and Oracle (Amalgamated Press) were among the most popular. At two pence these papers, moreover, were affordable to all classes. Furthermore, several factors - the entry of women into the workforce, a greater domestic stability, tighter editorial control by publishers, possibly a reaction to the violence of the war - served to change the character of the romantic fiction published during the 1920s. Exotic styles established by Ethel M. Dell or Elinor Glyn did not last long after 1918; an emphasis on 'middle class' domesticity and realism took their place, apparent for example in the less sensational, socially narrower romances produced by Mills and Boon.²⁷ Most editors, moreover, encouraged this: Winifred 'Biddy' Johnson of Woman's Weekly (Amalgamated Press) and Flora

25 Advertisement in The Advertisers' A.B.C. 1915 edn, p. 455

26 Cynthia L. White, Women's Magazines 1693-1968 (London, 1970), p. 93

27 See chapter 4

Klickmann of The Girl's Own Paper and Woman's Magazine are two examples, both having been employed long before the war.

The First World War accelerated this existing trend towards lower-priced and inferior fiction. Commercialization of publishing was a direct result of the need to increase revenues dramatically after the war in order to meet steep rises in production costs. By 1919 binding costs alone had risen to 11d. per book, compared to 3d. before the war.²⁸ The Bookseller reported that while it was unusual before the war for a publisher to issue a first edition of 1,000 copies (only half of which had to sell to avoid a loss), after the war 1,800 of 2,000 copies had to be sold to ensure a reasonable return. Consequently, commercial concerns were paramount in a literal struggle to stay in business. Two groups in particular were badly affected by these financial considerations: small publishers and new authors. Larger firms could absorb losses with less difficulty, and could rely on sales of cheap popular editions of previously published works. Many publishers, moreover, were reluctant to risk precious revenues on untested, first-time writers.²⁹ In short, all the 'best' books were in trouble, as the Manchester Guardian reported in 1921:

The lack of what is called 'popular appeal'- meaning more often than not some element of trashiness or, at least, flimsiness - has become such a bar to publication as it never has been before.

30

28 P.C. 29 November 1919 p. 499

29 B. December 1919 p. 688

30 'A Bad Time for Good Books', Manchester Guardian 14 September 1921, quoted in P.C. 15 October 1921 p. 397

Publishing between the wars, therefore, was characterized by the introduction of new styles of production and marketing along commercial lines. These included 'commodity-style' techniques: fiction had to be carefully planned and packaged, often as series, all with an eye on potential sales. Hence, books and magazines became commodities to be marketed and sold like soapflakes. Novels became shorter; the average word limit was reduced from 200,000 words to 130,000, a length which the author Michael Sadleir said was hardly enough for plot development or adequate characterizations.³¹ A 1924 textbook, How to Write Saleable Fiction, established the following plot guidelines:

Mystery, perhaps, appeals to the largest public. A love interest is essential until, at any rate, an author has made his name. Comfortable sentiment is absolutely necessary for popular success. Your work should also bear the stamp of sincerity. You cannot treat yourself and your reader too seriously. Flippant novels are seldom found amongst the 'best-sellers'.

32

The author added that 'to make money' it was advisable to write novels 'suitable for serial publication'. Publicity costs increased; on average £100 was spent per 2,000 copies, or one shilling per copy. New techniques such as posters on buses and newspaper ads containing bold illustrations and story excerpts were adopted: according to the Publishers' Circular:

The days are gone when the wildest exploit of book advertisers was a picture showing a youth quietly reading with the assurances from three

31 P.C. 4 March 1922 p. 219. The long-running serial in weekly or monthly magazines became an attractive alternative again, which harked back to the days of Charles Dickens when new novels were first published as serials in magazines.

32 George G. Magnus, How to Write Saleable Fiction (London, 1924), p. 9

college presidents and five financiers that fifteen minutes a day on the five-foot library would make you any kind of a success you fancied.

33

Popular weekly magazines were grouped together in advertisements. The Amalgamated Press, for example, marketed Fashions for All, Horner's Penny Stories, Forget-me-Not, Woman's Weekly, Home Circle, and Mother and Home as 'The Essential Six', and Woman's World, Home Companion, Woman's Companion and Family Journal as 'The Reliable Four': both sets had a guaranteed circulation of one million copies weekly in 1915 and 1930, respectively.³⁴ Finally, convenience of price and size in addition to quality were major factors in a bid to encourage book-buying among lower-middle and working-class readers.³⁵ In 1929, for example, the Leisure Library Company emphasised in advertisement the 'clear type...blue bindings... good paper...4 colour picture jackets' of its sixpenny reprints. Hutchinson's new 'Sevenpenny' series in 1934 was advertised as, 'This is a beautiful book for any shelf.'

Magazine publishers also capitalised on this renewed interest in cheap fiction. Cassell pioneered the new popular type of story magazine in 1912 with Cassell's Magazine of Fiction and Popular Literature, which undercut the novels by offering 264 pages of fiction at 5d. It featured one complete 30,000-word novel and 20 complete stories, by best-selling authors like Baroness Orzcy.

33 P.C. 24 May 1919 p. 453

34 Advertisements in The Advertisers' A.B.C. 1915 edn, p. 400; (1930 edn), p. 276

35 Attitudes towards the borrowing and buying of books are discussed in chapter 3.

Hutchinson's Story Magazine, a 9d. monthly with a circulation of 300,000 ('record value'), counted Orzcy. H. Rider Haggard and Charles Garvice among its popular contributors. Its sister paper, the Family Reader, made history in 1919 with the first Ethel M. Dell publication in a twopenny weekly magazine.

Although much criticized, given its concessions to low quality and novelty, commodity-style publishing was very successful between the wars. 'The habit of novel-reading has much increased since the war among the middle and lower classes,' McMahon Trevor wrote in 1921. 'They have no taste in literature, but the sale of cheap editions (of recent novels) to them is enormous.'³⁶ So enormous, in fact, that a lively debate ensued on whether too many novels were published. In 1920 alone over one million copies of Hutchinson's and Hurst and Blackett's new 3s. 6d. series (clothbound) were sold, by such authors as Dell, Arnold Bennett, Cosmo Hamilton and Dolf Wyllarde. Charles Young, of Lamley & Company, booksellers, echoed the old-fashioned feelings of many of his peers in complaining that an 'impossible' number of reprints, at too many prices (1/6, 2s., 2/6, 3/6, 5s.), were published for the bookseller to afford to stock them all. Young condemned the profit motive behind such production:

It is often said: 'Well, I keep what the public wants,' and in so doing, of course, a public need is met; but that is not bookselling. We are not to be entirely concerned with a quick turnover, ignoring meanwhile the books which move men and influence their minds, the product of brains which really matter.

37

36 McMahon Trevor, 'Who Buys Novels?' P.C. 28 May 1921 p. 555

37 P.C. 21 November 1925 pp. 720-721; 28 November 1925 p. 741

But in fact the publishing industry had no other choice but to encourage the 'quick turnover'. Even W.H. Smith issued a clarion call of sorts to its newsagent clients. 'With the remarkable growth of the demand for Sixpenny novels it has become very patent to most newsagents that to stick to newsagency alone and hold aloof from selling books is undoubtedly a mistake'.³⁸ Between September and November, 1929, book production in Britain exceeded the unprecedented total of sixty titles per day (a majority of them novels), prompting many to complain about an 'overproduction' of books.³⁹ W.G. Taylor in 1935 classed 'cheap fiction' which feed the libraries, bumper books, rewards and annuals as the only type of books which can be 'marketed' like mass-produced commodities'. He emphasised, however, that these were but by-products of the main, 'narrower but deeper' stream of publishing which encompassed 'novels', poetry, short stories, biography, and other genres.⁴⁰ By-products, perhaps, but they were the best-sellers nonetheless.

With new techniques of advertising and promotion, some authors emerged as 'stars' or 'celebrities' whose public acclaim loomed large throughout the period. Nat Gould's popularity survived the war; although he died in 1919 having written 130 novels, 22 more awaited publication. Sales of his novels exceeded 20 million copies in 1919; 23 million by 1923. Edgar Wallace's novels were published by some 30 publishers. According to some he was the most prolific

38 T.C. 31 May 1930 p. 6

39 'Sixty New Books a Day', P.C. 5 October 1929 p. 425

40 Taylor, 'Publishing', p. 63

writer of popular fiction the world has ever known; his exact output is unknown.⁴¹ American Zane Grey was another big seller, benefitting from interest in Westerns generated by the cinema. 'The publishers are squeezing Zane like a lemon squeezer squeezes a lemon', the Publishers' Circular reported.⁴² Another American conqueror was Mickey Mouse and the Walt Disney establishment; the book of the cartoon 'Three Little Pigs' sold 188,000 copies in three months.⁴³ The 'blockbuster' book was also a common fixture: Gone With the Wind (1936) and The Citadel (1937) were named in a 1948 Gallup Poll of 'What's the best book you've ever read?', after The Bible. A.J. Cronin's novel, in fact, sold 40,083 copies in 9 days in 1937, a bookselling record.⁴⁴

Through such restructuring the publishing industry was able to acquire and retain a modicum of prosperity in spite of the economic depression, with the exception, we will see, of the magazine trade. In fact, 1930 was the most prolific year until then in the history of British publishing: 11,603 new books and 3,790 reprints (in all categories) were published. One of many observers who

41 See W.O.G. Lofts and Derek Adley, The British Bibliography of Edgar Wallace (London, 1964). Barbara Cartland, Wallace's principal rival for the most-books-written record, criticised his style and suspected his originality. 'He was sort of fantastic. He rather wrote like me, but he did them all at the same time. He always forgot, and the eyes of the heroine changed halfway through; once they were brown and then they were blue. I always thought he had a lot of people who put things in', as did, she claimed, most of the literary establishment. (Cartland was interviewed on 26 May 1988)

42 P.C. 11 June 1921 p. 597

43 B. 1 May 1935 p. 434

44 P.C. 20 October 1937 p. 418

commented on apparent resistance of the publishing industry to the economic crisis was the Publishers' Circular:

The 'ill wind' of financial stringency has a stimulating effect on reading, as can be proved from the statistics of our public libraries. When money is scarce for the theatre or the talkies, then the joys of the armchair and the book are discovered.

45

In many respects a leisure service, publishing was among those light service industries which displayed a flexibility and resilience during the depression, when 'escapist' activities such as reading were regarded as necessities rather than luxuries. Similarly, the largest increase in radio licenses in a single year was between March 1930 and March 1931, at a rate of more than 1,000 each day; by November 1932 the B.B.C. had acquired its five-millionth licence holder.⁴⁶ In the case of book publishing, sales were further boosted during the 1930s by two additional developments: a dramatic increase in orders from the commercial, tuppenny libraries, and the unprecedented success of the paperback series, Penguin Books.

The growth of the tuppenny libraries was such by 1938 that W.C. Berwick Sayers, President of the Library Association, remarked: 'We have the almost spontaneous appearance in thousands of shops of departments for lending light literature; so much so that it would seem the lending of reading matter is becoming an auxiliary of every business'.⁴⁷ The impact of the 'tuppenny' libraries on the publishing industry was considerable. Their success galvanised sales

45 P.C. 27 December 1930 p. 877

46 Asa Briggs, The B.B.C.: The First Fifty Years (London, 1985), p. 110

47 P.C. 18 June 1938 p. 802

by providing a guaranteed market for light fiction. In response to such strong demand several publishers became 'library houses', tailoring their book lists to the demands of the libraries. Among such firms were Mills and Boon, Herbert Jenkins, Hutchinson, Ward Lock, and Wright and Brown.⁴⁸ Other, more upscale publishers added a 'cheap line' to their lists: light fiction which, if not enhancing the reputation of the firm certainly helped cash flow during difficult times. Collins, for example, published the 'Crime Club' series; Hodder and Stoughton the successful 'Yellow Jackets' line, and Oxford University Press was the first of the many publishers of the adventures of Captain W.E. Johns' 'Biggles'.

The publishing industry was evenly divided on the merits of the tuppenny libraries. Traditional booksellers may have lamented the lowering of standards and the 'overproduction' of trashy novels, but A.C. Hannay praised publishers for exploiting a new market and being sensitive to changing tastes, which displayed sound business sense:

Publishers, in spite of their theoretical objections, have been quicker to adapt themselves to the needs of the day. Wisely, and rightly, they are prepared to produce the books the libraries want. The novels are produced to meet a real and definite demand.

49

48 See chapter 4. John Boon remained critical of competitors such as Wright and Brown: 'They were essentially a library company: romance, thrillers, Westerns, a little more downmarket than we were. They were two managers from Hutchinson's who had seen what my father had achieved and set out to copy him, with deliberately more limited aim'. (JB-3)

49 A.C. Hannay, 'Are the Lending Libraries Really a Menace?' B. 11 April 1934 p. 200

A lending library was regarded by some as a source of revenue and also potential customers. W.H. Smith warned its newsagent clients not to scorn 'the "Edgar Wallace type" of reader'; if he entered the shop, he was a potential customer.⁵⁰ The Publishers' Circular was excited by reports of a tuppenny library in south London which turned an average weekly profit of £28. 'That passer-by is your possible customer. He will not notice your dull front and dusty, ill-lighted window! He will notice the brightly-lighted 2d. library!'⁵¹ The libraries were also seen as beneficial for the public libraries, which did not need to stock such 'worthless books'. As such, 'these tuppenny libraries will drain away a weeping abscess', Geoffrey Grigson noted.⁵²

Although Penguin Books, introduced in 1935, did not appreciably affect the working class, its success did serve to promote reading in general and new marketing ideas. Allen Lane pioneered the introduction of inexpensive quality paperbacks in 1935 with the launch of Penguin Books. His success captivated the book trade: in the first year three million copies of 50 titles were sold, 6d. each, a turnover for the trade of £75,000. The firm's innovative marketing techniques changed the character of bookselling: Penguins were sold not only in traditional bookshops but in newsagents and

50 'Books and the Public', The Newsbasket May 1930 p. 104

51 P.C. 1 February 1936 p. 101. Given such profits the tuppenny libraries were accused in 1935 of violating the Shops Act; tuppenny libraries were exempt as they did not offer books for sale, and remained open, in one case, to 11:00 p.m. ('Twopenny Libraries and the Shops Act', P.C. 10 August 1935 p. 219)

52 Geoffrey Grigson, 'Novels, Twopenny Libraries and the Reviewer', B. 20 March 1935 p. 286

chain stores such as Woolworths and Marks and Spencer. A Penguin vending machine was installed in Charing Cross Road. Other publishers copied the sixpenny paperback format for reprints of light fiction, producing 'books' with the same disposable qualities as magazines. Among these were Chevron Books (Queensway Press), Pearson's Sixpennies ('Romance' - 'Western' - 'Detective'- 'Adventure'), and Selwyn and Blount's 'Not at Night' thriller series, which sold 250,000 copies. Hutchinson cheekily labelled their 6d. series 'Toucan' and 'Jackdaw'. While these series did claim a large sale among lower-class readers, Penguin Books did not, despite Lane's intentions to influence the working class towards 'better' books.⁵³ Retailers did not approve of the sale of sixpenny paperbacks such as Penguin Books, which generated fewer profits than traditional hardbacks, and feared the eclipse of their trade by the chain stores, which did a roaring business in sixpennies, backed by extensive advertising in the Press.⁵⁴

53 Penguin Books commissioned Mass-Observation after the Second World War to survey their buying public. The report, completed in 1947 but never published, concluded that Penguins were bought by only 9% of the reading public. Working-class readers were actually few, a result of the quality of the fiction published and the ingrained resistance among the lower classes to book-buying: purchases were rare and usually cloth-bound books to 'display' at home. See chapter 3. (Mass-Observation, A Report on Penguin World [File Report 2545], December 1947)

54 Overall, however, with the exception of the Penguins these paperback series did not make much of an impact. Paperback publishing on a mass scale in Britain was not introduced until after the Second World War, a result of a desire for inexpensive, quality reprints and the creation of consortiums which provided the necessary and considerable physical and financial backing. In 1947 Penguin signed an exclusive contract with five publishers (Chatto and Windus, Faber and Faber, Hamish Hamilton, Heinemann and Michael Joseph) to provide the first cheap 2s. edition of their books. Also in 1947, Pocket Books, an American venture, was launched at 1/9, and Pan Books at 1/6. Pan Books was the paperback arm of Collins, Hodder and Stoughton and Macmillan. (See also Hans Schmoller, 'The paperback revolution', in Asa Briggs (ed), Essays in the history of publishing

The relative prosperity of the book trade was naturally interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939. The sudden and severe disruption created by the implementation of paper rationing in 1940 was, however, temporary. Given the restrictions imposed on other leisure activities during the Second World War, the demand for reading - and light 'escapist' fiction in particular - far exceeded supply. A buyer was found for every publication produced, although as during the First World War the lack of paper dampened profits. Restrictions also inhibited expansion. John Boon claimed that his firm 'may have done better without the war'. Although the expanded wartime market consolidated Mills and Boon's market position, the war also impeded the firm's ability to exploit it. 'I mean, we were doing very well in the thirties, and we were developing the whole time. As soon as the austerity regulations came in, we were in a straitjacket'. Mills and Boon could have sold many more books if paper had been available, he claimed.⁵⁵

Paper rationing, which was enforced from 1940 until 1949, was the dominant influence of this period. Rationing was implemented by the Control of Paper Order of February, 1940. It restricted publishers to 60 percent of their annual supply of paper in 1939. A common complaint among publishers was that allocation judged on 1939, a relatively bad year in the industry (given the outbreak of war), was unfair and unjust. After the German invasion of Norway, the

in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the House of Longman 1724-1974 [London, 1974], pp. 285-318)

55 JB-2. See chapter 4

principal supplier of wood and pulp, allocations were steadily reduced, initially to 30 percent, and by 1943 to as low as 6.5 percent. Further orders prohibited publication of any new newspapers, magazines or periodicals, and forbade the more frequent issue of those already on sale. When allocations were increased in small increments beginning in November 1943, it was only done so to meet the demands of the Forces, liberated territories, colonies and overseas markets, and not the home front. The severity of wartime restrictions on the publishing industry can also be illustrated through a comparison of pre-war and wartime paper consumption. Consumption in 1939 was estimated by the Board of Trade as follows:

Newspapers (including weeklies)	1,110,000 tons/year
Magazines and Periodicals	300,000
Books	63,000

With rationing restrictions, then, for the major part of the war the Ministry of Supply allocated paper according to the following averages:

Newspapers and Magazines	250,000 tons/year
H.M.S.O.	100,000
Books	20,000

Hence, the combined consumption of newspapers and magazines was limited to 18 percent of pre-war supply; of books, 32 percent. The War Office alone used 25,000 tons of paper, more than the entire book allocation. Indeed, book publishers used only 1.5 percent of the total paper consumption; an increase of just one percent, it was claimed, would have solved all problems of supply.⁵⁶ Stanley L.

⁵⁶ Hewison, p. 87. One should bear in mind that 'Magazines' included non-fiction titles; 'Books' all types including the largest consumer, educational books.

Unwin, moreover, estimated that as 1,000 tons of paper generated five million books, annual wartime production was in excess of 100 million books. However, this supply had to satisfy the production of all technical, scientific and educational books in addition to 'best-sellers' and light fiction.⁵⁷

Hardship caused by the shortage of paper was compounded by the blitz. The raid of 29 December 1940 on Paternoster Square in London destroyed five million volumes in the warehouse of the wholesale distributors Simpkin Marshall; and Hutchinson, Collins and Longmans, among other publishers, had their premises destroyed. Complaints of unavailable or out-of-print books were commonplace: in 1941 the Publishers' Association announced that 37,000 titles were unavailable, a reduction of 46 and 36 percent for children's books and adult fiction in print, respectively. since 1939.⁵⁸ Some popular series, such as the 'Yellow Jackets', were suspended until paper was again available to meet the expected huge demand. 'Nine new books out of ten are over-subscribed before publication', the Publishers' Association reported in 1944, 'and it is not uncommon for the orders for new books and reprints to exceed the number printed by four or five times'.⁵⁹

The magazine houses adjusted somewhat more easily than the book publishers. At the outset of the war rationing restrictions led to the closure of many titles; the larger firms were hardest hit:

57 Stanley Unwin, 'The Status of Books' (London, 1946), p. 9-10

58 B. 27 November 1941 p. 471

59 'Book Publishing in Britain To-day', B. 8 June 1944 p. 495

	Number of titles	
	<u>1939</u>	<u>1945</u>
Amalgamated Press	91	42
Odhams	25	17
Pearson	24	9
D.C. Thomson	22	17
George Newnes	19	8

Hence, the Amalgamated Press lost 54 percent of its titles; D.C. Thomson 23 percent. Most weeklies became fortnightlies or even monthlies in an effort to extend paper rations. In all, 916 periodicals and newspapers were suspended at the outbreak of the war.⁶⁰ In some cases evacuations led to distribution problems; many of the children's storypapers in particular were closed, including such long-running titles as Gem, Magnet, and Chums. But surviving magazines managed to maintain their pre-war prices, unlike books, and their readerships, despite reduced circulations. The most popular titles included Picture Post, Everybody's, and Woman's Own. One newsagent in Lansdowne Road, London, complained, 'I am so hard-pressed for magazines that I ask people to return them when they are read so as to supply other customers'.⁶¹ In 1940 W.H. Smith cited the case of the most popular woman's weekly, Odhams Press' Woman:

This magazine's editorial department received in January and February of this year the astonishing number of over 85,000 letters—nearly 20,000 more than in the last 2 pre-war months, July and August. During 1939 close on a million readers wrote to Woman for something they wanted or wanted to know. No sign of a shrinking market here, and doubtless the same reassuring story could be told by other publishers.

62

60 The News and Book Trade Review and Stationers' Gazette 15 August 1942 p. 411

61 M-0 'Reading' Box 5 File B (26 June 1942); M.S.

62 T.C. 23 March 1940 p. 6

Indeed, despite supply problems, reading thrived during the war. In 1941 86 new bookshops were opened; the number of issues from the public libraries increased by 15 percent; and Hutchinson's recorded book sales, including juvenile titles, of over 10 million copies.⁶³ Personal expenditure on 'Books, Newspapers and Magazines', as recorded by the Central Statistical Office, increased during the war, from £64 million in 1938, £67 million in 1943 and £77 million in 1945 (admittedly, the inclusion of newspaper sales in the total may unreasonably distort figures).⁶⁴ To meet this demand, the number of book publishers actually increased during the war, despite the scarcity of paper. The market was exploited by so-called 'mushroom firms', small publishers who produced light fiction. Although output was regulated by control of supply, there were no restrictions on the creation of new publishing houses. F.K. Foat, Book Manager of W.H. Smith, explained the problem in 1947, noting how these newcomers exacerbated the critical paper situation:

The wartime regulations left a loophole - there was no rule preventing the formation of new firms. Their sources of supply were probably threefold - paper stolen somehow or other, black market paper (if distinction can be made here), and their own printers' ration for jobbing work.

Most of the 'mushroom' firms are now 'folding up', 'They're on the way out', but that does not increase the allocation of paper to reputable publishers. Much of the material published by the new, wartime firms was of little value. A great many children's books of

63 P.C. 4 October 1941 p. 170; B. 26 February 1942 p. 185

64 Annual Abstract of Statistics (London, 1938-1948), p. 246. All figures revalued at 1938 prices.

poor quality were produced and sold well because of the shortage of toys. ⁶⁵

One such 'mushroom' firm was the United Anglo-American Book Co., Ltd., which offered a line of mystery/romance/thriller/gangster novels, including such titles as It's Only Saps That Die by Buck Toler and They Rubbed Him Out by John Lacey Cora.⁶⁶ Fortunately for these firms the demand for such 'trash' intensified in wartime. An assistant at the W.H. Smith bookshop in Sloane Square, London, observed in 1943: 'I think a lot of publishers are just unloading rubbish on the public, they know they'll be able to sell the classics and really good books after the war anything will sell at present. And rubbish will do while the war is on; that seems to be the attitude'.⁶⁷ In this way paper rationing during the Second World War undoubtedly affected public choice by limiting supply of certain types of fiction, such as the classics and quality periodicals, while expanding the supply of light novels and magazines. But even some 'trash' books had difficulty getting published. After the war the publication of Forever Amber, the 1944 American best-seller by Kathleen Winsor, was delayed in Britain due to lack of paper; one publisher commented that due to its length (800 pages) and expected huge demand it would exhaust his entire paper quota for one year.⁶⁸

65 M-O 'Reading' Box 10 File F (5 August 1947), p. 2; I.E.W.

66 B. 4 May 1944 p. 412

67 M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File K (7 December 1943); G.S.T.

68 'A best-seller in search of a publisher', B. 5 April 1945 pp. 406-407

III

During the 1920s and 1930s, the leisure industry expanded significantly. 'Entertainment and leisure became big business as it was increasingly realized that a lot of money could be made out of people's spare time', Stephen G. Jones wrote.⁶⁹ Coincidental with the commercialization of popular publishing along commodity lines, the cinema, wireless, organized sport, dancing, holidays and (later) television all experienced considerable expansion and professional organization. Rather than diminishing the reading habit, these activities actually encouraged it, through tie-ins ('the book of the film'; lending libraries at seaside resorts), and magazines relating to broadcasting (Popular Wireless, Picturegoer) and sport (Topical Times). Where the expansion of leisure activities did have an impact, however, was on retail sales. With more leisure opportunities on which to spend pocket money (and with an increase in real wages to do so), purchases of magazines in particular slumped, and, as we have seen, public reliance on borrowing novels instead of buying increased considerably. This section will survey these influences on popular publishing.

The cinema and the wireless were the most beneficial leisure activities in terms of reading promotion. 'The cinema was the essential social habit of the age' which 'slaughtered all

⁶⁹ Stephen G. Jones, Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-1939 (London, 1986), p. 35

competitors',⁷⁰ A.J.P. Taylor observed. There were 3,500 cinemas in 1914, 4,597 in 1951. Annual admissions increased from 903 million in 1934 to a peak of over 1.6 billion in 1946. Indeed, Charles Mowat estimated that, as cinemas sold 20 million tickets a week, 40 percent of the population went to the pictures once a week, and 25 percent went twice a week or more.⁷¹ The publishing industry greeted this new form of entertainment with a mixture of excitement and dread. In 1919 the Bookseller dismissed fears of the cinema eclipsing books: 'Surely the kind of people who are content to accept "the pictures" as a substitute for books are so unsophisticated, and the sort of novels they would otherwise read are of such a quality, that there is nothing at all to worry about'.⁷² But the cinema did attract the interest of some 'quality' authors, perhaps mindful of financial gain. Jeffrey Farnol (The Broad Highway) considered it a great privilege for any author to have his work filmed, and A.E.W. Mason (The Four Feathers) regarded the cinema as a great new art form.⁷³ The publisher T. Fisher Unwin saw in film adaptations new life for older books, and anything that helped to sell books was welcomed. 'The film has produced a new and larger public, though of a lower grade. Whatever happens, I think there is bound to be in the future an increase of the number of book readers', he said.⁷⁴

70 Taylor, English History, p. 313

71 Charles Mowat, Britain Between the Wars (London, 1955) p. 501

72 B. December 1919 p. 701

73 P.C. 24 April 1920 p. 427

74 P.C. 5 January 1924 p. 10

Indeed there was. Given their mutual interest in light fiction, relationships were forged early between the film and publishing industries, and both book and magazine firms turned the new medium to their advantage. The Stoll Film Company announced in 1920 adaptations of novels by Edgar Wallace, Ethel M. Dell, and E. Phillips Oppenheim. Zane Grey's 'astonishing' popularity among 'all classes of the reading public' was further enhanced by the filming of his novels.⁷⁵ In 1921 the National Federation of Retail Newsagents and Booksellers condemned the practice of publishers who bypassed bookshops and sold 'books of the film' directly in cinema houses;⁷⁶ Hutchinson was one of many publishers who marketed 6d. 'Film Editions' with such titles as Queen of Atlantis by Pierre Benoit (1933). Bryce MacNab in 1935 observed that some authors were writing in 'film style' to attract the interest of Hollywood. Only best-sellers were desired, however: 'If there is any chance of exploiting a name, of trading on an author's popularity, of buying up the film rights of a "best-seller" and publicising it into success even before it has been made, the film factors will do it'.⁷⁷ Retailers were encouraged to retain stocks of best-sellers until the filmed versions appeared. The Bookseller reported in 1947 that there had been a continuous waiting list for Jane Eyre in Derbyshire Public Libraries since 1940.⁷⁸

75 A.G. Cheverton, 'The Vogue of Zane Grey', P.C. 27 March 1920 p. 345

76 P.C. 2 April 1921 p. 345

77 Bryce MacNab, 'Searching for a Film Story: The Type of Novel Which Film Producers Want', B. 3 July 1935 p. 646

78 B. 18 October 1947 p. 730. Charlotte Bronte's novel was mentioned most frequently during this period on the influence of the film on reading.

The popularity of the cinema was also reflected within magazines. The women's weeklies included features on the latest films and gossip on the glamorous stars. Publishers frequently encouraged sales by offering free gifts, known as 'pushes' in the trade. Some sample ones were 'Gloria Swanson's Shampoo Powder' offered with Peg's Companion (1925) and a 'Beautiful Signed Portrait of Garbo' in Britannia and Eve (1932). The cinema also spawned a number of film and photographic magazines, including the popular Picturegoer, and Mickey Mouse Weekly, introduced in 1936 as 'The Children's Paper that Grown-Ups will find Excuses for Buying'.

Similarly, the wireless benefited publishing. Publisher George H. Doran predicted in 1923 that the radio would help to sell books. 'It is a tremendously multiplied lecturing platform; it is a new and more fascinating phonograph; it is the telephone in a million homes', he said, adding that serial story opportunities were endless.⁷⁹ Indeed, the radio drama seemed to have had the same positive effect upon reading as did the cinema. In 1950, 'an age of more reading than ever before in history', the Publishers' Circular praised the influence of the wireless and serials such as Jane Eyre, South Riding and Tom Sawyer: 'This serialising by the B.B.C. is one of the most useful and most acceptable efforts of the wireless. It is pretty safe to say that it has turned many listeners to the

79 P.C. 10 February 1923 p. 115. The Amalgamated Press's super sleuth Sexton Blake was one character which made a very successful transition from print to the radio drama.

printed page as most libraries and booksellers would readily agree'.⁸⁰

Given the complementary relationships forged between publishing and broadcasting, not to mention the record levels of book production between the wars, it is surprising to notice a severe depression in magazine sales. The principal reason for this would appear to be the redistribution of consumer expenditure to other leisure activities. In addition to the cinema and wireless, expenditure on smoking, gambling, holidays and sporting matches all increased. We have seen the growth of commercial lending libraries for the frequent distribution of light fiction, at a much cheaper cost than purchasing. Weekly magazines, on the other hand, did not have access to such an alternative outlet. As there were some best-selling exceptions, however, it is clear that the magazine trade also suffered from outdated technology and a passé, tired look. A Gallup Poll in January 1938 concluded that only 21 percent of the public read magazines 'regularly'.⁸¹

The depression in the magazine trade is evident from a number of sources. According to the Census of Production, for example, the net output in the 'Printing, publishing of newspapers and periodicals' reached a plateau between the wars, as did the sales of 'magazines and periodicals...by larger establishments':

80 P.C. 19 August 1950 p. 983

81 Multiple responses were common. Unfortunately, only five titles were listed: Woman's Own (6%), Woman (6%), Strand (6%), John Bull (5%) and Chambers (5%). 'All others' received 72% and 'No answer' 53%.

	<u>Net Output per person employed</u>	<u>Total Net Industry Output</u>	<u>Sales of Magazines & Periodicals</u>	
1924	£ 542	£ 32.2 m	£ 10,115	
1930	518	37.0 m	10,044	
1935	476	38.4 m	10,781	82

Declining circulations recorded by some publishing houses can account for the above. In 1938 there were 234 weekly 'general interest' periodicals published in Britain, with a recorded weekly circulation of 18,635,000, down from 21 million in 1935.⁸³ Sales of D.C Thomson's 'Big 5' papers for boys, the best-selling titles in this market, slumped before the Second World War; similar falls were recorded in the firm's popular weeklies for women, including Secrets and Red Star Weekly.⁸⁴ Notices of excessive returns of unsold copies were common in the trade publications throughout the 1930s. The Amalgamated Press was a frequent advertiser, with the Gem and Magnet, Schoolgirl's Own, Home Companion and Eve's Own Stories among the most seriously affected. In 1931 the firm's Circulation Manager addressed W.H. Smith's wholesale clients:

We have 65 periodicals and there are approximately 40,000 agents in Great Britain and Ireland. If every agent carries one unsold copy of all our weeklies, the returns would amount to 2,600,000 copies every week.

What, then, is the solution? We think that every agent should cut from his sheet each week half the 'overs' of the preceding week. Thus, if an agent ordered 18 copies of Answers and had 2 left, his next order should be 17 copies.

82 Jones, p. 48. Jones claims, however, that the main reason for the apparent stagnation and decline was 'the downward trend in prices which the crude Census data does not take into account'. (p. 47)

83 Nicholas Kaldor and Rodney Silverman, A Statistical Analysis of Advertising Expenditure and of the Revenue of the Press (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 86, 96

84 Source: D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. See chapter 6

If 2 are left again, then 16, and so on. In this way, the returns problem would solve itself.

85

Actually, only the tremendous demand created by the reading boom during the Second World War solved the returns problem.

Both publishers and retailers placed the blame for the depressed magazine market on increased expenditure on other leisure activities. John Masefield, the Poet Laureate, was struck by how much less people were reading in 1939 than in 1909. He blamed amusements, claiming it was idle 'to expect the people of to-day to abandon their new toys for the toys which delighted the last generation'.⁸⁵ Odhams Press, publishers of John Bull and Woman, criticized mechanical transport, in particular purchases of cars and motorcycles:

weekends spent motoring were by no means conducive to reading papers. Moreover economies had to be made in some direction if the installments on these purchases were to be met, and it was usually on magazines and Sunday papers that many began to cut down.

87

In 1933 the Religious Tract Society, publishers of the B.O.P. and the Woman's Magazine, acknowledged in its annual report that competition had become severe:

things are different since the war, and it is easy to give many reasons why people do not read so much at home. All new inventions seem to attack that quiet reading hour - the gramophone, wireless, cinema, motor cars, cheap motor-bus and coach rides - all have their share. Then the daily newspaper with its

85 T.C. 6 June 1931 p. 14

86 The Times 15 May 1939 p. 19

87 R.J. Minney, Viscount Southwood (London, 1954), p. 207

serial story and magazine articles has taken away many a reader from the general magazine. ⁸⁸

In 1927 W.H. Smith solicited both causes and remedies for the depression from its employees throughout England and Wales.⁸⁹ In addition to the wireless ('the long daily wireless programmes supply a form of entertainment requiring no effort on the part of the listener, and provide the continual change so dear to the feminine mind') and the cinema ('Each afternoon Kinemas are packed with women whose emotions are being tickled by slick American producers; in pre-Kinema days most of these vast audiences would have spent the afternoon reading'), employees also cited an increase in participation in outdoor activities such as sport ('the long light evenings, due to the "Daylight Savings Bill", tend to use up all the leisure time the public had for light reading in the shape of magazines'). Alternatives to the weekly magazine, including the advent of the sixpenny novel, the greater popularity of circulating libraries, and the adaptation of magazine features such as serials in the daily newspapers were also mentioned. Among the remedies suggested which were applied to some benefit before the Second World War were more free gifts, or 'pushes'. A frenzied 'gift war' in weekly magazines, reminiscent of competitions between early issues of Tit-Bits and Answers, ensued. One working-class London woman, aged 60, was asked in 1940 why she was a regular reader of Family Journal. 'Well I just happened to see it advertised one day and I took it and

⁸⁸ Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society (134th edn, 1932-1933), p. 112

⁸⁹ 'The Decline in Magazine Sales', The Newsbasket July-October 1927 pp. 157-161, 181-185, 209-211, 229-230. The amount of attention given to this subject is an indication of the severity of the situation.

I've been taking it ever since for 3 years. I think the attraction was 3 saucepans. They were giving 3 saucepans away with it.'⁹⁰

It is also possible that weekly magazines could not retain their readerships because they were, quite simply, looking out of date. 'If the contents of magazines are kept at a high level and a lot of the nonsense and hot air cut out, sales should not decrease much', one W.H. Smith employee announced in 1927. This would explain the success of those magazines which did enjoy significant growth during the 1930s. Letterpress production of poor quality and formulaic fiction which characterized countless weekly magazines looked feeble compared with such bright, new, unorthodox titles as Odhams' Woman (1937), the first weekly magazines to be produced by photogravure and in colour, along the lines of the glossy American magazines, and D.C. Thomson's Dandy and Beano comics. 'Hobbies' magazines were also popular on such subjects as gardening (The Smallholder), aviation (Popular Flying), and photography, and the influence of broadcasting was apparent in the enduring popularity of Radio Times and illustrated magazines such as Picture Post. As a newsagent in Mill Hill, London, remarked in 1940:

By far and away the most popular periodical (other than Radio Times) is Picture Post. This is universally popular - working, middle and upper classes alike buy it. Nobody has to look through it to consider whether they want it or not. Another weekly which people know they want without thinking is Everybody's. This, however sells only among the lower middle and

90 F/60/D, M-O 'Newspaper Reading' Box 2 File D (33 Coomer Road, London, 4 March 1940); K.B.

working classes. Higher classes wanting a competition paper choose Guide and Ideas.⁹¹

In fact, in 1949 Picture Post, Illustrated, Everybody's, John Bull, and Radio Times were identified as 'mass-circulation' magazines. It was estimated that the number of copies of these titles per 100 families was 110.1 in London and the Southeast; 115.0 in Wales; and 92.0 in Scotland.⁹²

In this chapter we have considered the principal developments in the publishing industry and the market for popular fiction in Britain from the First World War until 1950. The existing demand for "light fiction," in book and magazine form, was sustained or increased throughout this period. In fact, it was difficult not to resist reading something, so wide and accessible was the variety of reading matter to all classes. Wartime increased the demand for escapist fiction; the postwar decline in retail prices of books and

91 M-0 'Reading' Box 3 File D (104 Devonshire Road, N.W.7, 8 February 1940); K.B.

92 Major G. Harrison and F.C. Mitchell, The Home Market (London, 1950), p. 79. In the case of children's magazines, stagnation of sales may also have been due to the rapidly falling proportion of children in the population. In England and Wales, children up to the age of 14 comprised 32.4 percent of the population (10,545,000) in 1901; 23.8 percent in 1931 (9,520,000); and 22.1 percent in 1951 (9,692,000). In Scotland, figures were comparable: 33.4 percent (1,494,000) in 1901; 26.9 percent (1,305,000) in 1931; 24.6 percent (1,255,000) in 1951. With a falling juvenile population, saturation of the market would have accelerated. Indeed, D.C. Thomson blames the failure of its boys' paper The Vanguard (1924-1926) on such saturation. (See chapter 6. A.H. Halsey, Trends in British Society since 1900 [London, 1972], p. 33)

the ensuing competition by publishers led to a surplus of novels. During the 1930s facilities, public and private, for borrowing books cheaply and conveniently expanded nationwide. Leisure activities such as the cinema, the wireless and television all served to enhance the desire for the written word. Reading levels increased, however, at the expense of retail sales and the gain of the libraries, and magazine publishers suffered in particular.

These developments, whilst sustaining the demand for reading, provoked major restructuring within the publishing industry. Publishers were forced to cater to the tastes of a specific audience (in this case, the lower-middle and working classes) more closely than ever before in order to ensure maximum sale and cover rising production costs. Commodity-style techniques were introduced, and some houses tagged all of their books to one readership, such as the lending libraries. Such market targeting was a strategy previously confined to magazines. Fortunately the demand for the cheap low-brow fiction produced by the millions was great; reprinted works of adult fiction far exceeded new works. The Second World War served to institutionalise these new publishing techniques while intensifying the demand for reading even further, thereby preparing the market for the 'mass-circulation' magazines and paperbacks characteristic of the present day.

Chapter 3

'The Quickest Way Out of Glasgow':

Adult Reading Habits

During this period the market for popular literature, as we have seen, expanded in accordance with the growth of the 'new reading public' drawn largely from the lower-middle and working classes. This was particularly the case in the 1930s with the activity of the tuppenny libraries; the record production of 'light fiction' is an indication of the principal tastes of this reading public. 'Escapism', moreover, was one of the principal motivations in reading. As a postman in Scotland explained, 'As the Cockney said: "Getting drunk is the nearest way out of London", so reading is the quickest way out of Glasgow'.¹ This chapter will examine adult reading habits. The first section will assess broadly the growth and development of reading as a leisure activity among this 'low-brow public', and the publications and authors preferred most by such readers. Special attention will be given to the effects of wartime, which served to enhance the common desire for relaxation and a momentary 'escape' provided by light fiction. The ways people chose their reading matter in an increasingly sophisticated mass-

¹ Mass-Observation, Books and the Public: A Report for the National Book Council, File Report 2018 (11 February 1944), p. 85

marketplace will be discussed in the second section. Working-class readers, for instance, did not distinguish between books and magazines in looking for something to read, and were more susceptible to the 'look' of a book and a sensational title. The third section will try to put the term 'popular fiction' in perspective by presenting the best-selling authors, novels and magazines preferred by this public. Finally, the fourth section will consider what appeared to be the pervasive characteristic of reading habits during this period: reading as 'escapism'.

I

Generally speaking, the reading habit was either maintained or increased during this period. The principal influence was war, in two respects. Firstly, war increased the temptation of all classes, and especially women, to turn to fiction in book and magazine form. Reading and the distraction it provided were identified as 'a tower of strength' in 1915 and 'our safest refuge in the mental torment of war' in 1939.² This habit, moreover, was sustained in peacetime; after the First World War, for example, popular fiction was easier to obtain due to increased competition, lower prices and the commercial libraries. Secondly, wartime not only served to perpetuate existing reading habits but appeared to encourage new readers. Among those introduced to light reading were

2 'Reading in the time of war', The Times 13 April 1915 p. 6; Compton Mackenzie, quoted in 1939, M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File D

war workers, either in the Forces or on civilian duty. This was the major growth area in the reading public and it served to perpetuate reading habits in peacetime.

To contemporaries, the First World War plainly encouraged reading, especially of the 'lighter' kind. In 1915 the Daily Mirror surveyed publishers and booksellers and reported that fiction, poetry and detective stories were 'in great demand'; books were selling 'remarkably well' in spite of the war, but war stories were no longer popular.³ According to the publisher Herbert Jenkins, people had grown tired of war books. 'Indeed, they now asked for "something to make them forget how far it is to Tipperary, or that Piccadilly is being kept as dark as the plans of the War Office"... something that will, for a time at least, take them out of themselves.'⁴ Jenkins crusaded against those who criticised the number of novels, mostly by women writers, which were being published. 'What a boon new novels are to the man at the Front, the wounded, the bereaved. I have received many very touching testimonies of the gratitude of those who want to forget things occasionally for an hour or so',⁵ he said.

Increases in fiction borrowing were recorded by public libraries. In Leeds, the librarian cited escapism for the growth of fiction issues during 1916,⁶ and the librarian at the Guildford Institute said that 'light' literature never stayed on his shelves

3 Quoted in P.C. 2 October 1915 p. 317

4 B. 19 February 1915 p. 169

5 P.C. 20 January 1917 p. 50

6 P.C. 23 March 1918 p. 267

more than a few hours, such was the demand. The Times, surveying public libraries nationwide in 1917, said the reading boom was 'attributable to the fact that people seek distraction from the worry of the times in the reading of works of imagination'.⁷ The newspaper also cited restrictions imposed on other leisure activities during the war as a reason for the 'distinct revival in reading':

The civilian population at home have had much more money to spend than before and fewer ways of spending it. There were no longer any cheap tickets to tempt people to travel, and the dark streets made them disinclined to venture out again after they had once found their way home. The result was that the new quietness of the evenings and the Sundays provided a harvest for the booksellers. 8

This was probably important in promoting reading during both world wars.

The Second World War sanctioned a similar boom in reading and this is better documented than for the First. The strong participation in reading by the lower-middle and working classes, illustrated by the success of the tuppenny libraries during the 1930s, was intensified after 1939 for the same reasons as it had during the First World War: escapism, and a lack of alternative leisure activities. The trade journals documented the surge in light

7 'Reading and War Worry', The Times 12 April 1917 p. 8

8 Quoted in P.C. 12 August 1916 p. 147. Fifteen years later the P.C. gave a similar explanation for the growth of reading at the height of the depression. 1930 was the most prolific year to date in the history of British publishing. 'In recent years there has been an amazing increase in the amount of reading done by the general public. It may be said with truth that the ordinary man or woman is now discovering that books are one of the cheapest and most satisfying forms of interest and amusement', the P.C. reported in 1931. 'If the economic blizzard has caused much evil, it may be put to its credit that it has driven thousands of potential readers indoors to the fireside and the book'. (26 December 1931 p. 793)

fiction. In 1939 the Publishers' Circular surveyed publishing houses and remarked, 'the great British book-buying public are evidently like Mr. Goldsack's soldiers - choosing the lighter books these dark days, and leaving the heavier ones for future happier times and occasions'.⁹ Christina Foyle, of the London booksellers, described the wartime book market by 1942:

There's been a tremendous boom in books... There's been nothing like it, even in the last war. It's easily explainable of course - books aren't rationed, there's no purchase tax, and they don't require coupons, and then people have so much more time for reading than they used to have, with troops stationed in lonely places where books are the only things to amuse themselves with, with people unable to go away for holidays or to travel much locally, and with the black-out evenings.

10

She added that the boom was not confined to one type of book, but that 'everything under the sun' was selling well. The weekly magazines which survived initial paper cuts also sold well, shrugging off the gradual decline in this market between the wars - and showing that anything would sell.

Surveys conducted by Gallup and by Mass-Observation indicate that measured percentage levels of reading were either maintained or increased during and after the Second World War. A 1942 inquiry by Mass-Observation of over 10,000 people nationwide found that 40 percent of men and 40 percent of women said they read 'a lot'; two years later these figures had increased to 59 and 56

9 P.C. 9 December 1939 p. 577

10 M-O 'Reading' Box 6 File C (12 June 1942); C.M.

percent.¹¹ Figures referred to the reading of books, magazines and newspapers. A Gallup Poll published in February 1940 determined that 62 percent of the adult public (estimated at 19,840,000) was reading books; 38 percent were not (12,160,000).¹² Four later polls illustrate that the level of reading declined after the war, then recovered:

'Do you happen to be reading a novel or other book at the moment?'

	Jan. <u>1941</u>	Sep. <u>1946</u>	Nov. <u>1947</u>	Dec. <u>1949</u>
YES	51%	45%	45%	55%
NO	49	55	55	45

The recovery illustrated by 1949 was probably caused by the end of paper rationing, and the appearance of greater numbers of books and magazines. As explained by the deputy public librarian in Portsmouth, reading habits, though strengthened by war, could be disrupted by peace:

All figures point to the fact that reading is not only well maintained in war-time, but actually increases while population and libraries remain intact. When the population are no longer there, then, and only then, do figures decrease. This fact is important, since the figures of issue do not alone reveal it.

13

11 Mass-Observation, Report on Books and the Public: A Study of Buying, Borrowing, Keeping, Selecting, Remembering, Giving, and Reading BOOKS, File Report 1332 (2 July 1942), pp. 8, 11; M-O File Report 2018, p. 1

12 It is interesting to compare the Gallup population totals with those announced in an address to the Library Association annual conference in 1931. As reported by The Times, 'This was, of course, a reading age. It had been estimated that 17,000,000 persons read on an average twelve novels each a year. Some read at least 150, thus bringing up the average'. (1 September 1931 p. 14)

13 M-O 'Town and District' Box 17 File D (August 1941) p. 18

Such disruption could also explain why reading levels declined between 1940 and 1941; as the public librarian in Stepney explained: 'The public simply isn't reading. That's all. They don't want to make themselves responsible for the books, I think...Not since the trouble - there's been some very heavy bombing in this district, you see'.¹⁴ Once the general public adjusted to the situation, however, borrowing was brisk again. The librarian in Canterbury recorded a 20 percent increase in fiction borrowing early in 1940, and commented how borrowing habits had changed:

Formerly, we were fairly slack in the day-time, and very busy from 5-7 p.m. (we close at 7 p.m. even before the war). Now it is the other way round. We get slight queues early in the morning, decided congestion in the afternoon, and immediately the black-out screens go up, miraculous peace and quiet. 15

The black-out was one of the greatest promoters of the reading habit. A Boots ad during the war proclaimed, 'ONE BLACK-OUT BENEFIT! More time for READING! Long winter evenings at home means lots more leisure for reading. Join Boots BOOKLOVERS LIBRARY'.¹⁶ One Fulham man admitted that the war had affected his taste in reading:

I like Crime, Murder stories. Stories with excitement in them...The Madonna of the Sleeping Cars (by) M. Dekobra; The Crooked Hinge (by) J.D. Carr. Looks as if there'd be a murder - it would be gripping...I got used to

14 M/50/B, M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File G (14 September 1940); N.M.

15 M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File D (30 January 1940), p. 1

16 John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library ('Book Clubs' Box 2). The Publishers' Circular, in a leading article in 1940, noted that because of the black-out 'light' reading had supplanted the wireless in many homes as the main source of leisure. 'The wireless is often in use only for news, being switched off at other times so that the wailing of the sirens cannot be missed. Then a book provides just the relaxation required, and if it becomes necessary to take cover, the enforced inactivity can be profitably employed'. (5 October 1940 p. 185)

being awake when the blitz was on - I've kept it on. I read in bed a lot. 17

The size and complexion of the reading public in general did not change appreciably during this period. The evidence suggests that those already addicted to the reading habit read at least as much, and possibly more. Conversely, those less interested probably continued to avoid reading. The most significant change in the reading public was the introduction of the new 'leisured class'. This group, drawn significantly from the lower-middle and working classes, was comprised of men and women who were compelled, either by war or the depression, to accept a larger amount of leisure time than normal. These included the mass of the unemployed, who made good use of the public libraries, and (in wartime) men and women in the Forces, evacuees in the provinces, and Civil Defence workers. Of the latter, for example, Mass-Observation recorded during the Second World War that voluntary workers 'have plenty of spare time, but cannot use it in peace-time ways because they have to stay at their posts. Reading is the most unobtrusive, most easily-put-away method of using their spare time'.¹⁸ Long hours spent in underground shelters also encouraged reading:

Librarians have often been asked lately for something to read in the shelter. They think people are settling down to their nocturnal dwellings and are providing light good enough to read or work by instead of just enough to see what they were doing. At least one librarian attributes this only [to] the speed with which people return books. 19

17 M/25/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 4 File A (29 April 1942)

18 M-O File Report 2018, p. 3

19 M-O 'Air Raids' Box 7 File D (18 October 1940); J.S.

The increased reading activity of the new leisured class would not only have enhanced the market for popular fiction in wartime, but also would have promoted a continuance of such reading in peace.

Reading in the Armed Forces during each war was predictably light and low-brow, with books passed around eagerly. Demand was high; according to one observer, soldiers read 'insatiably' and prisoners-of-war were as grateful for books as for food.²⁰ During the First World War Camps' Library shipped 70,000 books and magazines weekly to France and the Dardanelles, and 170,000 to camps in England. 'Light' reading was preferred and public appeals were made for old novels.²¹ In fact, 'classics' by such authors as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens were revived during both wars, particularly among the troops.²² In 1917 the novelist Beatrice Harraden surveyed wounded 'Tommys' and found their favorite authors to be Nat Gould, Charles Garvice and E. Phillips Oppenheim. She defended their low-brow tastes:

Our wounded warriors have surely earned the right to amuse themselves with the books that please them most, and to be free from the kind of officious pedantry that would seek to thrust upon them literature of a class and type for

20 Wilson Midgeley, 'Reading in Wartime', John O'London's Weekly 4 June 1943 pp. 81-82

21 P.C. 13 November 1915 p. 494

22 One possible reason for such popularity was the longing for a gentler, 'pre-Armageddon' age. During the First World War, one soldier returned from Egypt and the Dardanelles reported that the favorite author at the front was Charles Dickens. Midgeley in 1943 described Jane Austen's appeal: 'Austen's constant gleam became a small flame, and helped to cool some of our distempers, when we realised that it was written in the throes of the Napoleonic War'. (Midgeley, pp. 81-82)

which they have, as they themselves would say,
'no use.'

23

The increase in reading by the Forces during the First World War gave the publishing industry cause for optimism. The Times attributed the general revival in reading to the influence of the troops. Three factors promoted their reading: the monotony of war which gave soldiers more spare time to read; the new modern army, which unlike the old regular army was made up of men who were used to reading; and the large number of convalescents, which translated into more readers.²⁴ 'The war has increased reading among the English public 40 percent', John Buchan explained in 1927. 'Lots of the new reading class started the habit in hospitals, others because they found books cheap and plentiful when other entertainments were dear and scarce'.²⁵

Reports filed during the Second World War indicated that detective novels and sex stories, especially those imported from America, were most popular among troops, although Oppenheim, William le Queux, and H.G. Wells were cited as favorite authors in one survey. 'Soldiers are at times escapist, like anyone else. Some read because it is their life's habit, others to forget the war', one observer noted.²⁶ According to the Daily Express, soldiers only wanted thrillers: 'The gorier the better, the highest-browed being

23 B. June 1917 p. 251

24 P.C. 12 August 1916 p. 147

25 Quoted in The Book Window (W.H. Smith) Christmas 1927 p. 97

26 Frank Buckland, 'What We Read in the Army', John O'London's Weekly 31 December 1943 pp. 121-122

about the level of, say. Agatha Christie'.²⁷ Romantic novels were also popular: a sergeant stationed with the army in Italy got 'the surprise of my life' when he discovered the demand among his men for novels by Annie S. Swan. 'Which all goes to show - something or other. I suppose it means the lads out here have their weak moments. But Annie S. Swan, I ask you!'²⁸ On the other hand, J.M. Dent reported in 1941 that sales of Everyman novels to the Forces had increased, an indication, according to the publisher, that men liked to mix their reading between humour, thrillers and the classics. A Mass-Observer who spent three months at an Army Hospital in County Durham noted that the amount of reading varied with the atmosphere of the company, its workload and spare time available to soldiers. In general, conditions which made concentration difficult promoted the reading of light fiction and especially quasi-pornographic magazines, which were easier to read than books without pictures, and perhaps more pleasurable. A Royal Army Medical Corps Officer remarked:

I don't think men find the ability to concentrate on anything very much, even the more educated men. Being in the army seems to have that peculiar effect on most men. [They] want something very light, and slightly pornographic, to relieve them, something they can enjoy almost without being consciously reading. I feel it's a form of escape, from a job which is usually uncongenial, in surroundings away from home.

29

27 Quoted in B. 7 March 1940 p. 307

28 P.C. 17 June 1944 pp. 347-348

29 M/40/A, M-O 'Reading' Box 7 File A (11 June 1942); H.N. In 1942 the Archbishop of Glasgow launched a campaign against newsagents who stocked what he labelled 'foul and corrupting' pornographic novels. According to Wm. Holmes and Co. Ltd., wholesale newsagents in Glasgow: 'About 70 percent. of cheap novels are sold to men in the Forces passing through railway stations...We refused to stock them, but retailers were being pressed for them by the public, so we had to give way. There has been a terrific demand'. (Daily Express 18 March

Among the most popular pornographic publications were imports from America. A grievance of British publishers during the war was the appearance in increasing numbers of American novels and magazines, usually distinguishable for their racy covers and bolder content. They were very popular; one war worker explained: 'At work the girls get the American magazines and they pass them round. We all like them better, the stories in them are more daring, they've got more sauce in them'.³⁰ The redesign of John Bull in 1946, in colour, appealed to one soldier, 'It's much better, colour appeals to people more than black and white, that's why American magazines are so popular'.³¹

There is some evidence as to what the 'new reading public' spent on its reading. Surveys suggest that during the 1930s as much as two shillings was spent each week by the 'average' family on reading matter. In 1934, for example, the average weekly expenditure per family on leisure activities was divided between four shillings on smoking, 2s.6d. on 'entertainments' and two shillings on reading matter, a considerable amount as magazines could be bought and books borrowed for as little as 2d.³² A Ministry of Labour inquiry into the cost of living, compiled in 1938, concluded that of working-class

1942 [Scrapbook of Newspaper Cuttings, John Menzies plc archives, Edinburgh])

30 F/25/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.

31 M/25/C, M-O 'Posters' Box 5 File A (Victoria, London, 27 February 1946); H.W.

32 Harrison and Mitchell, The Home Market (London, 1936), pp. 90-91. The average annual budget per family was set at £330, described as typical of 'an average small lower middle class family'.

families with an income of £250 per annum or less, the average weekly expenditure per head on books, stationery, pens and pencils was 2.5 pence per week, and on newspapers and periodicals one shilling. The latter figure, if spent exclusively on library borrowing or at the newsagent, could have been spent on, for example, three 2d. library books and three 2d. magazines in a given week. The Publishers' Circular, faced with a sluggish retail market for books, was encouraged by these last figures: 'The information does provide conclusive evidence that the working classes do read, and that in pennies and tuppennies they spend millions a year in satisfying their hunger for knowledge and relaxation'.³³

We also have some evidence about the level of reading activity, and the number of readers. In 1929 Walter J. Magenis was struck by the fact that the working class was quite prepared to spend something of its meagre wages on borrowing books. 'The worker is quite proud to be seen carrying home, for the use of himself and family, two or three books from the circulating library to which he is a subscriber'.³⁴ The popularity of reading among these classes was noted in the Merseyside social survey, which concluded that 64 percent of Class 'C' men and 70 percent of Class 'C' women read fiction in any particular week.³⁵ In 1947 the Hulton Readership

33 Cecil Palmer, 'The Working Classes and Books', P.C. 15 February 1941 pp. 93-94. Palmer added that 'the £5 a week wage-earner is a rarer bird than the one who earns fifty shillings a week' and wondered what their weekly spending was.

34 Walter J. Magenis, 'Changes Have Taken Place', P.C. 5 October 1929 p. 427

35 D. Caradog Jones (ed), The Social Survey of Merseyside III (London, 1934), p. 275. Oddly, 'Newspapers' were included under 'Fiction'. The survey cited the Sunday newspaper and magazines

Survey estimated that 68.5 percent of working-class men read at least one magazine a week; 19.8 percent read three or more. Among working-class women, 61.9 percent read general weekly magazines, 51.1 percent women's magazines, and 33.2 percent monthlies.³⁶ What people read most, however, were newspapers, in particular the News of the World, Daily Express, and The People. Similar conclusions were also attained in the 1940s by Mass-Observation, and by Gallup. A Gallup Poll in February 1940 concluded that 75 percent of 'higher income' groups read books, and 58 percent of 'lower incomes', presumably magazines as well as books.

Perhaps predictably, reading was popular among the unemployed. In 1938 the Pilgrim Trust, in noting the prevalence of reading among jobless men, discovered that the newsagent's shop was the source of escapist reading matter, instead of the public library. 'They escape into an imaginary world by buying, as a Deptford newsagent said, "magazines to forget their troubles"...twopenny magazines with stories, bad of their kind, of schoolboy adventures, pirates, buffalo ranches and highwaymen', and sport and betting, according to the report.³⁷ Similarly, the Carnegie U.K. Trust's survey of jobless men aged 18-21 in Glasgow, Cardiff and Liverpool in 1943 concluded that, although the cinema was the most popular leisure

(including American ones) as very popular among poorer families.

36 J.W. Hobson and H. Henry (compilers), The Hulton Readership Survey (London, 1947), p. 22. The size of the survey sample was 10,000, equally distributed by age, sex and class.

37 The Pilgrim Trust, Men Without Work (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 294-296

activity (80%), reading was recognized as the 'main interest' (45%).³⁸

Those outside the working classes, to the extent that their evidence is reliable, were confident that there was a 'new reading public'. One of the results of the First World War, according to the Publishers' Circular, was the marked increase in novel-reading by both the middle and working classes. 'They have no taste in literature, but the sale of cheap editions to them is enormous',³⁹ it noted, adding that ultimately the librarian and not the bookseller would reap the benefits. In 1932 Q.D. Leavis was struck by the activity of what she called 'tuppenny dram shops':

In suburban side-streets and even village shops it is common to find a stock of worn and greasy novels let out at 2d. or 3d. a volume; and it is surprising that a clientele drawn from the poorest class can afford to change the books several times a week, or even daily; but so strong is the reading habit that they do.

40

Geoffrey Grigson in the Bookseller characterised tuppenny library users as 'a public which I think we shall all agree does not consist of people who were reading books before but of those whose reading had been confined chiefly to newspapers and magazines',⁴¹ i.e. the working class. Indeed, reading habits were often divided along class lines. In 1942 Mass-Observation investigated public library usage in the Swansea area. Whereas readers in Sketty, Mumbles and

38 Disinherited Youth: A Report on the 18+ Age Group Enquiry Prepared for the Trustees of the Carnegie U.K. Trust (Edinburgh, 1943), p. 100

39 Trevor, p. 555

40 Leavis, p. 7

41 Grigson, pp. 286-287

Dystimouth ('middle-class suburbs') preferred travel books, 'novels' (high-brow) and non-fiction, readers in St. Thomas, a 'dock and industrial working-class district', preferred 'nearly all fiction. Cowboy stuff, thrillers, love stories, adventure. Nothing else goes there'.⁴² Another Mass-Observer, upon completing an exhaustive (and exhausting) series of interviews in 1943, divided the reading public up as follows:

A class doesn't read at all (or else it reads
Das Kapital)
 B class: highbrow, technical
 C class hasn't got the leisure
 D class reads, and lives, for pleasure
 (The higher you are the harder you fall) 43

According to contemporaries interest in romantic, detective and crime fiction remained strong during this period. In 1921 The Daily Telegraph, accounting for the 'phenomenon' of increased novel publishing in Britain, identified the romantic novel as a boom industry: 'One thing must be true - there must exist a very large body of readers who swallow down anything in the shape of romance, however badly it is written and faultily constructed'.⁴⁴ In 1922 The Times, commenting on popular fiction, reported, 'Every age has its literary rest-cures, and the present age flies to detective

42 M-O 'Reading' Box 5 File E (1 June 1942); E.T.

43 M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File C (1943), p. 1; A.E.R.

44 The Daily Telegraph 7 January 1921, quoted in P.C. 15 January 1921 p. 41. The Telegraph suspected that, given the large number of romances published, authors either were paying costs themselves, or publishers backed the promising ones with an eye on profits. Large sales meant that 'so long as this lack of discrimination continues, so long will the libraries supply with both hands average books for an average public'.

stories'.⁴⁵ By 1939 Cecil Palmer was prompted to identify thrillers as 'Everyman's Fiction', given their universal popular appeal:

The thriller provides a ready-made escape from the tempo and temperature of the age in which we live...It assuages the bitternesses of ugly reality with the sweetnesses of lovely romance. The thriller thrills, and in these three simple words we have expressed the fundamental truth concerning Everyman's fiction. 46

Similarly, an assistant in the Hammersmith branch of the Boots Booklovers Library commented in 1947, 'The majority like a thriller and light novels, you know, love stuff. It's surprising how many people do read the light stuff: it's the times - they don't want anything deep'.⁴⁷

The reception given by all classes to detective fiction was an intriguing phenomenon. C. Day Lewis, a prolific detective writer as 'Nicholas Blake', claimed that all classes and political views 'join hands over a corpse. One touch of bloodshed, it seems, makes the whole world kin'.⁴⁸ The popularity of detective novels remained great even after the Second World War, perhaps as a result of the cinema. A Gallup Poll in October 1950 found that 48 percent of respondents had read detective fiction; of these, nearly a quarter confessed to reading such fiction frequently. When questioned further, favorite authors included Wallace (14%), Conan Doyle (10%) and Agatha Christie (7%).

45 The Times 8 February 1922 p. 8

46 Cecil Palmer, 'The Thriller is Everyman's Fiction', P.C. 30 September 1939 p. 330

47 M-0 'Reading' Box 10 File F (20 February 1947); M.M.

48 Nicholas Blake, 'Detective Stories and Happy Families', B. 13 March 1935 p. 268

Equally, three readership surveys suggest that the large majority of popular magazine readers in Britain came from the lower-middle and working classes. Press Circulations Analysed (1928), Investigated Press Circulations (1932) and the Hulton Readership Surveys (1947-1953) were each conducted to provide the advertiser with information, during a period when market research was still in its infancy, and audited circulation figures were even rarer. Given the small amount of advertising in boys' and girls' magazines, none of them was included in these analyses. In each case, the probable readership of a periodical was displayed in terms of class and region. Leaving aside daily and Sunday newspapers, the weekly magazines with the highest percentage of lower-middle and working-class readers (amounting to at least 50 percent of the total number) were as follows (listed in order of popularity):

	General Interest	Women

1928	<u>John Bull</u> <u>Answers</u> <u>Pearson's Weekly</u>	<u>Home Notes</u> <u>Home Chat</u> <u>Woman's Weekly</u>
1932	<u>John Bull</u> <u>Radio Times</u> <u>Tit-Bits</u>	<u>Woman's Weekly</u> <u>Woman's World</u> <u>Red Letter</u>
1947	<u>Radio Times</u> <u>Picture Post</u> <u>Everybody's</u>	<u>Woman's Own</u> <u>Woman</u> <u>Woman's Weekly</u>

We should particularly notice in these listings that, with the exception of Red Letter, John Bull, Tit-Bits and Answers, all these magazines were 'middle-class' publications, and yet, the core of their readership was not from this class - a fact which almost certainly had social implications.

II

We have seen that with the commercialization of literature and the introduction of commodity-style publishing techniques after the First World War, greater attention was paid to the 'look' of a publication: marketing gimmicks such as colourful dust wrappers and bolder advertising. To what extent were members of the 'new reading public' particularly susceptible to such stimuli in the selection of a novel or magazine? As with reading habits it is striking how little patterns of selection appear to have changed over time.

During the 1940s Mass-Observation identified factors of selection which were 'unique' to working-class readers. For example, it was estimated that only one-tenth of working-class readers attached importance to the author's name in selecting a book; a majority would commonly read several books by the same author without realizing it. Most readers were conservative and uncomfortable in experimenting with different authors and types of books. 'People stick to their own type, and have prejudices in some cases against other types. If you give people short stories, said a librarian, "they look at you as though you had given them margarine instead of butter."⁴⁹ Often a reader left the choice of a new book or magazine to the librarian or newsagent, who was trusted to be familiar with the reader's tastes. Stephen Mogridge, who ran a lending library in

49 Kathleen Box, 'Selection and Taste in Book Reading', M-O File Report 48 (March 1940), p. 31

a southern English village after the Second World War, remarked that '80% of my customers are incapable of choosing a book for themselves. I suppose this reflects a lack of interest in life. They suffer from boredom'.⁵⁰ In the 1930s John Osborne's grandmother shunned the public library, dispatching her husband instead regularly to the local tuppenny library. Although the implication was that her tastes were special, even refined,

[the] truth was that she thought her husband incapable of even choosing a book for her whereas at the twopenny library they know, of course: Ethel M. Dell, Netta Muskett and, that pre-war Dickens of them all, read and re-read again, Warwick Deeping.

51

The average time spent in choosing a book from a tuppenny library, according to Mass-Observation, was five minutes, which was 'far lower' than for public library users.⁵²

Production values did have an influence, however. In 1942, 400 people were asked if they were affected by the 'look' of a book. Of Class B readers, 32 percent said they were; Class C, 47 percent; and Class D, a remarkable 73 percent. The 'look' of a book usually meant the type of jacket; blue was the most popular colour. 'I'd go for a nice blue or red cover; it looks more attractive than the duller ones', said one woman.⁵³ An interesting drawing, preferably depicting a romantic or amusing scene, was also a plus:

50 Stephen Mogridge, Talking Shop (London, 1949), p. 85

51 John Osborne, A Better Class of Person (London, 1981). p. 46

52 M-O File Report 1332 p. 70f. Although books were chosen quickly, working-class women tended to spend more time chatting with each other and the assistants. '2d. libraries are thus much more of a social centre than any other type', M-O concluded.

53 F/50/D, M-O File Report 1332 p. 140

Best laugh I ever had was a thing I got in Woolworths, no I don't remember its name but it had a girl with legs on the cover and a bloke looking through a window. I thought, that's a bit of all right, and it was. I never finished it though, had to hide it from the missus, and never found it again, oh but it was funny.
(M/45/C)

54

The proprietor of Mitchell's 2d. Library in Fulham commented in 1940: 'It's very strange. The person who is a reader selects often according to the author. The person who isn't selects according to the luridness of the jacket. It needn't indicate anything about the contents of the book'.⁵⁵ Good printing was also a concern, as was cleanliness:

I've no fads, yet all the same I don't like a shabby book - one that looks as if the bacon fat was poured over it.
(M/50/C)

I always look at a book; and it must be clean-very strongly; if I pick up a book and find a grub in it I drop it like a red hot brick.

(F/50/B) 56

The physical weight of books was taken into account (too heavy to carry home, too hard to hold while reading in bed) as well as the size; shorter novels that could be read quickly were favoured over long involved volumes.

I hate a book about a lot of people - I always forget which one I've to think of. I never choose a big book, it's much too heavy to carry around with you. I like books what I call easy reading - that is, big print, and not too crowded looking on the page.
(F/25/C)

57

54 M-0 'Reading' Box 8 File C (Notting Hill Gate, 9/10 September 1943); T.H.

55 M-0 'Reading' Box 3 File A (Fulham Road, 8 February 1940); K.B.

56 M-0 File Report 1332 p. 156; M-0 'Reading' Box 4 File A (Marylebone, 17 May 1942); C.M.

57 'Pretty typist type', M-0 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.

Some readers would rely upon the frequency of issues of a book from the library as a guide in choosing a novel (the tuppenny libraries usually date-stamped their books on the inside front cover). One woman from Marylebone commented, 'I just look at the front page where the date stamps are marked and if there's a lot of dates on it, then a lot of people must have read it, and so it must be a good book'.⁵⁸ Similarly, during the 1930s 'Book of the Month' selections were introduced in the daily newspapers to call attention to the 'best' in light reading. Although these were probably based not on critical acclaim but on the suggestion of publishers, they nonetheless did generate important publicity.⁵⁹

On the other hand, there was also the lure of novelty. Mogridge claimed that many of his customers had a hankering for the newest and the latest. 'Whatever the customer wants - crime, romance, cowboy, highbrow novels, biographies - the demand is for a new book. There is an obsession that anything over six months old is out of date and not worth reading'. His average reader took two books a week, although the book-a-day customer was quite common:

The fashion in reading now is quick and superficial. Fostered by the libraries, the habit of reading a book as fast as possible and then discarding it for ever is firmly

58 F/70/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 4 File A (8 April 1942); R.C.C.

59 Mary Burchell, one of the most prolific authors of Mills and Boon romances, recalled her thrill when her second novel, Call - And I'll Come, was chosen the 'Daily Mirror Romantic Book of the Month' during 1937. She did understand, however, the nature of the award. 'I did realize the Daily Mirror was not quite the top. And I remember Charles Boon said to me, "My boy Alan worked very hard for that". I was terribly impressed, you know'. (Burchell was interviewed on 18 June 1986)

established. Time is now so crowded. The quiet lawns of literature are trampled by impatient feet.

60

The susceptibility to the stimuli outlined above was probably engendered by the way these classes regarded the care and possession of books and magazines. According to Mass-Observation, working-class readers had a unique attitude towards books:

D's have on the whole no feeling of acquisitiveness, pleasure in possessing books. They share and pass round their magazines and 'real' books, without expecting their return, or worrying very much where they came from or whence they go.

61

Among the reasons cited for such behaviour were the reluctance to spend money to buy good quality books, high usage of lending libraries, and the large percentage of magazine and cheap light romance reading. One reader, a postal worker, remarked: 'I don't buy many books. Occasionally we buy the sixpenny ones, and after it's read, it goes to the Forces reading'.⁶² Given the expense of quality texts, it is not surprising that books were not purchased by this class, but borrowed instead. The omnivorous readers of an industrial town surveyed by the Bookseller in 1941 were not book

60 Mogridge, pp. 90; 183

61 M-O File Report 1332 p. 115

62 F/45/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 6 File B (London W.10, 20 May 1942); L.B. Given paper rationing during and after the Second World War it is not surprising that purchases of books and magazines were small, and reading matter was shared. A 1946 survey of John Bull readers estimated the average number of readers per issue as 2.2. Over 50 percent said their copy was passed on; among destinations were 'Sent to son in Burma', 'Sent on to a WREN', 'It goes next door' and 'Passed it on at work: three fellows read it regularly'. Consequently, sales figures are traditionally regarded by the industry as much lower than actual readership figures. (Mass-Observation, 'Report on John Bull in Colour', M-O File Reports 2364-2366 [9,13,15 March 1946])

buyers but instead active borrowers: 'People buy few books because they consider them luxuries: when it is a choice between books and butter, between Shakespeare and bacon, necessity becomes the mother of abstention'.⁶³ But when books were bought by the working class these generally were reference and picture books which were highly prized and passed down, as a 1947 investigation conducted for Penguin Books by Mass-Observation into libraries in working-class homes discovered. 'Cloth books have far more prestige attached to them than paper books among people who have not acquired the reading habit and who are therefore impressed by contents rather than appearance'.⁶⁴ In Osborne's Fulham home in the 1930s, the only 'permanent' books (magazines and 'books', presumably novels, were cleared away when read) were The Doctor's Book, Angel Pavement by J.B. Priestley, Contraception by Marie Stopes, and The Boy's Own Annual, 1908-1915, collected and re-read by Osborne's father.⁶⁵ A housewife in Muswell Hill, London, in 1942, revealed the contents of the one bookshelf in the home to a Mass-Observer:

These leather books were given to my husband at school. We've filled the others up here and there. Mostly in Smith's bookshops and usually at bargain prices...(Cooper's The Deerslayer)- I picked that up at a bookstall - I thought it was going to be interesting, but it's not. I like thrillers - Not at Night is lovely - all about horrors.

66

63 Bernard Lennon, 'Books in an industrial town', B. 9 January 1941 pp. 26-28. The 'industrial town' was not named but was described as 'large enough to return one Member of Parliament'.

64 M-O File Report 2545 p. 130

65 Osborne, p. 65

66 F/25/C (married to a building tradesman), M-O 'Reading' Box 6 File B (17 May 1942); M.S. A similar study of a Sheffield household (Father, clerk, mother, housewife, two girls aged 10 and 8) described a library containing some 80 novels, all light fiction including

This 'bookless' characteristic of working-class homes was regularly blamed by critics for engendering a fondness for inferior fiction. In 1929 Stanley L. Unwin claimed that 'the real problem' in the book trade was not overproduction but underconsumption and insufficient sales. 'Most people have not yet learned to regard books as a necessity. They will beg them, they will borrow them, they will do everything, in fact, but buy them.' In Unwin's opinion, dynamic efforts were needed to encourage the 'new reading public' which was growing up all around them.⁶⁷ Similarly, Fred Easton in 1935 urged retailers to embark on a national campaign with teachers and educational authorities on the message, 'A bookshelf is as essential as a cupboard'.⁶⁸ But 'commodity' publishing, as we have seen, did not encourage this; rather it highlighted the disposable quality of cheap books. According to Raymond Irwin, the decline of the domestic library in British homes was a twentieth-century phenomenon:

Those who go about with their eyes open must surely have noted how many homes today are apparently bookless. Moreover, the word 'book' itself is commonly misused for things that are not books at all, but popular magazines that are never regarded as permanent possessions, and are discarded when the next number arrives.

Good or bad, such things are not the stuff of which the domestic library is built. One

Edgar Wallace, Rafael Sabatini, E. Phillips Oppenheim and Denise Robins. (Panelist und.1, M-O 'Reading' Box 6 File A [26 May 1942])

67 Stanley Unwin, The Truth about Publishing (London, 1929) pp. 57-58

68 Fred Easton, 'Capture the Book Trade! Don't Blame Others - Act Yourself', National Newsagent, Bookseller, Stationer and Fancy Trades' Journal 23 March 1935 p. 1

Friday recently I stood for a few moments in a newsagent's shop in a small Midland town, watching one woman after another come in with her weekly order of 'books' for the family-eight or ten titles scribbled on a sheet of paper. This particular town had no true bookshop, nor had it a very satisfactory library, though I am doubtful whether this would have made much difference.

69

It was partly because of the way that many working people read that the type of fiction published and chosen was simple. Working women in factories, for example, were fond of the 'blood and thunder' pulp magazines which were exciting to read and, more importantly, easy to start and stop. 'The tastes of the working-girl reader incline to the adventurous and romantic. She wants something that is not wordy and will hold her attention', The Times reported in 1917.⁷⁰ Mass-Observation recorded the 'phenomenon' of 'scattered reading' before and during the Second World War. Regular times for reading, it was claimed, were rarely set aside. Rather, reading was observed in public transport, at work, during mealtimes, in bed- whenever there were a few spare moments. Reading at mealtimes was especially common; many were observed in Lyons Teashops in London.⁷¹ 'The newspaper serial is good for "scattered" reading but for most people the comic strip is even better', Mass-Observation noted.

69 Raymond Irwin (Director, School of Librarianship and Archives, University College London), 'The English Domestic Library in the Nineteenth Century', The Library Association Record 56 (October 1954), p. 388

70 'Working-Girls' Reading', The Times 7 August 1917 p. 9

71 See especially M-O 'Reading' Box 5 File B (1942). These accounts are minutely detailed and wonderfully evocative ('...3 pm looked up at clock - gazed at reflection in wall mirror - fiddled with hair and scarf - back to book...')

'Eyes and mind must be occupied but not strained'.⁷² One reader during the war justified her choice of The Way of an Eagle by Ethel M. Dell in this way: 'I like something like - you know - something you can get into quickly - especially these days - when you couldn't possibly be a long while getting to the point'.⁷³ Indeed, during the war and the blackout, as we have seen, the amount of reading done at home, not surprisingly, increased, and 'scattered reading' may have declined. In 1944 Mass-Observation determined that 73 percent of people did their reading at home in the evening, and only 12 percent while travelling. Hence, housewives were probably the most dedicated and consistent section of the reading public, as they could vary their reading to suit their work.⁷⁴

Finally, the selection of fiction by the reading public was influenced by the cinema. As we have seen, its increasing popularity and frequent treatment of the thriller and the love story did not detract from the popular fiction market, but enhanced it. In fact, in Bournemouth, the Daily Echo placed the cinema next to blackout regulations as responsible for that city's visible revival of reading during the Second World War.⁷⁵ Grigson in 1935 noted the strong influence of the cinema upon tuppenny library users:

A new public, a cinema-going public, wants to read nothing but novels, and only those which are 'hot huddles of sensation'. The huddle that is hottest and most sensational, providing

72 M-O 'Reading' Box 1 File A (1937), p. 3

73 F/50/C, M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File A (Fulham, 1940)

74 M-O File Report 2018 p. 20

75 The Daily Echo (Bournemouth) 2 March 1940, quoted in M-O 'Reading' Box 3 File A

that such qualities are effective but decently draped, will be this or that Book of the Month or 'recommendation'; and this mass public without traditions of book-buying or book-owning will at once swarm into the libraries in search of it.

76

Similarly, Mass-Observation noted that the 'book of the film' was particularly coveted by the lower-middle and working classes:

The most frequently bought fiction books, especially by C and D class people, are definitely those which have been filmed, like 'Hatter's Castle', 'The Grapes of Wrath', 'Love on the Dole', 'Rebecca', 'North West Passage', 'Gone with the Wind', etc. Here again we come to the souvenir and permanent value of the book. Having seen a film, people like to keep it in some permanent form by buying the book.

77

Although at least one reader was not happy with her 'souvenir'; having seen Gone With the Wind, she 'rushed straight out and bought it afterwards. I was rather disappointed in the book to tell you the truth...'⁷⁸

III

Which kinds of light fiction did the 'new reading public' choose most often? Who emerged as favorite authors? Given the uniquely 'popular' nature of the tuppenny libraries, analyses of their book stocks can help to answer these questions. Figure 3-1 compares the findings of two such surveys of 'busy' establishments,

76 Grigson, p. 286

77 M-0 File Report 1332 p. 59

78 F/25/B, M-0 'Reading' Box 8 File C (Notting Hill Gate, 9/10 September 1943); T.H.

with the contemporary catalogue of Mudie's Library. Only the authors listed were mentioned in the tuppenny library surveys. The preference for thrillers (notably Edgar Wallace) and romantic novels is especially evident. Surprisingly, Mudie's matched or exceeded the 2d. library totals (notably Ruby M. Ayres). an indication of either the broad-based appeal of these authors, or the automatic stocking of all titles by Mudie's, or (most likely) the number of former tuppenny library users who now subscribed to Mudie's, which had lowered its rates (alongside Boots and W.H. Smith) in the 1930s in a response to the 2d. competition.

A body of material related to the tuppenny libraries is also of use here. In 1925 a W.H. Smith employee wrote to the Newsbasket asking if a list could be provided of best-selling authors that branches could stock without fear of loss or remainders. The classified list of such proven 'fairly safe stock' is worth reprinting here in full, for it is both representative and comprehensive, compared to Figure 3-1:

'Light Fiction'

K. Rhodes	G. Page	O. Wadsley
C. Adair	D. Wyllarde	Berta Ruck
B. Reynolds	M. Peterson	P. Trent
Ruby M. Ayres	M. Hine	Maud Diver

'Detective and Exciting Stories'

E.P. Oppenheim	Sax Rohmer	W. LeQueux
P. Brabne	H.R. Haggard	O. Binns
R. Sabatini	E. Wallace	P.B. Kyne
J.S. Fletcher		

'Western Stories'

C. Mulford	Zane Grey	McL. Paine
B.M. Bower	C. Zeltzer	

'Good Fiction'

S. McKenna	H.G. Wells	A. Bennett
H.A. Vachell	A. Mason	P. Gibbs
H. Walpole	W.J. Locke	J. Barrie

Figure 3-1: Authors in Demand at Tuppenny Libraries, 1933-1935

	Tuppenny Libraries		Mudie's
	1933	1935	1934
Ruby M. Ayres	24	21-25	59
Charlotte M. Brame		31	0
Edgar Rice Burroughs	24	16-20	23
Marie Corelli	9	16-20	27
Richmal Crompton	14	16-20	15
Warwick Deeping	41	46	46
Ethel M. Dell	23	26-30	31
Jeffrey Farnol	14	21-25	15
J.S. Fletcher		56	97
Charles Garvice		0-8	5
Elinor Glyn	13	10-15	12
Nat Gould		0-8	35
Zane Grey		26-30	35
A.G. Hales	28	38	43
H. Rider Haggard		26-30	46
Sydney Horler		45	47
W.J. Locke	24	26-30	29
Kathleen Norris		34	35
E.P. Oppenheim	38	75	84
Margaret Peterson	26	26-30	28
Denise Robins		36	36
Sax Rohmer	18	21-25	20
E. Adelaide Rowlands		26-30	40
'Sapper'		16-20	32
E.M. Savi		56	51
Rafael Sabatini		26-30	30
Joan Sutherland	25	26-30	34
Paul Trent		31	47
Edgar Wallace	100	101	116
P.G. Wodehouse	32	40	43
F.E. Mills Young		33	42

Sources: 1933: T.E.Callander, 'The Twopenny Library', Library Association Record III pp. 88-90. The library surveyed contained 2,500 titles; according to Callander, 'The predominant flavour of the list is definitely lowbrow', and representative. 1935: Garfield Howe, 'What the Public Likes', B. 19 June 1935 pp. 580, 583. Howe examined 'one of the largest and newest' tuppenny libraries. Exact figures for the most popular authors were given; those with less than 31 titles (but 'definitely in the "best-seller" class') were placed in groups of five. Howe's list is more extensive than Callender's. Mudie's: Mudie's Catalogue of the Principal Works of Fiction in Circulation at the Library, Section One: 'Works of Fiction Under Authors' Names', May 1934

S. K. Smith J. Galsworthy R. Hichens
G. Frankau

79

One supposes that either personal taste or the book trade itself determined which authors were regarded as 'Good Fiction' and which merely 'Light Fiction'. Similarly, in the appendix to his 1938 book How to Run a Twopenny Library, Ronald F. Batty provided 'A Short Check List of the Most Popular Twopenny Library Authors', subdivided into categories. In addition to the authors given in Figure 3-1, these included, under 'Love and Romance', Barbara Cartland and Maysie Greig; 'Detective and Mystery', Agatha Christie and the Coles; 'Air and War Stories', Flying Officer W.E. Johns and Ian Hay; 'Western', Max Brand and W.C. Tuttle; 'Adventure', Jack London and P.C. Wren; and 'Humorous', W.W. Jacobs and Dornford Yates. Curiously, Batty provided separate listings for 'Novels' (Ursula Bloom, Baroness von Hutten, Compton Mackenzie) and 'Modern Novels' (Vera Brittan, Colette, Evelyn Waugh - and Mae West!).⁸⁰

Another source for the type of fiction supplied by the tuppenny libraries is 'A Selected List of Popular Fiction Suitable for Lending Libraries', issued by John Menzies in April 1935 and March 1937. 'This list does not claim to be exhaustive', the editor explained. 'It gives a representative selection of novels available in cheaper editions which are most in demand at the present day'. Popular series issued by individual publishers are prominent, including Putnam's Romance Library (Florence Barclay), Harrap's 'Wild West' Novels and Sealed Mysteries, Thornton Butterworth's 2/6 Crime

79 The Newsbasket March 1925 p. 48

80 Ronald F. Batty, How to Run a Twopenny Library (London, 1938), pp. 91-96

Circle Novels, and 'The Rogues Gallery' series published by Duckworth:

In this new series the life-stories of notorious men and women are told in such a way as to present their lives as a whole. The subjects dealt with will include famous murders, burglars, forgers, and criminal lunatics.

No. 1: CRIPPEN - Dentist and Murder by M. Constantine Quinn.

e1

Mills and Boon were presented as 'The Popular Fiction Publishers'.

Mass-Observation also sought the opinions of tuppenny librarians and library assistants - though their evidence is probably more impressionistic. One tuppenny librarian in Fulham in 1940 observed, 'Some of these silly women like a lot of slop...But men will look for something really blood and thunderish, something like oh - Who Killed Oliver Cromwell? sort of business'.^{e2} Similarly, in Chelsea in 1943 a library assistant commented on the state of the business:

I get in forty new books every four weeks for the twopenny library, but as you can see from the shelves, most of them are out, so there's never much of a choice. The men all choose those detective stories or the Wild West sort of thing, but the women are always asking for a really nice novel: Vicki Baum or Daphne du Maurier - they've both been very popular.

e3

81 'A Selected List of Popular Fiction Suitable for Lending Libraries', April 1935 and March 1937, John Menzies plc archives, Edinburgh

82 Box, p. 23. Who Killed Oliver Cromwell? by Leonard Gribble (1937) was a best-seller before and during the Second World War. An 'Inspector Slade Mystery', it concerns the murder of a man masquerading as Cromwell during a ball.

83 F/60/C, M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); G.S.T.

Mogridge was struck by the huge adult readership of westerns in his library. 'Authors' names mean nothing to the western fan; it is the story that is the thing, a fresh book every day the ideal'.⁸⁴ An amusing response from a working-class newlywed on his wife's tuppenny reading is worth quoting in full here:

No, I don't read books, the paper's all I can do with...But you should have met my missus before we got married - read - why, she was always at it, morning noon and night. She was crazy on desert stuff and sheiks and all that. The chemist at the corner kept a twopenny library. and she used to go down every day for another book and say to him, 'Haven't you got anything hotter?' He thought she was a real bad lot, but she wasn't, she was just nuts about books. When we got married, he made sure it was because we had to; he was quite surprised we didn't have a kid in the first six months. But since she married me, she's quite different - she never opens a book now.

e5

Newsagents also assumed that there were marked sex differences in reading habits. One newsagent, in Aston, said: 'They go in for short fiction stories the ladies do. And the murder books the men - the rough stuff'.⁸⁵ Similarly, a Fulham newsagent, commenting on magazine ('books') reading, stated, 'The young girls read the same they read before. Love stories'. He added, however, that interest in such fiction was variable:

The girl of about 17 or 18 will start buying books every week (points to Miracle - sex stuff). And then she goes courting and she gets saturated with it - with her young man and she ceases buying them. Then after six

84 Mogridge, p. 33. One of his customers, a veteran of the Great War, chose his westerns not by author but 'by whether they've got a woman in or not'. Sappy romance spoiled the story; the reader flipped through a novel in search of female names before deciding.

85 M/30/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File C (S.W.1., 13 July 1943); G.S.T.

86 F/50/C, M-O 'Town & District' Box 1 File B (23 November 1946); M.M.

months when the young man's got sick of taking her out she'll come back for two pen'north of love again.

e7

Of popular books and magazines, sensation always sold, whether in the form of a racy novel, or a weekly 'two pen'north' pulp paper. The most notorious and widely-read best-seller of the Second World War - among the working classes - was probably No Orchids for Miss Blandish by James Hadley Chase, published by Jarrolds (a division of Hutchinson) in 1939. This vicious story of the kidnapping of the 'Meat King's daughter' by the mob, her repeated rapings, torture and ultimate suicide, is told at a furious, breakneck pace. Why Chase's novel was not subject to censorship is anyone's guess; Jarrolds, however, saw its sensation as a marketing tool. The endpiece of the novel contained the following teaser:

The Publishers, Printers, and Readers of No Orchids for Miss Blandish are still convalescing from shock. They thought they could take it until they ran into Slim Grisson...

James Hadley Chase has another burst of electricity in store for them, and in store for YOU.

Look out for THE DEAD STAY DUMB, the new James Hadley Chase novel to be published shortly. It is very tough indeed!

e8

Of popular magazines, one newsagent in Blaina commented, 'It's all the same in this district, the cheap ones sell the best. Red Letter, Red Star and all the other love books, they are undoubtedly the best-sellers'.⁸⁹ Illustrated weeklies also sold very well during the war;

87 Assistant, S. Hughes & Co., M-0 'Newspaper Reading' Box 2 File D (Estcourt Road, Fulham, 2 March 1940); K.B.

88 Endpiece, No Orchids for Miss Blandish (1939), p. 256

89 M-0 File Report 2545, Part II pp. 234-235

'A paper with plenty of pictures in, yes. Pictures go mostly. Illustrated, Picture Post, Everybody's',⁹⁰ a Fulham shopowner said in 1940. But one Manchester woman preferred Illustrated to Picture Post:

We used to get Picture Post too but my husband stopped it - he said it was too full of rude ladies - it wasn't fit to have where there's children. (Illustrated) hasn't any of that in, and I like those war pictures. ⁹¹

In the same fashion, picture-story papers became increasingly popular after the war, including comics (Eagle, School Friend) and romantic fiction (Love Romance, containing '3 Complete Love Romances TOLD IN VIVID PICTURES').

Contemporary critics were, on the whole, dismayed by the level of popular reading habits. 'Let people enjoy plenty of fiction - good fiction - by all means', the Bookseller declared in 1919, 'but it is a thousand pities that so many should limit their reading entirely, or almost entirely, to "stories"'.⁹² Charles Masterman, recording the findings of a visitor to a soldiers' hospital, was more sympathetic. These men, he claimed, 'wanted forgetfulness, and surely they had earned the right to it'; the authors most in demand were Orzcy, Garvice, Gould and 'Sexton Blake'.⁹³ But Rebecca West, clearly perplexed by the public adoration of florid romances by such authors as Garvice, Dell, Corelli and Barclay, wrote, 'In trying to

90 Mass-Observation, 'Wartime Reading', p. 21

91 F/40/C, M-O 'Newspaper Reading' Box 2 File E (22 January 1943); J.M.

92 B. November 1919 p. 625

93 Charles F.G. Masterman, England After War (London, 1923). pp. 113-114

understand the appeal of best-sellers, it is well to remember that whistles can be made sounding certain notes which are clearly audible to dogs and other of the lower animals, though man is incapable of hearing them'.⁹⁴ She added, perhaps with a touch of envy, that one sight 'which must fill the heart of any serious English writer with wistfulness...is when he gazes across the esplanade of any watering-place and looks at the old ladies reading their Ethel Dells. Truly we are a strange nation'.⁹⁵ Finally, Graves and Hodge claimed that 'pulp' fiction was a staple of the reading public between the wars:

What did people read, besides newspapers, in the period immediately following the war? The low-brow public... read monthly story-magazines and 'pulp' fiction - that is to say, the light amorous and melodramatic sort, printed on wood-pulp paper, like newspapers, and not intended to last. Most of these novelettes were written by hacks and sold by the title and cover-design rather than by the pull of the author's name.

96

Nat Gould, William LeQueux, Sax Rohmer, J.S. Fletcher, and the stable of boys' magazines were all cited as examples, and "Tarzan of the Apes" was the most popular fictional character among the low-brow public of the Twenties; though the passionate Sheikh of Araby, as portrayed by E.M. Hull and her many imitators, ran him pretty close'.⁹⁷

94 Rebecca West, 'The Tosh Horse', in The Strange Necessity (Virago edn, 1987), p. 323

95 Ibid., p. 325. Such was Dell's appeal that West estimated the readership of Dell's novels as equivalent to the combined populations of Surbiton, Bournemouth and Cheltenham.

96 Graves and Hodge, p. 50

97 Ibid., p. 51

War themes, however, do not appear to have been very popular among adults during either war. The Bookseller reported during the First World War that by 1917 interest in war books had waned; readers wanted greater emphasis on the lighter and more human side of war. Similarly most readers seemed to prefer to avoid war themes during the Second World War: 'I never read a war book, for that purpose I read the paper and hear the news on the wireless - it would only be the same old joint dished up with a different gravy'.⁹⁸ According to one Mass-Observation, 'I avoid any plays, fiction or films dealing with the war like the plague. Would run a mile from any film called "Wings over Anything" or "Somebody in the RAF". Absolutely sick of shots of planes flying in formation or having rather indistinct dogfights in the air'.⁹⁹ Presumably, scenes of combat and violence in literature were regarded as uncomfortable and too familiar in wartime; the exception, of course, was evident in children's literature.

IV

Why did people read what they did? In 1944 Mass-Observation surveyed 10,000 readers to try to find the answer. The results illustrate the strongest desire among lower-middle and working-class readers was 'relaxation':

98 F/45/D, M-O 'Reading' Box 6 File B (London, W.10., 20 May 1942); L.B.

99 Mass-Observation, 'War Themes in Entertainment', File Report 1380 (August 1942). p. 1

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Class</u>		
			<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
Relaxation	53%	57%	39%	62%	58%
Knowledge, Education	50	26	39	38	39
Rest	10	17	17	13	9
Stimulation	8	4	11	4	6
Technical Knowledge	6	1	5	4	2
Others	2	7	14	1	2

(Multiple responses were common)

100

Between the classes, the increase in the apparent need to unwind and be entertained rather than educated is evident as one descends the social scale. Evidence from contemporaries and readers suggests that Class 'C' and 'D' readers read light fiction for 'relaxation' and, in a commonly used term during this period, 'escapism'.

Contemporary observers had little doubt of these motives. In 1922 The Times praised the fantasy elements in detective stories: the fast cars, beautiful women, exotic locations. 'Perhaps in real life your purse may seldom, if ever, allow you these delights; all the more reason, then, for enjoying them in imagination. They are to you what the caves of diamonds and rubies and pearls were to the readers of the Arabian Nights'.¹⁰¹ The novelist Jermyn March (The Man Behind the Face) believed that the average reader sought vicarious thrills from novels. 'They like to feel that the least little turn of fortune's wheel might have involved themselves in just such a throbbing romance, have headed straightaway on just such a reckless, joyous venture, or high enterprise, as the hero or heroine

100 M-0 File Report 2018 pp. 75-76

101 The Times 8 February 1922 p. 8

embarks on'.¹⁰² Similarly, Ruby M. Ayres, the doyenne of romantic novelists, offered this advice to aspiring writers of the genre:

In novels there are two rules: men must be tall and strong, but not necessarily good-looking. You must have two men and a girl, or two girls and a man. If you have not £20,000 a year you like to read about people who have. If you have not a handsome young man, you like to read about someone who has.

103

George Magnus encouraged aspiring authors to aim high. 'The world is a snob, and the Editor must cater for the world. There is a much bigger demand for stories dealing with people who live in Mayfair than about "persons" who exist in Battersea Park. It is the latter people who read the stories'.¹⁰⁴ In the same way, thrillers and crime novels carried the reader into an exciting, if condemned, life of crime. C. Day Lewis ('Nicholas Blake') believed that, in addition to promoting the universal ideal of virtue triumphant,

the reading of crime fiction, like the playing of some violent physical game, enables us to let off steam, to get some of our natural pugnacity off our chest...It brings within the reach of every purse the alluring sparkle of wickedness and the riotous sensation of unleashed emotions, without any of the unpleasant consequences.

105

102 Jermyn March, 'The World of Fancy', T.C. 19 February 1927 p. 3

103 'Miss Ayres Shares her Ideas', T.C. '22 April 1933 p. 10. In Eggs, Beans and Crumpets (1940) P.G. Wodehouse lampooned Ayres as Rosie M. Banks, Bingo Little's famous wife, '..."authoress of Only a Factory Girl, Merveyne Keene, Clubman, 'Twas Once in May, and other works. You see her name everywhere. I understand she makes a packet with the pen"'. (Penguin edn, 1986, p. 8)

104 George Magnus, How to Write Saleable Fiction, p. 38

105 Blake, p. 268. A cartoon in the London Evening News in 1935 poked fun at the thriller craze in tuppenny libraries. A working-class couple bursts out of a library with a book: '"This is what I call real value, Gwen...seven murders for twopence"'. (P.C. 5 October 1935 p. 537)

Mass-Observation found that most readers during the Second World War described their tastes in reading as 'escapist'. While wartime, as we have shown, did not profoundly influence the character of popular reading, it may nonetheless have encouraged 'light' reading by making the escapist motive less something to be ashamed of. A stenographer in 1944 regarded light fiction 'as I do cigarettes: nothing so potent as a drug, merely a harmless bromide', a frivolity she felt she could well afford during wartime.¹⁰⁶ Other readers agreed, some adding that they found a kind of solace in such fiction:

At present I read them purely as a drug. I don't know who you are, but I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. I can't bear my job and I'm unhappy in my personal life, and I absolutely stupefy myself with reading...I stay in bed the whole of Sunday and read.

(F/35/B, Chelsea)

Well, my tastes have got very depraved since the war. I used to read like a reasonably intelligent human being, but now I read like a tired business man. I suppose it's because I am tired. A book worth reading gives you a great deal, but it makes an initial demand on you that I'm just too exhausted to comply with, nowadays. I just stupefy myself with detective fiction, all the time...it's just a drug, anyway.

(F/40/B, Chelsea)

I read more now than I ever did. My boy's away in the Middle East, and I don't go out much, I expect that's the reason. I like light fiction best, of the family story kind, and I prefer them to have a happy ending, even if it is highly improbable. There's enough tragedy in real life to want to read about it, and that's one of the reasons I never read a war book.

(F/25/C, 'Pretty typist type')

My two sons are away, and I read a lot to stop

me worrying and thinking about them. It takes
my mind off things. (F/50/D) 107

Other readers - notably admirers of romantic fiction - were more
conscious of the idea of an 'escape' from a disagreeable reality:

I like Daphne du Maurier's books, especially
Frenchman's Creek and also Baroness Orzcy's.
Books dealing with some costume period when
smugglers had the rule of the seas. I like
books to take me into another world far from
the realities of this. I've only lately taken
to reading. I've been engaged and we decided
to break it off, and I wanted something to take
it off my mind. (F/25/D, War Worker)

I haven't much time for reading, but when I do
I like to settle down to a nice love story-
easy reading, one by Ethel M. Dell. I like
books about people who go out to seek a
fortune, and find it. Nice happy books.
(F/45/D, Postman) 108

The cinema had a similar effect, especially for the unemployed (who
could lose their worries for a couple of hours in a palatial
setting), and the overworked housewife. But some sought a more
conceivable, realistic sort of 'escape' in their reading. In 1926 a
library assistant in Manchester, when asked to recommend a book for a
'lady', produced a detective novel by J.S. Fletcher and a romantic
adventure by W.J. Locke, for the following reasons:

If a woman is taken up with a house all day,
she doesn't want tales about married problems
or misunderstood wives - she knows enough about
those already; she can't be bothered with
dialect after a day's work, and historical
novels aren't alive enough. What she enjoys is

107 M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File F (13 October 1943); G.S.T.; Box 8 File
C (13 July 1943); G.S.T.; Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.; File
Report 2018, p. 59

108 M-O 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.; Box 6 File B
(London W.10, 20 May 1942); L.B.

something that is possible but outside her experience.

109

Certainly the literature of the period, with its emphasis on happy endings, supported this theory, as did the opinions of readers:

I've always liked Naomi Jacobs' books; I find them so interesting, and the theme of the story isn't exaggerated. The characters experience incidents likely to happen to any one of us, and that's part of the charm of her writing, it rings true. She usually writes a series of books dealing with one particular family, with the result that by the time you've finished the story, the characters come to life, and you follow them up in the next book. (F/30/C, Aircraft Factory Inspector)

I like to read family books about plain Mr. and Mrs. no lords and princes and dukes - people more in my way of living that I can understand. I like writers that don't exaggerate. If they're writing about a Cockney -they should give a true picture of one - not put the Cockney stuff on with a trowel - that makes me lose all confidence in the writer - and I just put the book down. (F/45/D, London)

I like novels about commonplace people and their little dilemmas - I suppose they come under romantic - my reason the feeling of intimacy one gets with the characters, which combats the real loneliness of one's own life and is an antidote to the fact that one cannot get intimate with real people - every person is separate. (Housewife, aged 38)

110

The intentions of readers of thrillers and detective stories are less clear; a fondness for gore is suggested by some of Mass-Observation's reports:

I read quite a few detective novels...in general, I prefer to have my murders good and gory. Not to have the whole book devoted to the putting right of just one murder, but to have horror piled up on horror, until the whole

109 'Mr. Manchester', 'To-night's Diary: Book Psychology', Manchester Evening News 22 February 1926 p. 3

110 M-0 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.; Box 8 File C (18 October 1943); L.B.; File Report 2018 p. 96

book is swimming in blood - and the characters whittled down, so that even I have a fair chance of discovering whodunit before the author is graciously pleased to let his customer into the secret. (M/35, insomniac, reads six books weekly)

I like a good detective or crime story best of all. There's logic in it. The way it's all planned out, and the way it keeps you guessing all the time, and then unmasking the murder. Books like these make your blood curdle. I enjoy reading the gruesome methods people are killed by. (M/35/D London; plumber, 'Looks quite a prosaic type')

(I'm reading) Murder in the Bud - Phyllis Bottome. Because it interests me. (M/20/D; Fulham)

It's all according to the mood. If I fancy a good bloody murder - I get one. (no details) 111

Sidney Dark, who coined the phrase 'new reading public', was one contemporary who could understand why such fiction was probably popular among tired workers, but tried to dissuade such habits:

The trouble is most men begin their leisure so wearied by their work that they are naturally more inclined to take down from the shelf Edgar Wallace, who demands little from his reader, than to discover why Tolstoi's 'War and Peace' is acclaimed as one of the world's great novels. 112

But, he warned, books 'that are nothing but narcotics are, in the long run, as destructive of real life and real living as cocaine'.¹¹³ Some higher-brow novelists agreed. In J.B. Priestley's 1942 novel Blackout in Gretley, shopkeepers were making a good profit by selling

111 M-O File Report 2018 p. 88; 'Reading' Box 8 File C (14 July 1943); L.B.; Box 3 File A (1940); Box 8 File E (n.d., ?October 1943)

112 Sidney Dark, After Working Hours (London: 1929), pp. 41-42

113 Dark, 'The New Reading Public', p. 12

dreams and dope: druggists dispensing 'miraculous cures', and the tuppenny libraries: 'bright with book jackets showing South Sea maidens and shop-girls marrying dukes, pure opium without a hangover at about a farthing an hour'.¹¹⁴ In Love on the Dole (1933) Walter Greenwood wondered whether such literary escapes actually did more harm than good: here, Helen finds life in Hanky Park stifling and longs for a genuine escape:

Dully. insisiently. crushing came the realization that there was no escape, save in dreams. All was a tangle; reality was too hideous to look upon: it could not be shrouded or titivated for long by the reading of cheap novelettes or the spectacle of films of spacious lives. They were only opiates and left a keener edge on hunger, made more loathsome reality's sores.

115

This chapter has attempted to describe the tastes of lower-middle and working-class adult readers and the factors governing selection and activity. The primary intention has been to chronicle the growth of reading as a leisure activity at this social level, and to assess the role of popular fiction in the lives of the 'new reading public'. Through generous use of evidence from the Mass-Observation archive in particular, it has been shown that reading habits actually changed very little during this period. Pre-1914 reading patterns were preserved, even during war and the

114 J.B. Priestley, Blackout in Gretley (Dent edn, 1987), p. 19

115 Walter Greenwood, Love on the Dole (Penguin edn, 1987), p. 65

depression, when the recreational and 'escapist' qualities of 'light' fiction were especially appealing. In fact, the opinions of contemporary critics and readers suggest that the principal motive in reading among the lower-middle and working classes was 'escapism'. In some cases, thrillers, detective stories and romances were regarded as essential distractions from problems personal and public, particularly in wartime; in others, they were frivolous 'bromides'. We can only speculate,¹¹⁶ but based on our body of evidence, these readers - some very omnivorous - were dependent upon popular literature to a degree unseen before or since. Consequently, given the non-confrontational quality of such fiction it was possibly a significant instrument in maintaining morale and social cohesion, as well as in promoting conventional views of morality and society. Some publishers, including Mills and Boon, were conscious of this and attempted (for only as long as it was commercially successful) to lead their readership towards a 'better', 'wholesome' good.

116 Significantly, Mass-Observation admitted that 'no cut and dried answer' can be given on the conscious motives of what constituted 'escapist' reading. 'While people widely want to learn about life from fiction, any assessment of the extent to which they actually widen their experience and learn how to live must depend on deeper knowledge of the reader's character than can be obtained from these verbal attitudes', the 1944 report said. 'All that can be said here is that, at the conscious level, thriller-reading is widely considered as remote from reality; while most of the other types of fiction-reading are in one way or another felt to enlarge the reader's experience or knowledge'. (M-O File Report 2018 pp. 97-98)

Chapter 4

'The State of Play in General':

Mills and Boon, Ltd.

Most women who sought to lose themselves for a while in a romantic novel searched the shelves of Boots or the local tuppenny library for one name: Mills and Boon. From the 1930s this firm exploited with great success the demand for light fiction, becoming one of the principal suppliers of the circulating libraries. In fact, an extensive list, popular authors, and clever marketing techniques have established over the years a unique status for Mills and Boon. 'It's always been said, (that) there were only two publisher's imprints that the British public have been conscious of', Philothea Thompson, former editor of the Bookseller, said. 'One was Mills and Boon, and the other was Penguin'.¹ In this chapter we will examine Mills and Boon's remarkable success. Firstly, we will look at the history of the firm from its founding in 1908 until 1950, and particularly the role of the commercial libraries in transforming the nature of the company. In the second and third sections of this chapter we will explore how Mills and Boon established a dominant position in a crowded and competitive market, and consider its novel

¹ Philothea Thompson was interviewed once, in Woodstock, Oxon. on 26 February 1987.

advertising and marketing techniques, and its complex editorial policy. Lastly, we will examine the fruits of this editorial policy. As Alan Boon summarized his firm's intentions, 'I think we published what we thought represented the state of play in general'.²

I

Mills and Boon³ was founded in 1908 by two former employees of Methuen, a large and prosperous publishing house. Methuen was perhaps best known at that time as the publisher of Marie Corelli. Gerald Mills was Educational Manager at Methuen, Charles Boon Sales Manager and General Manager. Both men, then in their early thirties, had very different backgrounds. Mills came from a well-to-do family, and was a Cambridge graduate; Charles Boon grew up in a working-class family in Seven Dials, and his father worked for a library before entering the publishing business. Both had left Methuen under unhappy circumstances. Speaking of his father, John Boon explained, 'He'd seen Methuen grow very well, and he thought that he had made a substantial contribution to it, and had not been,

² Alan Boon, 4 December 1986. Alan Boon was interviewed in London on four occasions: 30 May 1986 (AB-1); 5 August 1986 (AB-2); 4 December 1986 (AB-3); and 10 August 1988 (AB-4). The son of the co-founder of Mills and Boon, Alan joined the firm in 1931 and worked primarily on the editorial side; he is recognized as the genius behind the best-selling 'Mills and Boon' romance. He is currently Editorial Director Emeritus of the firm.

³ For the sake of consistency. 'Mills and Boon', instead of 'Mills & Boon' (as presently used by the firm), will be used in this chapter. Both versions were used during this period.

(as) all young men think, adequately rewarded'.⁴ The new company was registered on 28 November 1908. The Bookseller was optimistic about the fledgling company: 'The two partners have had ten years' experience with Messrs. Methuen and Co., and propose to throw their publishing net widely'.⁵

Mills and Boon was not founded as a romantic fiction publishing house, although their first book was, prophetically, a romance: Arrows from the Dark by Sophie Cole. Early lists of Mills and Boon publications reveal the variety of the firm's interests. These included novels by Jack London, Horace W.C. Newte⁶, Cosmo Hamilton, Victor Bridges, and Hugh Walpole. 'Novels of the Plays' were published to coincide with long-running West-End productions, such as 'The Quaker Girl' by Harold Simpson. The 'Thrilling Adventure Library' included The Phantom of the Opera by Gaston Leroux. Separate lists of books on humour, health, children, cookery and domestic improvement, and travel were also published. Early on Mills and Boon acquired an extensive educational list from a publisher called Whitakers; some of the first books were very successful, including Nerves and the Nervous. 'They did books on algebra and geometry by a man called Walker, who besides being a very

4 John Boon, 10 August 1988. John Boon was interviewed in London on three occasions: 30 May 1986 (JB-1); 4 December 1986 (JB-2); and 10 August 1988 (JB-3). The younger brother of Alan, John joined his father's firm in 1938 and has worked on the financial side. He is presently Chairman.

5 B. 5 February 1909 p. 183

6 A 1920 advertisement of 'Mills & Boon Gossip' revealed that Newte's novel Sparrow had attracted three million readers, and another edition of 20,000 copies had just been printed. (The Newsagent Bookseller's Review and Stationer's Gazette 22 May 1920 p. 562)

good author was Examiner in the Liverpool area, so he always had a market', John Boon said. 'They were selling in the fifties'.⁷ Indeed, an early advertisement named Eton, Harrow and Sandhurst in a 'List of Schools and Colleges in which Mills & Boon's books are used'.

Before the First World War, according to John Boon, the new company made steady progress. During the first year 104 contracts were signed with authors, reviews were good, and, most importantly, sales were excellent. The firm produced quality six-shilling hardbacks, one-shilling reprints, and paperback sixpennies, their first foray into paperbacks.⁸ Turnover rose from £16,500 at the end of 1909, to £22,127 in 1913; salaries were increased and £300 advances to authors were common.⁹ Boon believes that establishing a small publishing house early in the century was not difficult. 'In those days...I don't think they were great accountants or anything like that. It was more sort of basic bookkeeping. I don't know whether we had a sales force'.¹⁰ The latter, for instance, was not necessary, given the sophisticated wholesale and library supply networks then available to publishers.

7 JB-3

8 'They were paperbacks in the sense of format, but not paperbacks in the sense of marketing', John Boon explained. 'The mass paperback is something different; it's sui generis'. (JB-3)

9 John Boon, 'The early years of Mills & Boon', B. 2 May 1959 p. 1650

10 JB-3

From the First World War until Gerald Mills' death in 1928 the firm fell upon hard times and very nearly collapsed. John Boon attributed the firm's difficulties to two factors: lack of capital, and the absence of a 'back list', books which were consistent sellers. Most of the staff enlisted in the war, and the young company lacked direction. 'As a result by 1919 its financial position was vulnerable; it had large stocks and a small reserve', Boon said.¹¹ After the war sales declined by 45 percent, as the firm was faced with a stock of 250,000 one-shilling cloth editions that it could not sell to a market demanding cheaper and newer fiction. Sales remained low until 1927. Several strikes, culminating in the General Strike, added to the firm's financial difficulties. Consequently, their star authors were signed up by rival publishers offering more lucrative contracts.¹² The firm's crisis was reached in 1928, when Mills died suddenly, with a considerable portion of the company in his estate. J.W. Henley, a former office boy brought along from Methuen, became joint Managing Director of the firm and acquired about a third of Mills' equity; the Boon family eventually bought the rest in the 1950s. Henley's shareholding solved the firm's financial problems, and enabled Mills and Boon to remain in private hands.

Mills and Boon's recovery, which began in 1929, can be tied directly to two factors: solution of the cash flow problem, and

11 Boon, p. 1652

12 Hugh Walpole was poached by Macmillan. Victor Bridges' departure was heralded in an advertisement, 'The inevitable has happened! Victor Bridges has moved to Hodder and Stoughton!' Jack London, one of the top authors under exclusive contract with Mills and Boon, died suddenly in 1916.

the rapid growth of the commercial libraries. Mills and Boon had already encouraged an extensive list of light fiction by such authors as Denise Robins, Joan Sutherland, Louise Gerard and Dolf Wyllarde, and so was well-suited to exploit the growing demand of the tuppenny libraries. Their experience with Marie Corelli at Methuen, moreover, may have influenced Charles Boon in this direction. Although most Methuen employees were amused at how seriously the founder, Sir Algernon Methuen, regarded Corelli and her works, Boon 'was like all good publishers and not averse to having a really popular low-to-middle-brow author like Marie Corelli', John Boon noted; Corelli would have greatly enhanced cash flow.¹³ Charles Boon, moreover, was an avid theatre-goer, and encouraged light novels written in the style of shows at the Haymarket Theatre in London.

Profits increased every year until 1936, when they were double the 1929 figures. As library sales increased by 1939, fiction displaced the educational and general lists. At the same time, Mills and Boon specialised in its most successful type of novel, the romance. Already, of course, romantic novels by such authors as Cole, Sutherland, and Gerard were a strong fixture in publication lists throughout the twenties. In 1923, Mills and Boon published Georgette Heyer's first novel, under the penname Stella Martin.¹⁴ John Boon attributed to his father's financial experience the firm's new commitment, which corresponded with the contemporary trend

13 JB-3

14 The Transformation of Philip Jettan, later reissued by another publisher as Powder and Patch. Heyer, however, specialised in historical romance, which (at that time) Mills and Boon did not.

towards the commercialization of popular literature, and the promotion of books as 'commodities':

I think really he was essentially a commercial publisher, as you would expect from his background. I think he found that the ready market developed with the commercial libraries, particularly for romance. It was low-risk publishing, because you can compute the likely sales. It was low overhead, and promotion zero. You didn't advertise (given the captive audience).

We had inherited a marketing technique, which I think dated back to the Methuen days. Even though we were selling almost a branded product in the books, that were so similar, each one was promoted individually, if it was promoted.

We changed that, and promoted the list, with some heart-searchings from the older members of the establishment...We advertised a certain amount, but we had a very well-run catalogue system. We kept the list absolutely up-to-date, very rigorous - it was a very 'live' list.

15

Mills and Boon's books, in distinctive brown bindings with brightly coloured jackets, became staples in the public, subscription and tuppenny libraries, and the firm became known effectively as a 'library house'. 'The commercial libraries needed a tremendous amount of books to keep their customers happy. Some of them would read a book in, say, three days, so they needed many books', Alan Boon noted.²⁶ In fact, it is doubtful whether Mills and Boon would have been as successful without the libraries, which became their lifeblood - as the paperback mass-market is for the firm today.

15 JB-3. Charles Boon's legacy, the B. reported on his death in 1943, was 'a flair for the light romantic novel, and a fair number of writers who have gained fame and fortune in that field of literature were Mr. Boon's discoveries'. (9 December 1943 p. 596)

All Mills and Boon books after the First World War were hardbacks; paperbacks were only introduced in the 1960s. There were few retail sales, most going to the libraries. According to John Boon, given the nature of the books it was almost impossible to encourage booksellers or newsagents to stock them: the speed with which women read them, and the price of the books made borrowing more attractive. For better authors, the average print run was 8,000 copies in a 7s. 6d. edition; for lesser writers 3,000. Books were reprinted several times, according to demand, in cheaper editions. Mills and Boon promised to issue two to four new books every fortnight, and an astonishing number of books was produced - the exact number is uncertain. The publication list for January-June 1938, for example, contained 47 new novels (by 36 authors) and 37 reprints, a total of 84 publications, or 14 per month - all romances. In 1939 Mills and Boon had over 450 novels in print, all available to order, by over fifty authors. The firm relied heavily upon standing orders from public libraries, the large circulating libraries such as Boots (which purchased between 300 and 500 copies of each title), and the wholesale library suppliers such as the Argosy and Sundial Libraries (up to 700 copies) for distribution to their tuppenny clients.

The golden age for the hardback Mills and Boon novel was in the 1930s and 1940s. 'In the thirties, with the libraries it was doing extremely well in a period when most publishers were not doing well. It was a very profitable small firm then', John Boon said. So profitable, in fact, that Walter Hutchinson, director of Hutchinson and Co., attempted to buy the company to add to his list of

publishing acquisitions. 'But my father was very independent, and he wasn't going to work for anybody else, and he very much disliked Walter Hutchinson', Boon said.¹⁷ International sales of Mills and Boon novels, although limited mainly to Europe, Australia and New Zealand, were also good.

Mills and Boon thrived during the war, as did most publishers. 'Undoubtedly the war encouraged readership', John Boon said. 'If we had paper we would have sold probably ten times as many'.¹⁸ Editions were restricted to 4,000 copies during the war; reprints were impossible. Boon believes that his firm has not been given sufficient credit for maintaining morale during the war. He referred to an occasion when the Ministry of Supply refused to give Mills and Boon its paper allocation. 'The P.A. (Publishers' Association) protested on our behalf, saying quite rightly that these were the sort of books which were read by the women in factories and all that...They gave way', he said (attributing the controversy to 'some Civil Servant whose literary views probably belonged to the Left Book Club')¹⁹

For several reasons Mills and Boon, recognised today as a publisher of paperback fiction, did not follow the Penguin lead in this direction during the 1930s. Of Allen Lane's venture, John Boon recalled, 'Publishers in those days were extraordinarily

17 JB-3

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

conservative. They thought at first it was gimmicky'.²⁰ Mills and Boon, moreover, although prosperous, could not have afforded then the substantial costs involved in publishing paperbacks:

We were not big enough. To launch mass paperbacks you require a fairly considerable investment, because you've got to print 20,000 copies. And a fair degree of advertising, and also the sales force which we didn't possess. We were running then I think on two or three salesmen. And we didn't feel that we could make the investment.

21

Naturally, the unprecedented success of Penguin Books broke down resistance in the trade. Ironically, Penguins were selling well in the places Mills and Boon books would have done, such as in newsagents' shops and in Woolworths. In 1958, Mills and Boon negotiated with a Canadian publisher, Harlequin, to publish their books as paperbacks for the North American market. Hence, they were able to experiment in the scheme without having to make a big investment. It was extraordinarily successful, presaging the movement away from the traditional hardback novel.

Mills and Boon's success and longevity in the romantic fiction market are legendary. 'We were dominant', John Boon recalled. 'Romance was synonymous with Mills and Boon'.²² Although before 1950 many publishers, including Collins, Hutchinson, Herbert Jenkins, and Wright and Brown, offered a list of romances, Mills and Boon's specialization in this genre was unique, and served to establish a substantial and dependable readership which has sustained

20 JB-2

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

the firm to the present day. Mills and Boon's share of the romantic fiction market in Britain today is about 85 percent, and they are the largest paperback publisher in the country. International sales (in translation) are enormous, with representatives on every continent. The firm remained in the Boon family until 1972, when it was purchased by Harlequin, although the British operation is still self-run.

II

How successful was Mills and Boon in the 1930s and 1940s, and how did it maintain a dominant position in a crowded and competitive market? In 1938 the firm's reputation was such as to prompt W.H. Smith into advising its wholesale customers, 'Lovers of romantic fiction have learned to rely on Mills & Boon titles, for these publishers specialize in popular romances. Their books are consequently favorites with women readers...Make your selection now!'²³ By the early 1950s Thomas Joy, Honorary Treasurer of the Booksellers Association and Librarian of the Army and Navy Stores, claimed of Mills and Boon's list, 'Any title, even new ones in the series may be confidently obtained and your buying problems simplified'.²⁴ In this section we will examine the nature of Mills and Boon's success and the unique methods used to sustain it.

23 T.C. 9 July 1938 p. 8

24 Year Book for the Scottish Newsagent, Bookseller and Stationer 1st edn (1954), p. 61

Mills and Boon were masters of the 'personal touch', a device which promoted sales by encouraging close contact with their readership. For example, by the early 1930s the endpages of each Mills and Boon romance, which featured the current fiction list, began with a full-page notice, headed 'To the Reader: Why you should choose a Mills & Boon novel'. It continued:

The Fiction Market is overburdened with new novels, and the ordinary reader finds it most difficult to choose the right type of story either to buy or to borrow... Really the only way to choose is to limit your reading to those publishers whose lists are carefully selected, and whose fiction imprint is a sure guarantee of good reading...Mills and Boon issue a strictly limited Fiction List, and the novels they publish all possess real story-telling qualities of an enduring nature.

This 'guarantee of good reading' was followed by an extensive publications list, usually 16 pages long, of new and reprinted novels. Essentially, this was an inexpensive method of advertising to a captive audience. While other publishers used this device, only Mills and Boon devoted it exclusively to romantic fiction.²⁵ Similarly, dustjacket blurbs during the 1940s read, 'When You Choose a Mills & Boon Novel...You are benefitting from over forty years' experience in publishing the best popular fiction. You are selecting a book from the largest and best-known list of romantic novels in the British Commonwealth'.

Each novel also featured the so-called 'bait', an announcement that Mills and Boon would read every manuscript

²⁵ Mills and Boon's major competitor, Collins Romance Novels, were often issued with a postcard insert, addressed to the reader, asking, 'May we send you news of our books?'

submitted to them. This encouraged readers to send in their drafts, as new authors were always sought. Again, most publishers endorsed such a policy. but Mills and Boon were the only ones to put it in print. First novels by new authors were given prominence in publication lists: 'They represent authors likely to be extremely popular in the near future and can be read by everyone interested in first rate popular romance'. In fact, three of the firm's best-selling authors, Mary Burchell, Jean S. Macleod and Sara Seale, were Mills and Boon 'discoveries' in this way in the 1930s. Mills and Boon still advertise aggressively for manuscripts today.

Mills and Boon's prosperity was achieved through quantity as much as quality. They concentrated on building a stable of popular authors, instead of pinning all of their hopes on a single star of the Barbara Cartland or Denise Robins mould. In this way, the Mills and Boon imprint became better known than the authors, which offered a distinct advantage in promotion. 'Remember, we specialize in this type of story, and our imprint is a guarantee of good reading', another dustjacket blurb read in 1950. Shirley Russell, a London literary agent (whose most famous client is Barbara Cartland), emphasized how advantageous this was to Mills and Boon. 'They published a brand of books and people never bought them by the author. They bought them because they were Mills and Boon novels. Ask an average Mills and Boon reader who had written the book, and they wouldn't be able to tell you'.²⁶ F.L. Belton, a Boots

²⁶ Shirley Russell was interviewed once, in London on 5 July 1988. She has worked for the firm of Rupert Crew, Ltd. since 1950. In addition to Cartland, her clients included Patience Strong, the poet, and Jean Marsh, a thriller writer.

Booklovers Library employee in Walsall, recalled her exasperation when an elderly lady requested a particular romantic book, and all she could remember was that it had a brown binding:

Desperately I clung to my only clue - a brown book - and prayed to heaven for inspiration.

I hadn't realised before just how many brown books there were in the Library, and silently I cursed Mills and Boon for choosing the colour for their publications.

'Was it "Meant for Each Other" or "Teach me to Love?"' I asked hopefully.

27

The imprint was further encouraged by an extensive mail-order catalogue system introduced before the Second World War. 'Our catalogue is a complete guide to our novels, and you ought to have it', one advertisement said. Readers wrote for a catalogue that presented the publishing list on a monthly basis, and could therefore pester librarians in advance to order new books. This was a low-cost but effective method of advertising. The catalogue system was the forerunner of the direct-mail subscription system that Mills and Boon has exploited so effectively since the early 1960s. Consequently, with such dependence on word-of-mouth recommendations and catalogues, Mills and Boon did not need to spend large sums on publicity. In a 1935 analysis of advertising expenditure by publishing houses, Mills and Boon ranked 28th in a field of 46 firms: £345 was spent over thirteen weeks, £304 in The Sunday Times and £25 in The Observer (the principal newspapers for book advertisements). By way of comparison, Victor Gollancz ranked first, with £2,287, followed by Hutchinson (2nd; £2,285); Hodder and Stoughton (6th; £1,226), and Ward Lock

27 F.L. Belton, 'Library Episode', The Bee October 1949 p. 28. The book was Forever Amber and had a green binding.

(25th; £354). One of Mills and Boon's closest competitors, Wright and Brown (another 'library house'), was 35th with £267.²⁸

Although it is clear that the bulk of their sales went to lower-middle and working-class women, Q.D. Leavis' claim that there 'is no reason for supposing that novelettes are bought exclusively by the uneducated and the poor',²⁹ would probably have applied to Mills and Boon novels during this period. 'Our books were very successful in Harrods' Library, and they were also very successful in the (commercial libraries) in the industrial areas. Everywhere, really', Alan Boon said.³⁰ Jean S. Macleod recalled that all types and classes of women read her books: 'Young girls, happily married young women, and the dowagers'.³¹ Similarly, Sara Seale claimed, 'Every kind of woman reads romantic novels. I know that the addresses on MILLS & BOON'S mailing file range from S.W.1, through country towns, industrial cities, North, South, East, West, to the Falkland Isles and back again'.³² Mary Burchell received many letters in her heyday, including from men. An Indian girl, who had an arranged marriage, once wrote that she and her husband read Mary Burchell's

28 B. 3 April 1935 p. 347

29 Leavis, pp. 277-278

30 AB-4

31 Jean S. Macleod was interviewed once, in York on 10 July 1986. A native of Scotland, Macleod has written over 160 novels for Mills and Boon, beginning with her first, Life for Two, in 1936. She was the co-founder, with Cartland, Robins, and Vivian Stewart, of the Romantic Novelists Association in 1950.

32 Sara Seale, 'Who Said [the] Romantic Novel is Dying?' TC 29 July 1950 p. 13

books together. 'I trust that marriage worked out all right', Burchell said.³³

Throughout this period one of the principal markets for Mills and Boon novels were the tuppenny libraries. In 1950 the firm, in association with W.H. Smith, solicited library owners nationwide in an attempt to determine the frequency of borrowing of Mills and Boon titles. This was calculated by the total number of date stamps inside a given volume. Issues per Mills and Boon book averaged 165, with the highest borrowing recorded in Scotland, coastal towns and the West Country. Seaside places such as Portsmouth were particularly popular; Mills and Boon thought that this was due to lonely sailor wives 'left-behind' who took up reading, and the influx of holiday-makers during the summer months. Tone Libraries, of Taunton, reported the highest number of issues of any Mills and Boon novel (740), for a 1935 novel, Anchor at Hazard by Ray Dorien. Originally priced at 2s.6d., this 15-year-old title had generated nine pounds in profits (or 1,080 tuppences). Another librarian, in Tottenham, recorded similar results:

I have some MILLS & BOON books which have been going out since 1932, 60 times for the first year and 40 times for subsequent years. I do not, however, stamp my books, otherwise they

³³ Mary Burchell was interviewed in London on 18 June 1986. Wife to Christopher, her first novel, was published by Mills and Boon in 1936. Burchell had written over 130 novels for the firm before her death in 1987. She was also the ghostwriter of two books by the tenor Tito Gobbi, including his autobiography. Although her real name was Ida Cook, I have used 'Mary Burchell' throughout as by this name she was best known.

would be covered with dates - and my customers
would be as wise as I! 34

Mills and Boon's prominence in the tuppenny libraries is also recorded in a 1935 Bookseller survey of 'one of the largest and newest' tuppenny libraries.³⁵ Among the Mills and Boon authors listed in 'the "best-seller" class' were Denise Robins (36 titles), Joan Sutherland and Sophie Cole (26-30 titles each), Louise Gerard (21-25), Elizabeth Carfrae (16-20), Deirdre O'Brien and Marjorie M. Price (10-15 each). A comparison of these figures with those in stock in Mudie's Library in 1935 revealed equal, if not higher numbers; Sophie Cole, for instance, had 38 titles in Mudie's.

Both Burchell and Macleod agreed that writing for Mills and Boon was a lucrative way of earning a living, especially for a woman in this period. 'If you were making a thousand a year then, that was very big money', Burchell said. She added that Charles Boon told her never to pass a Boots shop in Eastbourne, or wherever she happened to be, without popping in and chatting up the library customers, to encourage new readers. Macleod said that successive reprints of her novels, at 3s. 6d., often sold, cumulatively, 30,000 copies. As there were no retail sales, selling serial rights to weekly magazines - often for as much as £500 - was the chief source of revenue for the author. Mills and Boon retained a ten per cent

34 'One 2s.6d. Novel: Library Profit - £9', T.C. 6 May 1950 p. 22. The longevity of Mills and Boon novels in the tuppenny libraries was a problem, as it discouraged sales of replacement copies. 'We sometimes wish', say Mills & Boon, "that we could fit our novels with a self-destroying fuse to operate as the hundredth reader closes the book after the last page", the B. reported. (20 May 1950 p. 1078)

35 See chapter 3, Figure 3-1

commission on such rights, which helped cash flow, according to John Boon.

Unfortunately, sales figures no longer exist for Mills and Boon titles for the 1930s and 1940s, and we must rely upon very general estimations from sources such as the Boon brothers. A 1949 advertisement, however, does give some evidence:

406,473 copies of Mary Burchell's books have been sold, mostly to the Library Trade. On average each book is lent 100 times at 3d. a time, thus earning 25s. 25s. x 406,473 - £508,091 5s., not a bad figure for one author. 36

By 1949 Burchell had published 41 novels; according to this ad, each could have sold (with reprintings) an average of 10,000 copies, and could have been read by as many as one million people. According to John Boon, these statistics were not exceptional for a Mills and Boon author during this period. Burchell was a popular but not a top author, and any author, writing for as long a time as Burchell (since 1936), would have had comparable figures by 1949 (given frequent reprintings). Sara Seale, in fact, probably exceeded these. 'I think where we scored was that so many of our authors achieved these sort of figures. We had a very high general level, because the imprint was very well known'.³⁷ The firm also managed to sell more books by encouraging their most prolific authors to publish under different names. This would circumvent restrictions at Boots, for example, which would only order two titles from any one author per year. Hence, 'Molly Seymour', 'Guy Trent' and 'Barbara Hedworth' were the same person, as were 'Catherine Blair', 'Rosalind Brett' and

36 T.C. 5 November 1949 p. 22

37 JB-2

'Seline Conway'. 'It was rather a sort of Gilbertian situation', Alan Boon said. 'They (the libraries) would take them'.³⁸

III

'Romance is easy...A safe answer for any romance reader is to thrust a new Mills and Boon book into his hands',³⁹ Steven Mogridge advised Scottish librarians in the early 1950s. The implication here, recognized by the trade, was that Mills and Boon had hit upon a successful 'formula'. What were its basic components? While Mills and Boon demanded a strong moral line in all their romances, it is not the case that their editorial policy was inflexible and averse to change: changes in the taste of their readership were followed closely. The primary concern, within reason, was commercial: to provide an entertaining, up-to-date yet 'wholesome' product. It was a complicated combination of escapism and realism. 'Although we live in an age of escapism', Seale claimed, 'I think the English romantic novel manages to combine this with a story which could conceivably apply to many of its reader's lives and this is the secret of its popularity'.⁴⁰ Guidelines

38 AB-4. The B. seemed in on the secret, though. 'In the middle ranks an author can hardly consider himself a professional unless he has at least a couple of identities. This plurality seems most prevalent amongst the writers of romance - and by romance I don't mean High Histories of the Holy Grail, but Low Fictions for the Modern Girl'. (9 June 1937 p. 548)

39 Year Book for the Scottish Newsagent, Bookseller and Stationer 1st edn (1954), p. 61

40 Seale, p. 23

prepared for Mills and Boon authors today confirm this important point:

We're in the business of providing entertainment, a short foray into the emotions. Our readers don't expect to read about the sort of petty worries they can encounter any day of their lives, such as an overdue library book, or the sort of serious problems which cause too much heartache or anguish. We're talking about escapism. But escapism must be based on reality. 41

It is possible to identify three influences which, together, shaped Mills and Boon's editorial policy - the 'formula' - during this period. These were: the editorial staff; the editors of weekly women's magazines which serialized Mills and Boon novels; and the authors.⁴²

According to Alan Boon, the special attraction which Mills and Boon novels held for women during this period was their 'wholesomeness', the lack of sex and 'immoral' activities. Indeed, before 1950 the closest physical contact, before the marriage proposal, was hand-holding, or perhaps a peck on the cheek. However, whenever the heroine falls, hits her head, and is knocked out (as so often happens), she is usually revived when the shocked hero smothers her with frantic, anxious kisses. Such is the case with Randall in Life for Two (1936), who successfully resuscitates Claire when she is thrown from her horse. Boon claimed that as such, Mills and Boon novels 'represented, as we thought it, morality at the time. Now

41 From 'And Then He Kissed Her...', promotional cassette (Mills and Boon, 1986)

42 Somewhat surprisingly, Alan Boon freely admitted that his brand of romantic fiction was based on a formula - a good example of his firm's adoption of commodity-style publishing techniques. (AB-1)

people live together without the bat of an eyelid; then it was quite something, actually'.⁴³ Towards this end, Mills and Boon editors imposed a carefully crafted set of guidelines on their authors. One aspect of the formula, which essentially has remained unchanged over the years, is that the Mills and Boon heroine is a virgin, aged 18-27; a career-minded woman, often struggling, she meets a dashing man, aged 30-40, frequently in a romantic setting. They either marry in the end, or, if already husband and wife, settle their differences and make a better start.

The two main company guidelines for writers (still in use today) are called 'Lubbock's Law' and 'The Alphaman'. Lubbock's Law endorses the views of the literary critic Percy Lubbock in his collection of essays, The Craft of Fiction (1921). Lubbock recommended that stories should be written from the heroine's point of view, which would promote reader identification with that character and increase suspense and interest accordingly. 'The Alphaman', according to the Boon brothers, is based upon a 'law of nature': the female of any species will always be most intensely attracted to the strongest male of the species, the alpha. Translated in terms of fiction, the hero must be absolutely top-notch and unique. According to Alan Boon, 'The wimp type doesn't work. Women don't want an honest Joe'.⁴⁴ Whereas the novels today tend to emphasize the physical characteristics of the hero, in 1930s and 1940s Mills and Boon men did not have to be rich, famous, or even handsome. Dicky in The Net Love Spread (1935) was a struggling

43 AB-3

44 AB-1

artist, and Lucian in The Gentle Prisoner (1949) was facially disfigured by a hideous scar. In all cases, however, the hero was recognized for his strength, integrity, and potential for providing a secure yet exciting future.

Mills and Boon editors were remarkably gifted in finding ways around so-called 'potentially-sexy situations', in order to accommodate the more advanced tastes of its readers without sacrificing the moral line. One common device was 'what Alan and his father used to call a sort of post-moral story', Macleod recalled. 'You could have a married couple (and) something came between them. It's awful trying to keep two people apart for 258 pages, let me tell you'. Within this context, both partners could face titillating temptation, with the reader aware that marital love would triumph sensibly in the end. Macleod also noted that directives from editors were common, reflecting changes in readers' tastes noted by the firm:

Perhaps after the war a bit, they were saying to me, 'Don't write too much descriptions. The modern girl doesn't like a lot of description'. This was a time when readers said, 'This is what we want - we don't want yards of descriptions about castles'. And then they came back to say, 'Oh, we'd like to know what the castle looks like, or what the humble cottage looks like'. It goes in cycles, I believe. Ten year cycles.

Mills and Boon believed that their readers were quite gullible, susceptible to suggestions made in the books. Hence, editors carried large responsibilities. 'We probably haven't had sufficient credit for our effect on readers at large', Alan Boon said. 'I've often thought if a dictator could edit our lists he could influence our readers' minds. I don't say sexually, but if he

did it very subtly, saying "Communism is the solution to all our problems" or something like that'.⁴⁵ Indeed, to this day Mills and Boon editors excise in manuscripts all smutty or political references. French kissing, for example, is still forbidden (although Boon doubts whether this has had much effect), as are references to large families. Mills and Boon believes readers would actually want to emulate the happy fictitious couple who said, 'Let's have three or four of each'.

Women's magazine editors were an equally important source of suggestions - and directives. 'These editors were in a powerful position', Alan Boon said. 'If the author could sell the serial, she was well paid for it. It meant a great deal to their income, so the editors really could use their clout to make the authors dance their tune'.⁴⁶ The strong moral tone in Burchell's novels was reinforced by demanding editors at D.C. Thomson, publishers of My Weekly and the People's Friend. 'In those days a Scottish publisher wouldn't have had anything at all. I mean, if at the end of Chapter 3 (the heroine) had had a second sherry, I would get a telegram saying, "Cut out the sherry"'. Macleod recalled John Davidson, Managing Editor at D.C. Thomson, as 'a bit of a taskmaster. He would say, "What have you got?" and I would show him two ideas, and he would say, "Nonsense"', depositing his own ideas with her before she left Dundee. Jean Marsh, who wrote thrillers for John Long publishers, also wrote romantic serials for the Amalgamated Press in the 1920s and 1930s. She recalled that frequent (and urgent) telegrams were

45 AB-2,4

46 AB-2

used as the source of communication between editor and author. Marsh provided some of these, sent by Mrs. Henry St. John Cooper, Managing Editor at the Amalgamated Press, for inspection:

17 APRIL 1936

PLEASE GO ON WITH INSTALLMENT EIGHT. WRITE IT UP IN HOMELY WAY. DON'T WANT IT SENSATIONAL.
COOPER

4 NOVEMBER 1936

LIKE BINNIE DARCH STORY VERY MUCH INDEED. PLEASE GO ON WITH FIRST INSTALLMENT. WILL USE IT IN ORACLE. SHOW VERY CLEARLY BINNIE BEING AFRAID TO LOVE BECAUSE OF CURSE. SEND TELEPHONE NUMBER.

COOPER

47

Writing in serial form also influenced the way a novel was structured; a crisis or 'curtain' was required at the end of each instalment, or chapter, to maintain suspense - and circulation.

Macleod regarded her training with the People's Friend as a type of apprenticeship. 'A good book doesn't always make a good serial, but a good serial will always make a good book, because you've got these peaks all the time'.

One of the most influential magazine editors was Winifred 'Biddy' Johnson, a legendary figure in Fleet Street who edited such Amalgamated Press magazines as Woman's Weekly and Woman and Home. Woman's Weekly and Mills and Boon 'were sort of brother and sister almost at this time', Alan Boon said. 'All their serials usually were published by ourselves'.⁴⁸ Johnson crusaded for realistic yet

47 Jean Marsh was interviewed once, in Bewdley, Worcs. on 3 August 1988. She joined the Amalgamated Press in 1922, with a contract for 9-10 serials per year, salary £500. She graduated to thrillers: her most famous, Death Stalks the Bride, was published in 1943. She is now, in her 80s, a writer of children's books.

morally conventional romantic serials. 'Mrs. Johnson's idea doubtless was to have everything very cozy indeed, without any jarring. The characters wouldn't speak with any accent', Alan Boon said. 'She may in a way have effected a strong moral tone in our books, because she would not have any sort of sex or drink'.⁴⁹ Johnson often battled with Mills and Boon authors, particularly Seale. In one instance, Seale had her heroine, a sales assistant, annoy the hero, her boss and owner of the department store, by daubing lipstick on the store mannequins. Johnson attacked this as unrealistic and unbelievable; according to Alan Boon, girls 'wouldn't do things which would lose a job like that, in a tough time like the thirties'.⁵⁰ Readers desired escapist romance with which they could identify; but escapism had to be grounded in reality, not fantasy. Johnson's brand of 'realism' was situational and unfantastic. She was the inventor, for example, of a plot situation, 'M.I.N.O.', which broadened storyline possibilities within the acceptable moral line. In this case a man and woman could live together in a contrived but unconsummated kind of marriage, such as shipwrecked on a desert island. This was a 'Marriage In Name Only', or M.I.N.O. This created a potentially (but only potentially) sexy situation, as the reader waited anxiously for the moment when love would blossom, and thaw the frost between the characters.

Most of the women who wrote for Mills and Boon during the 1930s and 1940s were young; Burchell and Macleod, for example, were in their early thirties. As such, these women were perhaps more in

49 AB-2,4

50 AB-4

touch with their potential readers, and in tune with changes in style. They certainly could be sympathetic, for instance, with the single working life. Alan Boon admitted that during this period authors were given greater freedom and creativity than they are today; the conformity imposed by mass production was not yet applied. Hence, if a 'bolder' novel was very successful, Mills and Boon, with one eye on commercial concerns, 'took it with the tide'. Burchell's first novel, Wife to Christopher (1936), had such an impact. 'I think Alan probably knew, as did his father, that a little early on I was already, without knowing it, exploiting a rather bolder form of romantic novel', she said. Indeed, Wife to Christopher represented something of a departure for Mills and Boon. Vicki and Margery are sisters who need money to get their widowed father medical treatment. Margery convinces Vicki to compromise her rich and handsome boss, Christopher, and blackmail him into marrying her. Naturally, Vicki falls hopelessly in love with Chris - 'There was a careless magnificence about him' - but he learns of her trickery and proceeds to bed her, in a sequence that resembles marital rape. Chris calls it 'settling his account with a cheating woman'. They separate; Vicki's baby is stillborn; she adopts her sister's love child; flees to Salzburg - but all turns out well with Christopher in the end. Clearly, this storyline was hardly the typical boy-meets-girl romance, but Burchell got away with it, as it was a best-seller. 'Charles Boon, certainly, and Alan, were prepared to publish whatever I wrote. And so they must have believed in me', she said.

Other influences which perhaps shaped the author's outlook were the older tradition of romantic literature in Britain and the

newer influences of the cinema. Although Mills and Boon writers could never compare in style and refinement to an Austen or a Bronte, they were undoubtedly influenced by the hero-heroine relationships in such novels as Jane Eyre - itself quite a 'bold' book. Burchell, for example, saw herself as part of a continuing literary tradition, established by Mrs. Henry Wood, Queen of the Sensation Novelists. 'She worked exactly as I did. She was a talespinner; you had to know what happened next'. In her opinion, Mills and Boon would have 'undoubtedly' published Wood's novels had she started out in the 1930s. The cinema was also an important influence. 'I'd have thought a lot of our authors owed something to the films', Alan Boon said. 'I'd have thought they'd enhanced it. Sometimes I'd read one and I'd say, "Oh, God, here's Clark Gable talking again"...It was the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer type of love story'.⁵¹

Although greater creativity was, in some cases, permitted, 'immoral behaviour' in the novels was not. Towards this end, Mills and Boon probably screened the convictions of their authors carefully. Both Burchell and Macleod, for example, were unwavering in their support of such a stand, which at the time might have been regarded as slightly old-fashioned. They were scornful of the present crop of romantic fiction writers and their 'soft-porn' morality, which they consider offensive and unnecessary. 'But of course today so many people think that all they've got to do is to have them rolling about like dogs, although not quite so healthily', Burchell said. 'I reckon that you're not a really good writer of romance unless you can have the hero put his hand around (the

heroine's) arm, and she's wearing a sleeve, and she has the sort of, the frisson. You must be able to do that'. The heroine's reactions were basically your own, she added, and thereby natural. A Scot, Macleod argued that Scottish people are by nature more conservative. If you did not reflect that in your stories, you were of no use to Scottish publishers. 'For the time, for the age, there were things you just didn't write about'. She believed that her fiction reflected 'exactly' the morals at the time; as she wrote for D.C. Thomson as well as for Mills and Boon, she did not think there was any difference in taste between English and Scottish readers. 'You couldn't write about sex, or people living together before marriage. Drinking was permitted, but discreetly and in moderation', she said. In all cases, a happy ending was essential; authors learned the lesson of tampering with this, and receiving hate mail from readers.

Mills and Boon's editorial policies were undoubtedly successful; the business prospered, and they were not troubled by the censors, either at home or abroad. During this time censorship laws in Ireland and South Africa caused the greatest problems. 'We were astounded that our books could go into nunneries in Ireland, and that's our books which were getting a bit steamier', Alan Boon said.⁵² Similarly, Mills and Boon books in South Africa enjoyed a good reputation: 'any of our books were O.K'.⁵³ Nevertheless, the

52 AB-4

53 But the 'wholesome' nature of Mills and Boon novels excluded them from the lucrative North American market. Until recently U.S. publishers took no notice of the novels because they were considered 'too tame'. Judging from the semi-pornographic nature of many American magazines and novelettes distributed in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, this was probably true.

firm did tread carefully; character names were always slightly exotic, primarily to protect the author against libel actions brought by real people with the same names. Each novel carried a disclaimer in the front of the book, which has been successful in warding off lawsuits.

It is interesting here to contrast Mills and Boon's editorial policies with those of Barbara Cartland, certainly the most famous and successful author of romantic fiction in Britain and the world. Cartland has been publishing continuously since 1923, and currently has nearly 500 titles to her credit, a record. She has never, in fact, been published by Mills and Boon. 'I didn't want to be published by Mills and Boon. I can't imagine anything worse', she said. 'They always had the doctor marrying the nurse. Some of them aren't bad, but they aren't very good'.⁵⁴ Shirley Russell claimed, quite rightly, that Cartland was too famous to be included in Mills and Boon's list, where authors ranked lower than the imprint. 'The authors rated not at all. It was just another romance. And we never classed Barbara in that sort of writing. She was always above that'. This was why Denise Robins, another 'star' author, left Mills and Boon. Cartland maintained that her publishers, including Duckworth, Hutchinson and Rich and Cowan, were more 'up-class' than Mills and Boon. In fact, Alan Boon revealed that his firm did, at one point, consider Cartland's works for publication. 'To my knowledge, in the

⁵⁴ Barbara Cartland was interviewed once, in Hatfield, Herts. on 26 May 1988.

thirties we examined some of the modern Barbara Cartlands, and thought they were a bit too advanced for us, actually'.⁵⁵

Although Cartland and Mills and Boon shared the same literary and moral plane, they differed sharply in their attitude to a changing readership and world. From her first novel, Jig-saw (1923), Cartland has been a moralizer, devoting long sections of narrative to the wicked consequences for a girl if she forsakes her innocence in a cruel world. Her personal crusade against pre-marital loss of virginity and promiscuity inspired some graphic prose. Cartland did not have the light, even witty touch with which Mills and Boon authors wove such convictions seamlessly into a story. In Jig-saw, for example, the heroine weeps for her girlfriend Sally, jilted by a man with whom she has had a passionate affair. 'No nice man will want to marry me now', Sally confesses. Cartland expressed a moral outrage with an exaggeration never found in a Mills and Boon novel:

Sally, the innocent, trusting child! It was not the physical injury that counted, it was the deliberate massacre of her ideals, the smashing of fairy-castles, the trampling of golden dreams. With the splendour of youth her wounds would heal, the misery pass. But the scars would always remain, memorials of a crucifixion...

To the very few, the very favoured, perhaps only to one person in our lives, do we open the gates with the key of love. Too often do we find too late they are merely trespassers, ruthlessly picking the flowers, to leave them dying by the roadside, scoffing at the ambitious little buildings we have erected, destroying our temples with laughter. Then,

when we are barren, they leave us to a desert
of desolation. 56

Cartland was confident of her ideal of womanhood, spiritual, physical, utterly feminine, which she promoted in her novels. Ian, the rugged hero of Sawdust (1925), met his ideal in Wanda, who had been raised, nymph-like, in the forest:

Every ideal of woman he had ever forgotten, half-formulated or imagined, came into his mind from some unknown store of memory. A radiant mother in jewels or laces kissing a child of four good-night; the fairy at his first pantomime; the sister of his school friend; Joan of Arc; the Blessed Virgin Mary; a nurse in the sanatorium at Eton; Lily Elsie; a little actress on the pier at Brighton. 57

Unlike Mills and Boon, however, Cartland refused to follow the changing tastes of readers and modernise her 'Victorian' values. Consequently she has lost many commercial opportunities, refusing for example to compromise with directors anxious to film her books. During this period, Cartland said, her novels were never filmed 'because I was pure. They wanted rather hot, steamy things, everybody kissing and mauling about. My people are not allowed to be touched'. She resisted attempts by publishers to pressure her to revise her moral views. 'They kept on saying, "Oh, come on Barbara, you must really be up to date", and I said, "No". That's why I write in the past. Everybody's a virgin in the past; it was all right'. Herein lay the compromise: in order to continue writing about virginal single women in a changing world, especially after the Second World War, Cartland has had to abandon contemporary romance for historical romance. Since 1948, every one of her novels has been

56 Barbara Cartland, Jig-saw (1923), pp. 66-67

57 Barbara Cartland, Sawdust (1925), p. 74

set in the period 1790-1914. Ironically, the past, which used to be the source for bawdier plotlines (Forever Amber is one example), has been used by Cartland as a kind of distant Eden.

Mills and Boon, on the other hand, were not averse to change, if it meant commercial success - which it did. In one sense, Cartland has provided the reading matter for the small minority of ex-Mills and Boon readers who were dissatisfied with the changes. 'In our books now there is an awareness of sex, and I'm afraid they sometimes get into bed without the benefit of a priest', Alan Boon said. 'But they should marry each other in the end'. Today, Mills and Boon believes readers would find a romantic novel boring without sex. 'I hope we don't do it in a way that is titillating, but (in a way) which is natural', Boon added.⁵⁸

IV

What, then, did the editorial policies of Mills and Boon look like in practice? It is now time to let the books speak for themselves, to reveal the product of the firm's directives on such issues as love, sex, marriage, motherhood, class structure, and the war. In general, as Mills and Boon was in the business of providing escapist entertainment, 'ideal', 'middle-class' social behaviour was endorsed, even if in practice it was less than perfect.

In selecting novels for review among the vast Mills and Boon canon, an attempt has been made to examine those which were most popular. The lack of bestseller lists and sales figures can be circumvented. Some books, for example, have been chosen at random based on the acclaim, inside and outside the firm, of the author: it is obvious that Burchell, Macleod, Seale, Louise Gerard, Sylvia Sark and Constance M. Evans were among the top authors at Mills and Boon. Other books were chosen on evidence of popularity. The top three novels, borrowed most often, in the 1950 commercial library survey have been consulted: Anchor at Hazard (740 issues); Be Patient with Love (369); and Anne Finds Reality (281).⁵⁹ Two Mills and Boon novels were included in a list of 'Books in Great Demand' at all W.H. Smith branches during the first six months of 1935 - a rare example of the modern best-seller lists. 'Demand' could have reflected both retail sales and library orders and/or borrowing. Lady by Marriage by Elizabeth Carfrae ranked seventh of 18 books for three weeks in January, eclipsing such authors as Agatha Christie and E. Phillips Oppenheim. Nina Bradshaw's The Net Love Spread achieved the same ranking during March.⁶⁰ Some of the books won awards: Call-And I'll Come was the Daily Mirror 'Romantic Book of the Month' in 1937; The Gentle Prisoner (which Alan Boon called 'one of the great classic books we published') was awarded 'Romantic Novel of the Year' by

59 It comes as no surprise that Anchor at Hazard, the story of a lonely Navy officer's wife, was popular in a seaport like Taunton. Be Patient with Love was most popular in Gravesend, Kent, and concerned a lonely London working girl who is trans-ported to a Sussex farm. Anne Finds Reality had every working girl's fantasy: to gain a huge inheritance and taste the rich life; it was most popular in Lancashire, a depressed area.

60 The Library Department, 'Books in Great Demand', W.H. Smith & Son, Ltd., Strand House, London (12 January-15 June 1935: W.H.S. PA. 167, W.H. Smith Archives)

Woman and Home magazine in 1949. Such distinctions may appear dubious but would probably have influenced loyal romantic fiction readers. Finally, novels published after 1930 have been given precedence over earlier works. By 1930 the transformation to a romantic fiction publishing house was well underway, as was the careful crafting and marketing of the Mills and Boon imprint and image.

In general, a close reading of several Mills and Boon novels published before 1950 reveals some surprising characteristics. Naturally the writing style is often tedious and verbose, the action predictable, often incredible. Nonetheless, the Mills and Boon heroine is wholeheartedly a representation of the contemporary woman, rooted in the current age, and concerned with such matters as money, managing a household, assisting friends and family, and holding a job. Although she dreams of finding a husband and settling down, she is not a soppy stay-at-home, but out and about on her own. In this respect, it is arguable that the Mills and Boon heroine was more advanced for her time than they are today. The heroine, moreover, is either a working woman, supporting herself and/or her family, or at home running the household, burdened with a dotty widowed mother. A strong undercurrent of quasi-feminism and social concern runs through most of the books, though it is true that the heroine does not do the chasing in the novel; she is pursued by the dashing, handsome stranger. That is not to say that the heroine does not have strong feelings concerning love and romance: she simply is not obsessed with finding a husband. It is true that every Mills and Boon novel ends with the marriage proposal and/or the ceremony. and

the heroine probably goes on in life as a housewife, but this is left to the reader's imagination. The hero, in addition, is not necessarily rich, or dashing, or handsome. Unhappy marriages are common. In all, companionate marriage and a source of security are deemed more essential than a good lover, which was probably the dream of most readers from the middle and working classes.

Among the issues raised and judged in Mills and Boon novels is virginity. In all cases the firm toed the Barbara Cartland line. Despite great temptations, the heroines remain pure before marriage. Virginity, however, is never equated with prudishness; rather, the heroine takes a moral stand and gains the respect, not the laughter, of the reader. For example, in The Net Love Spread, Roseen is abducted by deceitful Gerald, who plans to marry and spirit her away. Their car breaks down en route, to Gerald's excitement:

'What can we do? Why not camp out in the forest for the night? It's gloriously warm, and there will be a full moon later. I've lots of rugs, and plenty of food. Darling, it would be heaven.'

'I'm afraid I don't agree. You seem to forget that we are not married yet. And what will happen in the morning?...I may be old-fashioned, but I object to spending a night out alone with a man who is not my husband.'

'You're being absurd, sweetheart.' The smile died out of his eyes. She saw them harden. 'What does it matter staying out together, if we're going to be married tomorrow? If you loved me you would want to stay here with me.'

'No, I shouldn't, Gerald. Loving has nothing to do with it. I should lose my self-respect. Surely my wishes count for something?' she added pleadingly.

61

One can suppose how often this discussion took place among real-life couples. But Mills and Boon authors were hardly naive; they appreciated that temptations could be irresistible. Faith, in Secret Love, fights for control while bidding her beau farewell at the station:

He just looked at her, as a starving man might at a wonderful feast whose delicious odours and dishes he was allowed to smell and see but forbidden to taste.

With a wave of her hand Faith turned quickly away.

If she watched that hungry, pleading look on his face she might forget she was going to be a wise virgin. She might throw discretion to the winds, get into his carriage, creep into his arms, and let him love her.

62

Significantly, Faith doesn't, reflecting an idealistic, if unrealistic, view of social behaviour. But those who did, and become pregnant, are treated with compassion.⁶³ In The Net Love Spread Corinna, an unwed mother (the result of a brief spell of 'free love' with 'a young portrait painter with more than a touch of genius'), is applauded for her devotion and respect for motherhood, despite all adversity. Corinna is the ideal mother, and Oonagh the perfect child. But single parenthood, although tolerated, is not endorsed. Corinna's plight in failing to attract the hero of the novel, Dicky, as a husband and father is crucial. 'Corinna and Oonagh, another man's child, could never come to mean to him what Roseen had and still meant to him. He was better alone, ploughing his solitary furrow',⁶⁴ Dicky muses.

62 Louise Gerard, Secret Love (1932), p. 84

63 A reflection, perhaps, of the rise in illegitimate births between the wars. (A.F. Halsey, Trends in British Society Since 1900, pp. 50-51)

64 *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228

Mills and Boon novels generally endorsed old-fashioned methods of courtship, but with a few concessions to changing times. 'Lovemaking' throughout the novels referred to kissing. In most cases, 'modern' practices and 'modern' girls were portrayed in an unsympathetic light, and prone to disaster. In Arrows from the Dark, the first Mills and Boon novel, Marjorie is staggered by George's kiss. 'A proprietary kiss in the street! How disgusting of him! His matter-of-course appropriation of herself was beginning to be positively alarming'.⁶⁵ What a contrast with Elinor Glyn's Three Weeks, published only two years earlier.⁶⁶ Similarly, in The Net Love Spread, Nan and Phyllida are stepsisters, Nan in her thirties, 'Phyl' 18:

'Love?' scoffed Phyllida, with curling lip, looking at Nan with pitying contempt. 'You talk like a Victorian spinster - which of course you are, my dear, in spirit. I've done with love. It's an overrated commodity. No, let the men do the loving in future. I'm fond of Tommy, of course. I like him, and I think we shall get on well together. But it's what he can give me - a position, a comfortable home, money - that counts.'

Nan supposed that this was the aim of at least half the women who married, so perhaps Phyllida was not so much worse than the others, after all.

67

65 Sophie Cole, Arrows from the Dark (1909), p. 72

66 But in the 1920s, before the 'golden age' of Mills and Boon (and the strong moral line was adhered to as the firm began to develop its romantic fiction imprint), some novels published by the firm were indeed quite steamy. Louise Gerard's The Sultan's Slave, for example, was perhaps typical of the torrid desert romance then in vogue, along the lines of E.M. Hull's The Sheik. None of these Mills and Boon publications, however, would ever have been considered shocking.

67 Bradshaw, pp. 251-252

But Phyllida becomes pregnant, loses Tommy, attempts suicide, gives up her child and leaves town. But Carfrae made some allowances for changes in courtship: in Lady by Marriage, she sympathises with the 18-year-old heroine, rather than her 47-year-old overprotective stepfather.

'I don't want you to be cheap,' he said. 'And in my day a girl who let men kiss her indiscriminately was cheap. In, at all events, the eyes of the men who kissed her. In these days I know things have changed -and not for the better - '

'Perhaps,' Sheila said, interrupting him, 'that's true. They mayn't have changed for the better, but they have changed, Uncle John. In our lot...kisses don't count. It's part of the game. A girl who doesn't let a man make love to her - well, she's just out of it, that's all. There's nothing really to any of the things we do-'

'No,' John Ambrose said briefly. 'And yet, only this afternoon, I've been to see a girl of sixteen, a girl of your lot, as you call them, who's going to have a baby as the result of the things that mean nothing.'

68

Sheila does realise, however, that her fun-loving generation 'isn't trained for marriage', and follows her dreams of marriage, a home and children, in choosing to marry John.

Some Mills and Boon courtships were fantastic, even shocking. The reasoning here was simple: as long as lovemaking was honorable, and marriage was the end result, any kind of relationship was allowed, even between relatives. The two bestsellers of 1935, The Net Love Spread and Lady by Marriage, contained similar storylines on romances between relatives. They are, in retrospect, early examples of the 'bolder' novels published by Mills and Boon. In Bradshaw's novel, Dicky Bannister, a struggling artist, raises his

stepsister Roseen alone when his father dies. Roseen was an orphan rumoured to be from 'grand stock'. Eleven years pass, and Dicky, aged 38, falls in love with his sister and former playmate, aged 17. Dicky tries to suppress his feelings:

But if he had made love to her, as a lover-
and if they had gone on together he couldn't
have helped it - what then? Would it all have
been spoiled, ended, their perfect love as
brother and sister, or would it have grown into
a greater and closer love as husband and wife? 69

Roseen, claimed by her heiress aunt, is spirited away, as she is underage, to avoid the stigma of appearing to be a mistress. In the end, of course, they admit their true feelings for each other. The novel ends with Roseen and Dicky spending 'a happy afternoon together in the studio, rearranging things to suit their future life together as husband and wife, instead of brother and sister'.⁷⁰ The scenario in Lady by Marriage is slightly different, but even more incredible. Eminent physician John Ambrose grants a dying circus woman's wish to adopt her daughter Sheila. Sheila grows into a beauty; John's fatherly affection grows into love. Sheila is 18, John 47. John buries his feelings until he is struck by a lorry, lapses into a coma, and reveals his true feelings, deliriously, to a horrified Sheila. She refuses to tell her friends about her stepfather's love for her. 'It's the sort of idiotic thing that happens in women's novels, and I couldn't bear any one to laugh at Uncle John',⁷¹ she says. The reader shares Sheila's shock at the situation. Surprisingly, Sheila sacrifices young and exciting love

69 Bradshaw, p. 155

70 Ibid., p. 248

71 Carfrae, p. 67

with Jimmy for a lonely life as John's wife, out of a sense of duty, and a desire for a secure home and children. Sheila is thoroughly miserable, trapped in marriage to an inattentive husband and losing her children. She contemplates divorce, but is determined to honour her vows in the end.

In fact, in all circumstances the primacy of marriage and marital vows was emphasised, and the kind of fashionable practices such as adulterous affairs and divorce, which the reader might expect in a 'society' novel, were discredited. Even when the heroine is mistreated, or is tempted by a more noble suitor, her vows remain sacred and inviolable. In Be Patient with Love, Joan risks a sudden marriage with her friend Phil for the security that is lacking in her lonely single life in the city. Although he turns out to be a gambler and a poor provider, Joan sticks with Phil, resisting her feelings for his swarthy and noble brother Tom. She is never tempted to end the unhappy marriage.

'There's nothing to be done except try to forget. I'm married to Phil...'

'Joan, Joan.' Josie's tone was one of affectionate impatience. 'Haven't you heard the word divorce...? Darling, this is 1937, you know...'

Joan's smile was a tragic flickering thing.

'That's some people's way out,' she admitted, 'but it wouldn't do for Tom and me...we've vowed never to let Phil down'...

How do you explain to a young 'modern' like Josie that divorce was nothing in your life. Now, no matter what Phil did to you, he remained your husband and that for you there could be no other man?

72

Joan does eventually reform her husband through love and understanding. However, this being escapist romantic entertainment, Phil dies honorably while saving a lost sheep, and one month later, Joan marries Tom, her conscience clear.

Predictably, motherhood was also frequently and fervently endorsed alongside marriage. Children were regarded in some sense as a panacea: motherhood provided fulfillment of womanhood, and also served as salvation for rocky marriages (although, as we have seen, large families were not endorsed). Manora, in Call-And I'll Come, tells Anna that 'No woman worth the name would value a voice above a child who would look at her with the eyes of the man she loved'.⁷³ Anna freely sacrifices her career as an international opera singer to have a baby, as does Gail, the star actress in Once to Every Woman:

'You've given up so much,' he said again.
'Do you realise how much? What can I give you
in return?'

'Your son,' Gail whispered.

They stood heart to heart in the small,
quiet room. Jon did not speak. There was no
longer need of words between them.

74

The hardships of pregnancy and birth were frequently and strongly noted in Mills and Boon novels. In Secret Love, for example, quasi-feminist undertones are apparent as the hero sees his wife in the hospital:

'My God, I shall be glad when it's over,'
he said hoarsely. 'It's so beastly unfair.
You have to suffer, and a great hulking chap
like me gets off scot-free.'

There was a gurgle of weak laughter.

Then Faith lifted a corner of the silk

73 Mary Burchell, Call-And I'll Come (1937), pp. 252-253

74 Sylvia Sark, Once to Every Woman (1940), p. 251

coverlet. His amazed eyes saw a tiny, red-faced object asleep in a soft, white shawl.

At the sight his heart seemed to swell to the bursting-point. The room and all in it vanished in a sort of mist. Quite well he knew why he had been sent - to save him hours of anguish whilst the girl went, alone, through the Valley of Death...

Stooping, he peered closely at the red-faced object.

'Hello, what's this?' he asked, his voice trembling.

'The son and heir. He arrived yesterday afternoon.'

75

Similarly, in Anchor at Hazard childbirth is described as 'this crisis of a woman's life'.⁷⁶ The heroine in Wife to Christopher pleads with her husband to see her stillborn baby. "Can't you tell me anything to comfort me?" she begged in sudden piteousness. "Don't you see that I've nothing but pain and terror to remember - and I meant it all to be so beautiful".⁷⁷

'Lovemaking' between man and wife was not only endorsed but often described in vaguely mystical terms. In one sense, ardent passion was presented as a type of wonderful prize obtainable only through marriage. Here especially the influence of the Hollywood film is most apparent. In Once to Every Woman, Jon and Gail experience marital bliss as newlyweds:

Jon lifted her in his arms and carried her to the couch. Gail lay back, her eyes closed, her whole being flooded with joy and tenderness. She felt Jon loosen her dress, slip it from her shoulders, felt his lips on her throat and breast. My husband, my lover, her heart said, but her lips were silent. In this sweet, wild moment neither of them had need of speech.

75 Gerard, p. 252

76 Ray Dorien, Anchor at Hazard (1935), p. 247

77 Mary Burchell, Wife to Christopher (1936), p. 167

Their love flowered swiftly, more passionate,
more searching than it had ever been before. 78

In an attempt to promote reader identification and concern, heroines in Mills and Boon novels were portrayed as proud of their class and status, defending their backgrounds and careers when confronted by the upper class. The value system normally associated with the middle classes was championed; unlike sensation novels, where the rich were admired and the poor despised, the less fortunate heroine in Mills and Boon is proud, rising to the occasion to defend herself - and winning the respect of all in the end. There was no substitute for good, hard, honest work and an independent life before marriage. Shop-girl Kitty in Anchor at Hazard is repelled by her greedy upper-class mother-in-law:

'You were in a shop?' gasped Mrs. Lewis.

'I was in the office. I didn't stand behind the counter, not that it makes any difference,' said Kitty, amused at the other woman's prejudice.

She did not think it necessary to explain that the girls had to present a high standard of education and appearance to be considered at all by the firm...

Although she had always earned her own living, she had discovered that her attitude to it was very different from that of people who in her opinion had not worked for money, and yet seemed to expect it as a matter of course. She felt the chill of this self-absorbed nature. 79

Other characters in this novel agree. Rose is amazed that Kitty's marriage is viewed as a come-down by her husband's family: 'Nonsense! Hasn't the world moved since then?'⁸⁰ Similarly, Joan in Be Patient

78 Sark, p. 20

79 Dorian, pp. 18, 50

80 Ibid., p. 10

with Love resents her husband Phil's contented unemployment, and their subsequent dependance upon his family. When accused of indolence, she attacks.

Joan's colour leaped to her cheeks.

'I don't ask anyone to keep me,' she flared. 'I've earned my own living before, and I can do so again'...

She was Joan Thomas who had earned her own living since her seventeenth birthday. She wasn't used to being dependent, and she resented owing her bread and butter to comparative strangers.

81

In Anne Finds Reality, Anne resents her rich fiance's snobbish opinions of her own, lower-class friends:

The colour flamed in Anne's cheeks. She sensed the fact that Roland did not approve of her friends and resented it. Vera, in her cheap washing dress, and stolid George, whose grey flannels compared so unfavorably with those Roland wore, were a part of her old life - the nicest part.

82

When Anne receives an unexpected inheritance, she is determined to become a philanthropist and help the needy: 'Suddenly Anne realised the power of the wealth that was now hers'.⁸³ This promotion of middle-class ideals was often coupled with an attention to the value of money and material goods. For instance, when Anne is knocked down by a car, the driver of which becomes her roguish lover, her immediate concern is not her physical condition, but the costly clothes she is wearing, and cannot afford to spoil: 'She was hatless and disheveled. Her hand was cut, but mercifully her dress was not torn'.⁸⁴

81 Trent, pp. 48, 51

82 Francis Braybrooke, Anne Finds Reality (1940), p. 48

83 Ibid., p. 166

84 Ibid., p. 15

Finally, life in wartime was also explored, although in a limited sense. Charles Boon initially encouraged writers to leave the Second World War out of the romances, because it dated the story and prevented reprints. 'We couldn't really publish a reprint of a book (in which) guns and bombs were falling all over the place', John Boon said.⁸⁵ Macleod, moreover, recalled that this reluctance to accept wartime romances was part of the common belief at first that the war would not last very long. 'But then of course after two years, three, four - they realised they had to acknowledge the fact that boy was meeting girl during the war, just as anything else', she said. Macleod relied on relatives in the medical profession, as well as her own experience, to convey the wartime experience in her 'doctor-nurse' romances set in air ambulance units or army hospitals.

The war romances combined the ubiquitous boy-meets-girl romance with a gritty portrayal of the hardships and horrors of war. In This Much to Give, the plight of shellshocked airmen is highlighted. Lindsey, the heroine, is a nurse with a mission: to aid the men 'broken mentally by the stress and strain of war, but not altogether forlorn hopes';⁸⁶ she marries one in the end. Similarly, Sheila in Enter - A Land Girl, having lost her husband Jimmie in an R.A.F. mission and her baby daughter to pneumonia, shrugs off her depression by joining a War Agricultural Camp. Escaping from the horrors of the blitz ('Nowhere was there the slightest indication that in any other places there was red, horrible war and famine. It

85 JB-3

86 Jean S. Macleod, This Much to Give (1945), p. 22

was a scene of utmost content') and doing her patriotic duty in the tomato patch, Sheila falls in love with Dudley, the chief gardener. Curiously, Dudley's grave injuries, acquired when a pilot in the last war, are introduced to the reader in a rather sexy, melodramatic manner:

Two men in bathing-trunks came past Sheila to the edge of the water and stood there with their backs to her. One of them was a young, slim boy. the other was older. His body was deep brown, his back broad and muscular. Right down the side of it, from the shoulder to where it vanished into his bathing-trunks, ran the jagged white line of a scar, and there were scattered dark marks over his back which Sheila recognised. She had seen them on Jimmie's body - the aftermath of shrapnel.

87

Away from Each Other, a dizzying tale of separation, temptation, shortages and bombs, was intended undoubtedly as a warning to all single, lonely wives during the war: beware the philandering soldier billeted with you, and remain faithful to your fighting husband. Maive, left to run the newsagent's shop when her husband, Clifford, joins the Fire Service, is seduced by Shaun, an Army captain and a married man. Shaun's advances were initially repelled by Maive in a strongly-worded exchange:

'Oh, don't start that again! We haven't time for prolonged discussions in ethics and conventions.'

'We haven't time?'

'Haven't you heard that there's a war on, darling? And I may be sent out East any day now.'

Her brain cleared a little at that. She thought coldly and dispassionately. The old, old story. That's what my father said to my mother in 1916. 'I may be sent to France any day now. Why should we wait? We can't afford to wait for each other. There's a war on-let's seize our happiness while we can. We may never have another chance.' And now it's I and

Shaun... 'I may be sent out East any day'... Only
a romantic little fool falls for that old plea. ⁸⁸

Maive does succumb, but Shaun is exposed as a rogue and a bounder in time for her to rekindle her 'indestructible' love for Cliff.

As one of the primary publishers of light fiction, Mills and Boon's success and longevity can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, the rapid development of the commercial lending libraries during the 1930s supplemented the traditional outlets for Mills and Boon novels (some retail sales, mainly the public and subscription libraries) and provided a unique opportunity for exploitation and sizeable expansion and financial gain. Had it not become a 'library house', Mills and Boon would probably not have survived for as long as it has. Secondly, one of the long-term advantages of the promotion of its single brand of fiction has been unequalled recognition of the imprint, a distinct advantage in sales and promotion.

Mills and Boon's editorial policies were also governed by commercial concerns, and as such were flexible and receptive to change. In this respect, as we shall see in chapter 6, Mills and Boon resembled D.C. Thomson, their rival and associate. Relying to a large degree on their authors, and on editors of national women's

⁸⁸ Fay Chandos, Away From Each Other (1944), p. 20

magazines, Mills and Boon maintained close contact with its readers, monitoring changes in attitudes and adjusting its views accordingly, within a 'moral' framework. The firm was conscious of the responsibilities of providing morally acceptable fiction to an audience which it deemed gullible and impressionable; the identification of the Mills and Boon reader with the heroine was considered to be very strong. In general, Mills and Boon novels promoted conservative moral and social values. While some important concessions were made to 'modern' practices of wage-earning and courtship - if only for commercial reasons - marriage and motherhood were treated as sacred. The fundamental appeal, however, was escapist entertainment. According to Alan Boon, 'It has been said that (our books) could take the place of valium, so that women who take these drugs would get an equal effect from reading our novels'.⁸⁹

Chapter 5

'We Must Prevent the Leakage':

Children's and Adolescents' Reading Habits

In this chapter we will consider the reading habits of children and adolescents between (roughly) the ages of 12 and 16. We will examine what they read, how far what they read was determined by social class, and why - to the extent we can discover - they read it. We will also examine a largely unnoticed phenomenon: the marked inclination of girls to read boys' literature and for children and adolescents to read adult literature. The latter point is vital in establishing a possible link between the tastes of young and old of the lower-middle and working classes. Sidney W. Anderson, in The Library Assistant, voiced a common concern on the need for guidance among children reaching the 'crucial age of 14', the school-leaving age:

Such children will, in nine cases out of ten, lose the reading habit which the Junior Library has been at pains to inculcate, and subsist for the rest of their lives on Sunday newspapers (not the Observer) and magazines of the more sensational (or more sensual) kind...

The point is that we must prevent the leakage. Unless our libraries see that the right books get into the hands of the rising generations at

this crucial age, they are jeopardizing their own chances of future survival. ¹

In terms of reading habits, the cliché, 'The child makes the man', often rang true.

I

A leading article in The Times in 1921 called attention to the significant expansion of reading among children. The modern child, it was claimed, read 10 times as much printed matter as his grandparents had done when young. Hence, a golden opportunity now existed for all those trades involved in children's publishing.² These claims were certainly exaggerated, but, in fact, the period from the First World War until 1950 was one of rapid growth in children's reading and publishing, as it was for adults. Production of first editions and reprints of fiction rose constantly until the Second World War,³ and the magazine industry, reorientated from 1921 by the new-look boys' papers issued by D.C. Thomson, was at its most vigorous state since the 1880s.

Just as the women's market was targeted by publishers of novels and weekly magazines after the First World War, so was the

1 Sidney W. Anderson, 'Catering for the Adolescent', The Library Assistant September 1934 p. 194

2 'What Children Read', leading article, The Times 26 November 1921 p. 11

3 See chapter 2, Figure 2-2

younger readers'. During the 1920s the Amalgamated Press presented its list of ten titles for boys (with a combined circulation of 'over one million' weekly, including Union Jack, Magnet and Boys' Friend) as 'a unique and extremely powerful selling medium' for all advertisers:

THE SPENDING POWER OF YOUTH is Greater than it has ever been before. No Advertiser of any article appealing to boys and young men of any age from ten to twenty can afford to neglect the Amalgamated Press Group of BOYS' PUBLICATIONS...

4

At two pennies, the weekly letterpress papers were within the reach of boys and girls in every class. They were, moreover, freely passed around and swapped, particularly in working-class neighborhoods; each copy sold, therefore, was probably read by two or three children:

These periodicals are pondered over, as a rule, longer and often more seriously than the adult takes her reading, and copies remain treasures for some time. Then, too, the boy's paper acquires what amounts to a 'club circulation' when it goes round to his classmates in exchange for others.

5

Stanley L. Unwin urged booksellers to tap this active readership. 'Think of the thousands of copies of the Magnet, Rainbow, Gem etc. you regularly sell. Are you making the best of the opportunity this gives to start the readers of these many children's papers as book-buyers?'⁶ One of the most active sections of juvenile publishing was in Sunday School 'rewards', hardcover books given as prizes to worthy students. Many authors of rewards, in fact, were also

4 The Advertisers' A.B.C. 1921 edn p. 401

5 Penrose Hunter, 'Selling through the Schoolboy: How National advertisers can make use of the magazines of youth', Advertising World 60 (September 1931), p. 196

6 Quoted in The Newsbasket January 1929 p. 8

contributors to the weekly magazines, including Percy Westerman, Talbot Baines Reed and Angela Brazil. Generally, the 'vast reading public of children is becoming vocal', Eileen Colwell, a veteran children's librarian and frequent commentator on reading habits, wrote. 'The publishers are awakening to the importance of that public'.⁷

Colwell attributed the continued growth in reading among children to three factors: improved educational facilities; 'broadening influences' such as the cinema and the wireless; and the gradual development of separate sections for children within the public libraries. By 1950 most public libraries in Britain contained a children's library, and some, like Walthamstow, also had 'intermediate' sections for adolescents. Most library authorities permitted borrowing at age 10, although there was no law on a fixed age.⁸ Until the Second World War, however, public libraries were largely a middle-class preserve, and the children's shelves were stocked with 'better' books than, for example, the best-selling 'Biggles' series. The war and the book shortage boosted juvenile usage of public libraries considerably. Issues to children in Sheffield public libraries, for example, increased from 629,608 in 1937-1938 to 981,715 in 1947-1948.⁹ The 'dramatic' increase in

7 Eileen Colwell, 'Some Trends in Children's Books', B. 1 September 1937 p. 195

8 'Encouraging Young Readers', The Times 16 January 1937 p. 9. The Glasgow Corporation lowered its minimum age to 5, but this was the exception.

9 R.J. Gordon, letter, The Times 25 January 1949 p. 5. Gordon was confident that other public libraries could show equally 'encouraging' figures.

issues in the children's library in Margate during 1943-1944 amounted to 40,000, or 28 percent.¹⁰

Judging from formal surveys of children's leisure activities conducted during this period, 'reading' was either the preferred spare-time activity, or a strong second or third choice. In these tastes children reflected their parents. Figure 5-1 displays the leisure activities of boys and girls aged between 12 and 15, documented in two extensive surveys. The Merseyside investigation used a heavily working-class sample, while the 1949 Social Survey used a representative sampling. Nevertheless, the similarities are striking. On Merseyside, reading competed in popularity with sport among schoolboys, but was first in preference among schoolgirls. The decline in reading after leaving school, particularly among girls, was a common phenomenon noted by many observers; in this case, it should be balanced by the fact that reading, the cheapest and most manageable leisure activity to fit around a job, was now highest among both sexes.¹¹ By 1949, according to the National Survey, broadcasting had surpassed reading in popularity, but the reading of 'comics' ('bloods' as well as the Beano) and other books was still energetic, particularly among schoolboys and girls. Other surveys confirm this apparent decline in the popularity of reading after the war. A 1945 questionnaire sent to 4,000 Liverpool Youth Organization members ranked reading in third

10 P.C. 27 January 1945 p. 37

11 Although cinema attendance increased with age (and wage-earning) on Merseyside, it was still more expensive (and thereby less accessible) than reading for a working-class adolescent, which probably accounts for the surprisingly low cinema figures here.

Figure 5-1: Leisure Activities of Young People, 1934 and 1949

	1934				1949			
	Merseyside Social Survey		Social Survey, Nationwide		BOYS		GIRLS	
	BOYS	GIRLS	BOYS	GIRLS	12-13 years	14-15 years	12-13 years	14-15 years
Outdoor sport or games excluding cycling and walking	Before Leaving School	At 15 +	Before Leaving School	At 15 +	69%	56%	68%	35%
Reading:	57.8%	49.8%	36.4%	22.9%				
General Comics	53.0	51.9	57.0	44.7	75	55	71	49
Library, other books					54	58	79	83
Cinema:								
Less than once a week	24.7	32.5	15.6	28.4	29	32	34	30
Once a week	2.9	7.6	1.5	6.8	30	34	39	37
Twice a week or more					39	34	25	32
Watching Football	37.2	37.3	-----	-----	74	69	18	25
Listen to wireless					76	80	88	91
Needlework, Knitting, Dressmaking	-----	-----	26.7	19.0	---	---	73	74
Cycling	5.9	14.5	0.7	4.0	56	54	45	44
Dancing	5.3	1.4	13.4	5.4	9	12	15	31

Sources: Caradog Jones, ed., *The Social Survey of Merseyside III* (London, 1934) pp. 219-220; Ward, 'Children the Cinema', *Social Survey New Series 131* (London, 1949), p. 42

place, after the cinema and dancing, while the 1950 survey of 1,000 adolescents aged 14-19 in Birmingham placed the cinema and youth organizations before reading.¹²

The seeming decline in reading suggested by these surveys can be contrasted, however, with evidence of great activity. A.J. Jenkinson's 1940 survey, for example, examined the reading habits of Secondary and Senior School boys and girls aged 12-15. This habit, he concluded, was firmly implanted at these ages; few did not participate. On average, boys and girls read 3-4 magazines and 4-6 books each month.¹³ The war, moreover, intensified reading among children; given paper rationing and limited supply, demand was high. A Fulham newsagent in 1943 reported that children's 'comics' were in very short supply:

If more were printed a lot more could be sold...Why should the children suffer in particular?...It's the boy that reads comics today who'll be the man of tomorrow. If they'd cut down some of this trash (he indicates sixpenny thrillers) and put a few more comics out it would be fairer.

14

Similarly, the Publishers' Circular in the same year reported that more children than ever were reading, and reading more at that; 'Judging from experience after the last war, it is not unlikely that

12 P.C. 13 January 1945 p. 16; Bryan H. Reed, Eighty Thousand Adolescents (London, 1950) pp. 23-47

13 A.J. Jenkinson, What Do Boys and Girls Read? (London, 1940); also, 'Children and their books: New methods of education are needed', B. 19 September 1940 pp. 310-314. Jenkinson surveyed 1,570 boys and 1,330 girls, about evenly divided by school and by age.

14 M/40/C, M-0 'Newspaper Reading' Box 2 File E (Hughes, Escourt Road, Fulham S.W.6; 18 March 1943); N.W.

this extension of the reading habit will survive the peace'.¹⁵ Indeed it did, judging from two postwar investigations. Pearl Jephcott's study of working-class adolescent girls revealed that 4-6 'books' each week was not unusual reading for a girl by the age of 18; 'The number of girls of about 14 and 15 who, during a lunch hour, examine the exhibits of a 'popular' bookstall in a place like a market hall is an indication that reading is a genuine enough interest'.¹⁶ Similarly, a diminished if still regular reading habit was confirmed in Birmingham, where of boys and girls aged 14-19, over 75 percent admitted reading their last 'book' one week ago.¹⁷ In both cases, 'books' and magazines were frequently synonymous.

Children from lower-middle and working-class families were undoubtedly active readers, though what they read may have differed from the middle class. 'Blood' reading among both sexes was especially popular, and these were particularly popular with readers who had not been shaped by the middle-class tradition of book reading.¹⁸ Robert Roberts, for example, recalled the 'addiction' of working-class boys in Salford to public-school tales in the Gem and Magnet,¹⁹ as did John Osborne, 'with grown-up encouragement'.²⁰

15 C.M.J., 'Young People and the Reading Habit During War-time', P.C. 18 December 1943 pp. 678-679

16 Pearl Jephcott, Rising Twenty (London, 1948), p. 112. Jephcott interviewed 103 girls aged 14-18 from three areas: London, Needham, and Dowden Colliery.

17 Reed, p. 45

18 Drotner, Feminist Studies, p. 37

19 Robert Roberts, The Classic Slum (Penguin edn, 1987), p. 160; A Ragged Schooling (Manchester, 1987), p. 168

20 Osborne, p. 81

Bill Naughton recalled his childhood friend's weekly desperation to see the Magnet: 'I don't care if tha 'as to scour the town an' beyond. I mun 'ave my Magnet - I mun find out what Billy Bunter's been up to this week'.²¹ The author of the 'Greyfriars' series, Frank Richards, confirmed that 'every paper desiring a wide circulation must circulate, for the greater part, among the working classes, for the simple reason that they form nine-tenths of the population'.²² George Orwell observed that working-class boys clung to these papers longer than public-school boys, well-past the age of 12:

They are certainly read by working-class boys...They are generally on sale in the poorest quarters of big towns, and I have known them to be read by boys whom one might expect to be completely immune from public school 'glamour'. I have seen a young coal miner, for instance, a lad who had already worked a year or two underground, eagerly reading the Gem.²³

Of 1,850 boys and girls aged 11-15 surveyed in St. Pancras, over 50 percent read three or more magazines (principally 'bloods') each week; of this number, about 30 percent read six or more. Among girls, 'Reading' was the 'Principal Out-of-School Hobby or Pastime', followed by 'Knitting, Dressmaking, etc'; among boys, it placed a close second to 'Fretwork and Carpentry'.²⁴ Mass-Observation found that in Blaina, a mining town, 99 percent of the children read

21 Bill Naughton, On the Pig's Back (Oxford, 1988), p. 124

22 'Frank Richards Replies to George Orwell', Collected Essays, etc. I (Penguin edn, 1987), p. 536

23 Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', p. 512. For other reminiscences of working-class childhood reading of the Amalgamated Press papers, see Jeffrey Richards, Happiest Days (Manchester, 1988), pp. 291-294

24 J.H. Engledow and W.C. Farr, 'The Reading and Other Interests of School Children in St. Pancras', Passmore Edwards Research Series no. 2 (London, 1933), pp. 12-13, 17-18

'books' regularly, and 88 percent had between 6d. and 2s.6d. in pocket money to spend on reading, among other treats.²⁵ It must be concluded, however, that 'books' almost certainly meant for many, if not most, 'bloods'.

II

Which publications for boys and girls were most popular, quickest off the newsagent's or the library's shelves? Which types of fiction (school, adventure, etc.) were sought, and who emerged as the favourite children's authors? The overall impression is that there was less differentiation in reading tastes among children of different classes than there was among adults.

In terms of weekly magazines, the period after the First World War was dominated by two firms: D.C. Thomson, and (to a much lesser extent) the Amalgamated Press. The arrival of the Thomson 'Big 5' boys' papers, beginning with Adventure in 1921, was as sensational, and as successful, as the B.O.P. debut in 1879. Each Thomson paper was read by between 600,000 and 1,500,000 boys (and girls) weekly between the wars.²⁶ Adventure, Rover, Wizard, Skipper and Hotspur were usually cited as favourites in reading surveys. St.

25 Leonard Woolf, 'Mining Town - 1942', M-0 File Report 1498 (8 April 1944), pp. 190-192. Blaina was especially prosperous during the war; there was a shortage of boys to work in the mines, and the munitions and silk factories were busy.

26 Source: Circulation figures provided by D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. See chapter 6

Pancras schoolboys, for example, preferred these titles to the Gem and Magnet by 1,575 votes to 127;²⁷ as did boys of all ages, attending both Secondary and Senior Schools, in Jenkinson's investigation.²⁸ D.C. Thomson's success, however, was restricted to the boys' market. The girls' paper market was dominated by titles published the Amalgamated Press, including School Friend (1919, a sister paper of the Gem), Schoolgirl's Own (1921), and Schoolgirl's Weekly (1922). the latter two the firm favourites in 1933 and 1940.²⁹ These papers, unlike the multifaceted 'Big 5' titles, featured mainly school stories.

As children tended to find a favourite magazine and stick with it over long periods (given the consistency of favourite choices in surveys over the years), so, too, were they loyal to particular authors. The interwar period witnessed the rise of several popular authors whose works, in series, resembled 'blood' fiction in book form, with formulaic plots and standard characters. Notable among these were Captain W.E. Johns ('Biggles'), Richmal Crompton ('William'), and the doyenne of school stories, Angela Brazil. It is reasonable to assume, moreover, that bonding with fictional heroes was more intense among children than adults, which would have facilitated the success of book series. In Figure 5-2 three surveys of favourite authors, two in 1926 and one in 1949, are compared. Stepney and Manchester are probably representative of general tastes,

27 Engledow and Farr, p. 12

28 Jenkinson, pp. 68-70. Interestingly, the Wizard, Hotspur and Rover also ranked very high in popularity among girls.

29 Engledow and Farr, p. 13; Jenkinson, pp. 214-215

including lower-middle and working-class children; Croydon provides an interesting contrast.³⁰ The decline in popularity of boys' authors, such as Henty and Strang, whose heyday was the pre-1914 period, was noted (with regret) by many observers. Children regarded them as old-fashioned or, in the terminology of the 1930s, 'unmodern' and not 'live'. Harry Blackwood, President of the Educational Institute of Scotland, observed that it was useless to try to encourage children to read books which were regarded as 'antediluvian'; young readers regarded anything written before 1914 as ancient history.³¹ The two exceptions were, of course, Westerman and Brazil, whose output was remarkable.³² Both authors were cited, along with Arthur Ransome, by the Bookseller in 1933 in a list of 'Juvenile Best-Sellers'.³³ The Manchester survey in 1949 illustrates the later dominance of the market, which began in the 1930s, by three equally prolific authors: Johns, Crompton, and Enid

30 Stepney was largely working-class, Croydon middle-class. Hence, similarities between the two indicate the broad-based popularity of some children's authors. The Manchester results are undoubtedly representative as they are post-war, when usage of public libraries had increased among all classes of children.

31 The Times 29 December 1937 p. 6

32 Westerman began writing in 1907 and was a regular contributor to boys' papers. He had a life contract with Blackie & Son for three books a year, and by 1950, at the age of 74, had written 170 books for boys. Angela Brazil, who died in 1946, was also published by Blackie, and wrote over sixty books. Such was her popularity that in 1923 Blackie offered her a lucrative six-percent royalty deal to try to dissuade her from leaving. (P.C. 29 July 1950 pp. 911-912; Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, You're a Brick, Angela! [London, 1976], pp. 111-124)

33 B. 3 November 1933 p. 10

Figure 5-2: Favourite Authors in Children's Sections of Public Libraries, 1926 and 1950

	1926		1926		1949	
	Croydon Public Libraries		Stepney Public Libraries		Manchester City Libraries	
	<u>750 Boys</u>	<u>750 Girls</u>	<u>% Boys</u>	<u>% Girls</u>	<u>in use</u>	<u>Number of copies left on shelves</u>
Percy Westerman	220	---	27	--	334	518
Herbert Strang	213	---	--	--	---	---
G.A. Henty	198	---	7	--	6	60
Charles Dickens	101	90	2	3	---	---
John Finnemore	---	---	--	11	---	---
Angela Brazil	---	303	--	43	205	94
Andrew Lang	---	---	2	7	---	---
Enid Blyton	.				943	38
W.E. Johns					559	123
Richmal Crompton					398	21
Alison Utley					344	146
Arthur Ransome					100	148
T.H. Burgess					129	69
C.B. Rutley					117	131
Louisa May Alcott					83	90

Sources: 'An Analysis of Child Reading', P.C. 20 November 1926 p. 759; 'What East End Children Read', The Times 23 September 1926 p. 14; 'By favour of the public', B. 10 December 1949 p. 1488

Blyton.³⁴ Eileen Colwell, when asked which books were best-sellers among children, replied simply:

Every bookseller and librarian knows the answer - Enid Blyton, Richmal Crompton and W.E. Johns, of course. The demand for Enid Blyton's books is almost insatiable; William provides slapstick comedy; Biggles is the Superman of this generation.

35

Their basic appeal lay in their 'up-to-date' nature: Blyton's fast-paced adventures; Crompton's satirising of 'middle-class' life and values (via the anarchic behaviour of her hero, William Brown) and Johns' appeal to youthful interest in aviation and the Forces, the pioneering aviators, and the war - a 1935 advertisement for Oxford University Press' 3s. 6d. 'Biggles' series broadcast that 'Biggles is a 'live' character: he stands for the spirit of the air-arm and typifies the modern age of invention'.³⁶

Although favourite authors were subject to change, the types of stories preferred by children remained rather constant. Figure 5-3 displays the favourite types of reading by young people, of the lower-middle and working classes, in three areas (two urban, one rural). The similarities are impressive, particularly between East Ham and Blaina, as the ages surveyed there were closer. Among boys, adventure and mystery stories were as prominent as school stories were among girls. The 'distressingly high' preference for

34 Although Blyton claimed to write for all children between the ages of 3 and 15, it is doubtful that she was read much by children older than 10 or 11; certainly there is little evidence to the contrary from this period.

35 Eileen H. Colwell, 'Which Books Delight Children?' T.C. 28 August 1948 p. 9

36 B. 4 September 1935 p. 854

Figure 5-3: Preferred Reading by Young People: 1932, 1942, 1950

1) East Ham, London: Central Junior Library (Ave. age = 11)

<u>853 Girls: Most enjoyed Book:</u>		<u>904 Boys: Most enjoyed Book:</u>	
School Tales	377	Adventure	200
Fairy Tales	232	School Life	142
Adventure	105	War	134
Guide Stories	61	Sea and Ships	81
History	40	History	66
Home Life	37	Animal Stories	44
Mysteries	18	Cowboys & Indians	43
Animal Stories	18	Travel	38
Nature Stories	9	About Machinery	30
Poetry	3	Scouting	28
Humour	3	Air Stories	24
Plays	1	Fairy Stories	23

2) Blaina, South Wales: Social Survey, 1942 (Ave. age = 14)

<u>Favourite books:</u>	<u>Among boys:</u>	<u>Among girls:</u>
Mystery stories	77%	40%
Adventure Stories	70	58
Love stories	6	34
Hobbies	38	8
School Stories	20	43
Scientific books	20	12
Classics	0	16
Historical stories	0	11

3) Birmingham: Adolescent Survey, 1950 (Ages 14-20)

Books Read by Young People:

	<u>Unattached</u>	<u>Unattached</u>	<u>Attached</u>	<u>Attached</u>
	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>
Classical Fiction	14%	14%	9%	14%
Modern Fiction	15	27	8	19
Adventure, School	10	15	20	14
'Thrillers'	14	4	15	11
Paper-covered				
romances, etc.	9	19	6	21
Sport	7	--	8	--
Technical Subjects	3	--	5	--
Other Non-Fiction	9	6	7	5
'Do not read'	19	15	22	16

Sources: 'What Children Read', P.C. 12 November 1932 p. 561; M-O File Report 1498 (1942) p. 191-192; Reed, p. 46

'War' stories, recorded by the East Ham children's librarian, referred to tales of the Great War; anything earlier was rejected by boys as 'ancient history'.³⁷ Although there is no such category in the 1942 survey, war-related themes in fiction, especially popular among boys, were probably categorized under 'Adventure'. As the Publishers' Circular claimed in 1943: 'In fact, there are not enough good stories devoted to the Army and Navy to go around'.³⁸ By 1950, school stories and 'thrillers' were still popular among both sexes. One should also note the popularity of fiction, both 'modern' and 'classical', the latter a consequence of the shortage of new books during the war, and broadcast adaptations of such 'classic' works as Jane Eyre and Great Expectations.

Rather like some of their peers in the adult market, including Mills and Boon, publishers of popular fiction for children embraced their readership in a paternal fashion. This was, of course, the legacy of such publishers as the Religious Tract Society and Lord Northcliffe, who led moral crusades against penny dreadfuls. Both authors and publishers of the bestselling series of children's books and magazines during this period were remarkably conscious, even proud, of their role in loco parentis. Underlying such 'responsibility' was intense competition, and the desire not to offend either children or, more importantly, their parents. The parent, in fact, was the unknown, omniscient quantity that had to be considered by any ambitious publisher or author. D.C. Thomson, for example, carefully screened all contents of its magazines, for fear

37 'What Children Read', P.C. 12 November 1932 p. 561

38 C.M.J., *ibid.*

that parents might object, and ban the papers from the house. Lawrence Cotterell, of Harrap publishers, claimed that the first question which his firm posed when considering a manuscript of a new children's book was, 'Will the children and the adults responsible for their upbringing and education, like this book?'³⁹

Captain W.E. Johns epitomised this new breed of writers for children. Johns believed that authors bore a great responsibility in protecting the vulnerable minds of their young readers. His series of air adventures featuring 'Biggles' and 'Worrals' offered a generation of boys and girls lessons in patriotism and duty to one's country. The first 'Biggles' novel was published in 1935. During the Second World War the Air Ministry, impressed by the popularity of Johns' hero among boys, and the value of 'Biggles' as a recruiting aid for the flying corps, persuaded Johns to create a female counterpart. Worrals of the W.A.A.F. was published in 1941. Both series were also serialized in such magazines as the B.O.P. and G.O.P., and was a throwback of sorts to the intensely patriotic atmosphere of the late nineteenth century periodicals. Johns, like Arthur Ransome, initially wrote for an adult audience; his style changed considerably when faced with an increasing army of young admirers:

Success was due I think, to the fact that I never wrote down to boys. At first the stories were adult. But soon perceiving that with a growing juvenile readership I had certain responsibilities I toned down the expletives, cut out hard drink, and shaped the character to my own idea of what sort of man a boy should strive to become...If, by his exploits, he can

³⁹ Lawrence Cotterell, 'Before the "Juvenile" Reaches the Shop Window', T.C. 25 September 1948 p. 5

produce men like himself, the country should be well served. ⁴⁰

Among the principles that Johns tried to instill in his readers - both boys and girls - were decent behaviour, sportsmanship, unselfish team-work, and loyalty to Crown, parents and rightful authority. 'I teach a boy to be a man, for without that essential qualification he'll never be anything', he said, adding:

Today, more than ever before, the training of the juvenile mind is important. The adult author has little hope of changing the outlook, politics, or way of life of a reader, whose ideas are fixed. The brain of a boy is flexible. It can be twisted in any direction. A born hero-worshipper, he adores his heroes, and what they do he will do, so by the actions of his heroes will his own character be formed.⁴¹

It is difficult to ascertain whether this moral stuff had any appreciable effect upon the young reader. But as the series continued to sell well into the 1950s, Johns saw no reason to change his style. The Worrals books, moreover, have been particularly praised: 'For thousands of girls growing up during the 1940s and 1950s, it can be said that the Worrals books influenced them in challenging the old sexist assumptions',⁴² though this is not praise Johns would necessarily have appreciated.

40 Quoted in T.C. 2 July 1949 pp. 10-11

41 Captain W.E. Johns, 'What the modern boy expects of his hero, Biggles', T.C. 20 August 1949 p. 15

42 Peter Berresford Ellis and Piers Williams, By Jove, Biggles! (London, 1981), p. 190

III

Why did children choose to read what they apparently did? As might be expected, the reasons given by librarians, retailers, adults and the children themselves are varied and often inconsistent. There are, however, some common characteristics, many of which are reminiscent of adult reading habits. Children, for example, craved escapism, seeking excitement and adventure in their reading to complement action from the cinema, and also as a release from an often dull existence at home and at school. They also turned to fiction for information, and to satisfy their natural curiosity of such 'exotic' matters as public school life and affairs of the heart.

In 1937 Mass-Observation attempted to discover why children read, from essays collected from working-class children aged 13-16 on the title, 'Why I read books'.⁴³ 'Books', as in most cases, also referred to magazines. L. Straus (L/5/A) admitted he read some books for pleasure and thrills. 'In books sometimes classed as "trash" "nonsense" or some other term there is often some knowledge to be gained by reading them', he wrote. This was certainly the case with 'Biggles' and its treatment of aviation, and of the various articles in the 'Big 5' papers. Thomas Kedward

43 Mass-Observation, predictably, did not specify what kind of school these children attended, only the age range and level. Given the region, and the fact that Mass-Observation would not have been interested in replies from public-school children, it can be assumed that these were state-school children from the working classes. (M-O 'Reading' Box 1 File B [9 September 1937]; 160 essays in all)

Lambelle (L/5/A), read for self-improvement: 'The books about adventure have more grip than books about love but I read them to increase my vocabulary and for the spelling of the words'. Indeed, the magazine publishers prided themselves on correct grammar and spelling. But some children read simply for the sake of reading; according to E. Moy (U/5/B),

My favourite books are detective or school stories or some other exciting kind of book. I do not read for the sake of perfecting my English grammar or any other kind of thing like that but only because it is a kind of hobby.

This distinction between reading for pleasure and reading for knowledge was also mentioned by E. Bramley (U/5/C). 'I get much pleasure in reading twopenny books better known as twopenny bloods. I also read books in order to gain knowledge'. But often, particularly in the case of a series like 'Biggles', these two converged:

I read more Navy and Army books than any other kind. This is because I am going to join the army or the navy. (L. Hall, L/5/A)

Books which I prefer most are books of air stories by 'Johns' usually thrilling episodes of 'Biggles and Co'. This gives me a lot of knowledge concerning air-planes.

(N. Barker, U/4/A)

Flying stories often tell of the difficulties of the pioneers of flying or of the difficulties in the war when at first machine guns could not fire through the air-screw...War stories are sometimes very far-fetched but most of them show the grim horrors of war and many dangers which have to be endured.

(G. Oxendale, U/4/A)

Some Middlesbrough schoolchildren said they read to escape from a depressing reality. 'I read to pass the time away for it is better than lying about the house doing nothing', C. Crooks (U/5/B) wrote. 'I read also to take my mind off some regrettable incident'. A.

Hoyland (L/4/B) wrote, 'My greatest pleasure is to sit down with a book of pirates... when you are frightened a book of interesting stories will take your mind of (sic) your loneliness'. Lastly, the popularity of 'bloods' is evident from a number of replies from boys and girls. 'There are books like the 'Wizard' and 'Hotspur' which a great number of boys read', one girl, K. Myers (U/5/A), wrote. 'I like to read these but some of the stories are silly and are not worth reading'. But another girl, F. Marwood (U/4/A), wrote, 'The best books are the Wizard, Rover, Etc. which are published each week'. A classmate, John Barker (U/4/A), agreed in a straightforward manner. 'Most boys like reading twopenny books because of the exciting tales. Of course I am one of these kind'. R. Brown (U/4/A) admitted reading bloods to obtain the free football and cricket cards.

It is difficult today to appreciate the hold which the weekly magazines in particular had upon children, let alone their effect on tastes in reading. 'I find it hard to understand what influences made us cast out our cultural nets so haphazardly', Osborne, an avid reader of Gem, Magnet, Hotspur, and Wizard when young, recalled.⁴⁴ One important factor, emphasized by Mass-Observation, was the longevity of the children's magazine market, which by the Second World War had conditioned the reading habits of three generations of children. In a 1947 survey commissioned by Penguin Books to explore the potential for their new 'Puffin' series of quality children's books, Mass-Observation concluded that the

44 Osborne, p. 81

'tuppenny blood' trade militated against the sale of books in general, not to mention well-produced ones:

Puffins obviously try and attract by quality, but the effects of quality production on children are unknown and virtually unexamined. For decades children have been reading with enthusiasm badly produced magazines, badly printed on bad paper, and it seems as things are, the rival to the Puffin is not primarily the cloth bound book at all but the paper magazine. This was stressed by many school teachers and particularly by teachers in elementary schools. A typical schoolteacher comment was something like this:

'Paper backed books are not used in the schools. Some of the girls have those: Woman's Own and Home and Beauty - sometimes they have them with them - I expect they borrow them from their mothers. And the boys read the ordinary weekly comics'. (Stepney)

45

The popularity of some book series, such as 'Biggles' and 'William', could be explained by the fact that they resembled 'bloods' in book form, rather than conventional books, which the typical schoolchild regarded with dread. When asked in 1926 what boys read by preference, the chief librarian in Edinburgh put the matter quite simply: any thriller or a Robinson Crusoe-type novel would not be refused:

The typical sort was that in which going out of bounds, drinking, smoking, betting, money-lending, petty thieving were recurring themes. No book written to this pattern seemed stale to boys, so that there was little inducement for authors to write more original or better books.

46

Here again the influence of the 'blood' is evident.

45 A Report on Penguin World, M-O File Report 2545, pp. 203-204; 205-206

46 P.C. 3 July 1926 p. 7

Another factor, particularly important among the lower-middle and working classes (as we have noted with adult readers) was the lack of home libraries, which tended to encourage disrespect for real books among children. In the St. Pancras survey, over 50 percent of the children surveyed came from homes which contained fewer than 50 books; of these 'libraries', half contained fewer than 25 volumes, and most were books of verse.⁴⁷ Osborne admitted that his generation was the product of 'homes where books and music were almost completely disregarded. Although no one said as much, people who went out to work every day had no time for such luxuries'.⁴⁸ They did, however, eagerly devour other 'books', namely novelettes and 'bloods', which were disposed of or swapped when read. Mass-Observation noted how indifferent, even hostile to children's reading working-class parents could be. One Chelsea woman in 1943, when asked about her son's reading habits, replied, 'Well, my younger boy always used to have his nose in a book - I had to stop him - he was getting round-shouldered. I don't think it's healthy for children to read too much'.⁴⁹ Similarly, Jephcott noted that working-class girls enjoyed erotic bloods as much for the thrills as for their ease of reading amid distractions. 'It must be uphill work, in homes where there are rarely periods of complete silence, let alone absence of physical movement, for the girl to undertake any reading that demands much closer thought than the exploits of Raymond, or any

47 Engledow and Farr, p. 9

48 Osborne, p. 81

49 F/50/C, M-0 'Reading' Box 8 File F (Chelsea, 13 October 1943); G.S.T. This woman said that she liked 'a nice love-tale to read on a Sunday afternoon. Sometimes the girl says, "This is a nice one", and I take it'.

other of Crystal's characters, compel'.⁵⁰ Finally, James D. Stewart, chief librarian in Bermondsey, claimed that the increase in usage of libraries by children also affected choice. In olden days when books were chosen by lists, boys, for example, depended upon their parents' guidance. Now, when children were given a choice, Stewart claimed:

when the actual books could be sampled before being borrowed, boys naturally preferred those authors who knew of the existence of motor cars, aeroplanes, wireless, and other features of the present day...It has nothing to do with literary merit, but is governed almost entirely by the contemporary environment.

51

The tuppenny 'bloods' for boys and girls aroused the most interest and controversy among the adult population. The strong reactions, one way or the other, resemble the arguments against the penny dreadfuls in the nineteenth century. The principal defence of these papers was their convenience, their encouragement of reading outside school, and their harmless fiction which stimulated the imagination. L. Stanley Jast described 'bloods' as 'a god-send to the errand-boy and to the maid-of-all-work': they could be purchased by the children themselves; were small enough to carry in a pocket and read anywhere; and were passed on or exchanged for others. He also praised the papers' affinity with their readers; the author wrote to you, not over you, which could only serve to build the reading habit.⁵² Similarly, Rodney Bennett condemned the tendency to look down on the errand boy with a magazine stuck in his pocket; it

50 Jephcott, p. 36

51 James D. Stewart, F.L.A., 'What Boys Read', The Boy 6 (March 1934), p. 171

52 L. Stanley Jast, The Child as Reader (London, 1927), p. 49

is better to remember that 'these boys' lives are dull enough, and if the "penny dreadful" enlivens things a little for them, well, good luck to them'.⁵³ Similarly, Frank Richards thought the duty of a boys' author, whose largest audience was from the working class, was:

to entertain his readers, make them as happy as possible, give them a feeling of cheerful security, turn their thoughts to healthy pursuits, and above all to keep them away from unhealthy introspection, which in early youth can do only harm. If there is a Chekhov among my readers, I fervently hope that the effect of the Magnet will be to turn him into a Bob Cherry!

54

The only real harm done to children by 'bloods', according to Edgar Osborne, Derbyshire County Librarian, was in their shoddy style, slip-shod thought and poor production-ill-coloured paper. His conclusion, endorsed later by Jenkinson, was that the best remedy was to improve on these papers, not ban them, as the B.O.P. had shown in 1879.⁵⁵ Similarly, Frederick Cowles, Swinton and Pendlebury Librarian, said that bloods, read by ages 11-12, 'do no harm, and, on the whole, the language of such publications is no worse and no better than that used in many of the books produced for children of this age'.⁵⁶

Many critics, heartened by the activity of reading among children, tempered their personal distaste for 'bloods'. J. MacAlister Brew believed that, although children should read better

53 Quoted in T.C. 9 August 1930 p. 9

54 'Frank Richards Replies', p. 540

55 Quoted in P.C. 5 November 1932 p. 527

56 Frederick Cowles, F.R.S.L., 'Children's Reading in Wartime', P.C. 23 August 1941 p. 92

fiction, it was an encouragement that they read at all, if only bloods. At least these were 'impregnated with a wholesome if elementary, but quite distinct moral code'.⁵⁷ But the potential danger was that children might grow tired of such reading, and therefore of reading in general:

The tragedy would seem to be that many young people become the victims of their ability to read because when their taste for thrillers and the more luscious type of romance has been sated, they are unable to find a bridge to adult reading and they 'Give up reading' because 'all the tales are much the same with the names changed' - which after all is how most of us, if we are honest, graduated out of school stories through E.M. Dell to Conrad. 58

Similarly. at the Library Association Conference in 1950, Dr. R.G. Ralph, youth section librarian at the R.A.F. Training College, Cranwell, urged librarians to be tolerant and patient. The morally bad, the psychologically harmful, and the poorly written should all be banned, but these were rarely found in children's books anyway. 'Remember that a child was unlikely to jump from comics to Conrad; but could go from comics to Edgar Rice Burroughs, from Burroughs to Buchan, from Buchan to Masefield, and from Masefield to Conrad'.⁵⁹ Both Margaret Phillips and Brew suggested simple, persuasive substitutions for popular literature which proved successful in their respective teaching experiences of young girls. 'Sexton Blake can be replaced by Conan Doyle, or by Chesterton. If school stories are wanted, Tom Brown and The Hill are better than The Captain and the

57 J. MacAlister Brew, Informal Education (London, 1947), p. 131

58 Ibid., p. 130

59 'From Comics to Conrad: The Librarian as Readers' Guide', The Times 21 September 1950 p. 2

Boys' Friend', Phillips said.⁶⁰ Brew recalled the 'intense interest' among young people when they discovered that Treasure Island was a blood and Jane Eyre a thriller, which encouraged them to read both classic works.⁶¹

IV

Two significant features of the reading habits of these boys and girls during this period are a preference of both sexes for 'adult fiction' over 'juvenile fiction', and a fondness of 'boys' fiction' among girl readers. Both are illustrated in an example from the Bookseller in 1935, which described the reading habits of 'Matilda', a 'normal 14 year old'. Matilda had read 58 books over the past year, 11 by her favourite author, 'Sapper'. She was also fond of P.G. Wodehouse, Arthur Conan Doyle, Ian Hay and Dennis Wheatley - all authors with a traditionally male appeal. Matilda obtained her books through her own library subscription, presumably one of the tuppenny libraries. Matilda's generation, the Bookseller concluded, enjoyed thrillers and adventure books as much as boys; over half of her list fell under these headings. It had become increasingly apparent, moreover, that children were mimicking the reading tastes of their parents:

It appears that fourteen-year-olds prefer the books meant for grown-ups rather than the

60 Phillips, p. 112

61 J. MacAlister Brew, In the Service of Youth (London, 1943), p. 359

literature specially written for children; that the 'girls' school' story is not in universal demand; and, cheering news for authors, that the young are clamouring for their work and, in one case at least, getting it.

62

While Matilda's tastes were perhaps not typical of most children, given the popularity of such authors as Richmal Crompton and Captain W.E. Johns, there is evidence to suggest that this trend was growing, particularly among lower-middle and working-class children. It is likely, therefore, that the prodigious adult demand for light fiction had its origins in the reading preferences of children and adolescents. Frederick Cowles was one of many contemporary observers who tried to bring this fact to the attention of the public. By the age of 14, he claimed, the reading habit was firmly formed by the tuppenny bloods: girls were wallowing in 'sentimental rubbish', boys in mysteries, westerns and sea stories. Given the lack of guidance when they left school, by the age of 16, 'both boys and girls are reading adult literature. This is to be regretted, to a certain extent, but neither publishers nor librarians have solved the problems of catering for adolescent tastes'.⁶³

Jenkinson's documentation of the extent of reading of boys' bloods among girls aged 12-15 did not come as a surprise, merely confirming the long-held suspicions in the trade. Among children, gender differentiation in reading tastes was less apparent than, say, for adult readers of romantic fiction. The popularity of the B.O.P. among girls, for example, was well-known, and Frank Richards noted that 'The Magnet is intended chiefly for readers up to

62 B. 9 October 1935 p. 1024

63 Cowles, 1941, p. 92

sixteen; though I am proud to know that it has readers of sixty! It is read by girls as well as boys'.⁶⁴ In 1922 Phyllis Orgel, 11, of London claimed that girls have a larger number of books to read because 'they will not hesitate to read a book written exclusively for boys. I do not think there are many boys who would condescend to read a girl's book!' She added that she had 'read and re-read' Treasure Island and Kidnapped.⁶⁵ Jane Hardington, aged 14, was one of many female fans of Ransome, Saville, and especially 'Biggles'. 'Captain W.E. Johns seems to be the favourite author with all the boys I know. They get very excited about the secret missions of Biggles, and I believe their sisters generally manage to read about Biggles'.⁶⁶ W.H. Smith reported in 1936 that another publishing 'myth' was shattered when Collins received a letter from a Lancashire schoolgirl, requesting to join their Wild West Club. 'We girls take as much interest in Westerns (or even more, as the case may be) than the boys', she wrote.⁶⁷

A body of evidence suggests that to an increasing degree children mimicked the tastes of their parents, thereby nurturing a fondness for popular fiction early in life. The main reasons appear

64 'Frank Richards Replies', p. 533

65 P.C. 22 April 1922 p. 360. The Editor certainly agreed, noting that Phyllis's letter 'confirms what has so often been said in our columns for generations past, viz., that most girls like books written for boys as much or even more than the books specially written for girls'. The Derbyshire Public Libraries survey in 1932, which revealed the favourite book of both boys and girls, aged 10-14, to be Treasure Island, dispelled the idea that Stevenson's classic was exclusively a book for boys. (The Times 8 September 1932 p. 12)

66 T.C. 27 August 1949 p. 7

67 Ibid., 1 February 1936 p. 12

to be three. Firstly, natural experimentation with and adaptation of adult ways and means by children was extended to the literature which crammed the newsagent shops and the libraries and which was promoted by the latest films. Secondly, as we have seen, provision in libraries for school-leaving children was poor; most graduated to the logical successors of 'bloods': thrillers, love stories and erotic bloods. Finally, as libraries in lower-middle and working-class homes were uncommon, these 'books' were freely passed around. Jephcott described the family of one of her subjects, a working girl of 17: 'her father, a pitman, reads the twopenny love novels that her mother brings home whenever she goes shopping. The house is full of Women's Novels, The Moon Series, and True Love Stories. Two other brothers who work at the pit enjoy Randland Romances'.⁶⁸

In fact, girls more than boys expressed favour for the works of 'adult' authors and for 'adult' magazines; the principal attraction, it would seem, was love and romance. In 1913 Moulder found that working girls displayed more 'adult' tastes than boys in their choice of Mrs. Henry Wood, 'Ouida', Miss Braddon and Marie Corelli. The weekly papers so beloved by these girls were taken 'mainly for the touching "to-be-continued" love stories which are kept running through its pages, stories that often contain records of quite impossible heroes and heroines'.⁶⁹ According to Jenkinson, both Senior and Secondary School girls displayed adult tastes in reading, although of a very different nature: the working-class girl preferred the so-called 'erotic' bloods, the middle class girl

68 Pearl Jephcott, Girls Growing Up (London, 1942), pp. 100-101

69 Moulder, pp. 544-545

romantic novels. These tastes were probably shaped by different environments:

The Senior School girl goes out into a life which offers her little chance of growing beyond these values and standards. It is significant that the Senior School girls often described these magazines as 'books'...when they recognized the Schoolgirl's Own and Wizard as 'bloods'. For them literature tends to be such stuff as Miracle is made of.

The Secondary School girl seems to miss erotic magazines and moves on to Dell, Orzcy, Porter, and Gray, with the possibility of wider and deeper reading experiences before she is exhausted by 'the hard realities of life', by earning a living.

70

Similarly, Jephcott found that working-class girls progressed naturally from 'girls' books' to their mothers' papers upon leaving school. On Tyneside, 'The girls go straight on from the comics of their childhood's reading to Silver Star and the other more suggestive magazines of that constellation'.⁷¹ She estimated that the circulations of these provocative magazines, mainly published by D.C. Thomson, 'must be very extensive because the magazines are universally known among young people'. An astonishing amount was consumed each week, Jephcott observed:

One not entirely untypical girl who gets a great deal of pleasure from the (cheaper women's magazines) bought the following magazines in a single week (November 1945): Oracle, Miracle, Weekly Welcome, Woman's Own, Woman, Woman's Weekly, Home Chat, Red Letter, Red Star, Family Star, Picture Show and Glamour.

She also borrowed, from her particular friend, Lucky Star, Silver Star, and Melody Maker. In the same week she read, too, a 4d. romance,

70 Jenkinson, p. 219

71 Jephcott, 1942, p. 101

Love Tangle, and a 1/3 book, Unsuspected Witness.

She paid less than the market price for these magazines because she deals at a shop which works on a 'take-two-old-ones-in-and-get-one-new-one-out' system; but even so her week's spending on reading was about 5/- out of her 65/- income.

72

A 1950 investigation of working-class boys went further. Martin Parr spoke before the London Council of Social Services on his seven years' experience with boys aged 14-18 in his Shoreditch club. Parr could not interest his charges in Dickens, Thackeray or Anthony Hope; Robinson Crusoe was quite out of favour but there was 'a regular, consistent demand' for Henty, of all authors. In general, however, boys' tastes were firmly in the adult sections:

Among the 'indispensable' books and authors for a boys' club were, he found, Zane Grey, Sydney Horler, Agatha Christie, Nevil Shute, Poisoned Arrow, Tarzan and I Chose Freedom.

The 'most beloved' were Sherlock Holmes, William, Bulldog Drummond, Biggles, Peter Cheyney and The Saint.

73

Clearly Johns and Crompton had much, somewhat unexpected, competition. Some publishers were aware of the advanced tastes of boys; Hodder and Stoughton advertised the latest 'Bulldog Drummond' thriller in 1949 as, 'For the delight of a huge public - Man and Boy'.⁷⁴

72 Jephcott, 1948, p. 113

73 'Reading in Youth Clubs', B. 18 February 1950 p. 224; also 'Why Boys Read: Decline of Robinson Crusoe', The Times 15 February 1950 p. 8

74 B. 5 February 1949 p. 190. Jenkinson did explore the popularity of 'adult' authors among boys, but his analysis was limited to the likes of Buchan, Dickens, Scott and Mark Twain. Surprisingly, he dismissed swiftly the appeal of lower-brow authors, blaming lack of

The influence of the cinema in promoting such authors among children must not be underestimated. Children maintained similar tastes in films as in reading. It is hardly surprising that the favourite types of films cited by children aged 11-15 in the 1948 Social Survey were in the 'Mystery, murder, thrillers' category: 48 percent of boys and 33 percent of girls. In 1949, boys were equally divided between 'Cowboy' and 'Gangster/ Detective' (25% each) while girls preferred 'Musicals' (22%).⁷⁵ The 1950 Birmingham survey concluded that adolescents, like adults, were susceptible to reading books which had been filmed or mentioned on the wireless. Among favourite books listed were Forever Amber, Gone With the Wind, No Orchids for Miss Blandish, Rebecca and Jane Eyre.⁷⁶ Colwell, for one, blamed films for a child's often perverse taste in reading:

In a census taken recently among girls, fifty percent voted unreservedly for the mystery story. 'I like mystery and murder', said one. 'I like murders and kidnapping' said another, aged eleven!

space; this evidence would perhaps have been more revealing: 'A few, but not many, authors who write for the adult market, but are quite widely read by boys, have been omitted, including Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Sapper," and Edgar Wallace. The reading of these authors by children has its significances, of course, and would not be neglected in a complete survey'. (p. 48)

75 Ward, 1948, p. 46; Ward, 'Children and the Cinema', Social Survey New Series 131 (April 1949), p. 36

76 Reed, p. 45. Similarly, Hilde T. Himmelweit's 1958 study of the effects of television on children found that the most consistently popular type of programme among boys and girls age 10-14 was the adult serial crime thriller, including 'Fabian of Scotland Yard' and 'Dixon of Dock Green'. In general, they preferred adult programmes to children's programmes and, as such, the 'child, though sharing the viewing with his parents, may be developing adult tastes earlier'. The study concluded, however, that television stimulated the reading habit and heightened curiosity in a wider range of books, including non-fiction. (Hilde T. Himmelweit et.al., Television and the Child [London, 1958], pp. 24, 125-127)

This seems a strange demand from a girl, but it is typical of many requests in the children's library. I can only conclude that it results from the undue publicity given to the sensational, and to the prevalence of the 'gangster' film.

77

The opinions of young readers themselves support these conclusions. Jane Shirley, aged 12, liked Blyton and Greek mythology but reserved her greatest praise for thrillers, 'especially the Sherlock Holmes and Bulldog Drummond books, which send lovely creeping thrills down my back. Agatha Christie writes gorgeous murder stories and you never can discover the murderer till right at the end'.⁷⁸ One would hardly expect a child of 12 to enjoy 'Sapper's' works. W. Curtis, a Middlesbrough schoolboy (L/5/B, 1937), also admitted reading 'Bulldog Drummond' 'because I like the way that he expresses himself'. A classmate, R.S. Brown, agreed. 'There are several interesting crime writers such as Sapper and Edgar Wallace whom I like because they know what they are writing about'.⁷⁹

A principal attack on the 'advanced' tastes of child readers was the harm these would inflict on young undeveloped minds. This line of argument was similar to that launched against the penny dreadfuls in the 1870s, and the claim that tales of highwaymen promoted juvenile delinquency. Although a 1938 survey of young offenders did reveal the prominence of 'Reading' among favorite leisure activities (either the most popular, or a close second to 'Sport'), the type of books and magazines read was not mentioned, nor

77 Colwell, 1935, p. 841

78 'Our Favourite Authors and Books', T.C. 20 August 1949 p. 11

79 M-0 'Reading' Box 1 File B (9 September 1937)

was any connection proposed between reading and crime.⁸⁰ If a child demanded 'adult' reading, Brew actually preferred detective stories over bloods and thrillers. At least the former genre had attracted 'clever and conscientious' authors such as Dorothy L. Sayers; was rooted on the side of law and order; and encouraged the use of one's wits rather than frightening one out of them.⁸¹ Children agreed. In 1934 Collins received another letter, this time from a 14-year-old schoolgirl in Leeds, asking to join their Crime Club; she apparently did so despite great opposition from her 'Auntie':

When I was away at my Auntie's, my friend sent me a cutting out of a newspaper. This said that a boy in a Crime Club had hanged himself. My aunt was shocked when she heard that I was in one. I told her that I wasn't going to hang myself, and that the best authors wrote for the Crime Club and that it took a very clever person to write a first-class mystery.

She said something about 'putting ideas into children's heads!' But most children are not as innocent [sic] as most grown-ups fondly imagin [sic]. Besides I don't think that Crime Books make people want to go and do a few murders. Most crime books are just the opposite. They show how hard a life of crime really is. For however ingenious the murderer may be he is invariably found out in the last chapter or before. This should deter any would-be criminals.

82

Similarly, a 'Club Boy', R.H. Dixon, in 1935 dismissed claims that gangs of small boys committed minor thefts as a result of reading 'Wizards, Rovers and what-not...In my opinion, adventure yarns have

80 A.M. Carr-Saunders, Hermann Mannheim, and E.C. Rhodes, Young Offenders: An Enquiry into Juvenile Delinquency (Cambridge, 1943). p. 93

81 Brew, 1947, p. 46. She added that detective stories flourished only in democratic countries; Germany and Italy banned them in the 1930s.

82 B. 26 September 1934 p. 636. The writer also claimed that 'good' literature such as Shakespeare was just as 'horrible' as crime books.

done no one any harm yet. I read 'penny dreadfuls' for years and I don't think I am a criminal'.⁸³

On the subject of child reading of women's magazines and 'bloods', critics were divided. George Orwell would have found an ally in Lucille Iremonger, an enemy in Madeleine Henrey. These two ladies squared off in a series in the Trade Circular in 1950. Henrey extolled the merits of magazine articles, of which seven out of ten were educational, dealing with cookery or sewing. These were excellent preparation, she claimed, as a girl's first thought 'is to get married and well it may be. That is our function in life'. In addition to educating their readers these publications also promoted the reading habit:

I gave up smoking without difficulty but I could not so easily give up Woman, Woman's Journal, Everywoman and the like. The teenagers who read them like I do and who appear to be so blamed for it, develop by necessity an urge to read not only more magazines but also more books, and as they become married women they, not the men, borrow most often from the lending libraries and eventually, if they can afford it, buy books.

84

But novelist Lucille Iremonger challenged Henrey, noting the comparison with smoking as an admission that women's weeklies were essentially 'mental drugs...Glossy fiction does not lead anyone to better literature, any more than a taste for chocolates develops a

83 R.H. Dixon, 'The Club Boy: Literature and Morals', The Boy 8 (Winter 1935-1936), p. 332. G.K. Tattersall, in reply, agreed: 'I am quite convinced that if I robbed a till, it would not be because I wanted to imitate a film-villain who conducts a gigantic bank-robbery. It would be because I wanted the money'. (pp. 334-335)

84 Mrs. Robert Henrey, 'Why Deride Teen-Ager and Her Magazines?' T.C. 27 May 1950 p. 19. Henrey was the author of 15 books including Matilda and the Chickens.

fine palate'. The library books chosen would only be much of the same, detrimental fiction, she maintained:

There is no humour in their love-stories, less wit, less realism. No understanding of what people are really like (or a determination to ignore it), and the plots are few, flimsy and unconvincing. Read one, and you have read them all. This is sickly stuff.

In moderation it does no harm. But a girl who (as one of the 80,000 adolescents did) reads 24 of these publications a week is living in a world of dangerous fantasy. Read in excess, I hold, these magazines could be a danger to society, certainly as much so to girls as gangster films to boys.

The glamour-struck girl goes into marriage in a spirit of fear, jealous possessiveness and bovaristic discontent. She is 'a natural' for suburban neurosis, and for making her husband miserable. The end of this road is one of the forty thousand squalid divorces a year. 85

Mills and Boon would hardly have agreed, although Phillips and Jephcott did. Both women were alarmed by the degree of unconscious absorption of ideas, values, and a distorted world-view obtained through such publications by working-class girls. Phillips found this was reflected in her continuation students' writing styles:

essays, poems, and stories written in leisure time, sometimes of unmanageable length, were beginning to pour in. But the stories, alas, fell almost without exception into one of half a dozen classes. There was the story of slum life based on George R. Sims; the war melodrama with the German villain and the English hero; the sadly sentimental story recalling Little Meg's Children; the crude school-story; the 'strong' personal romance in which love is identified with jealousy; and the supernatural

85 Lucille Iremonger, 'Our Girls Deserve Better', T.C. 10 June 1950 pp. 26, 29. Iremonger was author of the novel Creole. The T.C. editor added a postscript saying, 'We do not share all Mrs. Iremonger's explosive opinions'.

story, founded on Richard Marsh and the cinema serial.

86

She admitted, moreover, her 'shock' at reading a violent short story, 'The Girl who Paid her Price', written by girl of 16 with an apparently misleading 'facial expression of childlike innocence'. Similarly, one of Jephcott's subjects in 1948, a Needham girl called Celia, produced a novel, Greater Love, in her spare time after working in a factory. This, too, exhibited all the drama, frivolous love and happy-ever-after endings that were contained in the pulp magazines so eagerly devoured. Jephcott was appalled by the emphasis on sex and romance without a thought to the realities of marriage:

The same girl observes that lots of people get married without any such bother as having to pay for a house or knowing how to run it - just for pleasure. An older woman puts it bluntly, saying, 'They think "We can't do it in the street or the pictures, only in bed - so let's get married"'.⁸⁷

87

But in 1925 the United Conference of members of the Training College Association and the Association of Head Masters was informed that less insistence should be given in schools on 'the virtues of Scott and Dickens' as these discouraged children from reading. One speaker's experience had shown that 'usually boys who professed a keen love for Scott and Dickens were found to be not so good at composition as others who frankly said they preferred modern writers, Zane Grey, for example'.⁸⁸ Although this is unlikely, light fiction did, at the very least, encourage children to develop the reading habit, and publishers such as D.C. Thomson actually believed, as we

86 Phillips, p. 104

87 Jephcott, 1948, p. 80

88 The Times 9 January 1925 p. 7

will see, that its insistence on correct grammar and spelling had a beneficial influence.

The Carnegie U.K. Trust, in presenting their report on unemployed young people in 1943, observed that 'the only activity of school-life carried into the post-school years to any appreciable extent was reading'.⁸⁹ This chapter has attempted to describe just this, and to reveal continuities between young and adult, and boy and girl, readers. Children and adolescents age 10-14 were active readers, particularly of 'bloods', school stories and adventures. To a large extent, girls preferred 'books' (usually magazines or novelettes) normally associated with boys and masculine tastes— notably, Westerns and thrillers, 'William' and 'Biggles'. Both boys and girls, moreover, shared the same affection for light adult fiction as their parents. In some cases, this was a natural progression, from the boys' 'blood' to the 'Bulldog Drummond' thriller, for example. The point is, not so much the actual books and authors which young people read, but the fact that the inculcation of such reading tastes at a young age represents an important continuity between adults and children. For lower-middle and working-class children a 'bookless' environment at home, and parental disinterest in 'quality' reading, may have encouraged their

89 Disinherited Youth, p. 101

marked preference for magazines over books; the cinema may have had a similar effect. We can also see how children's magazines ('bloods') were shaped by these tastes. A desire for new and exciting material favoured D.C. Thomson's lively blend of science fiction and international settings, while the stuffy Religious Tract Society magazines, born of the nineteenth century, suffered the same 'antediluvian' fate as Henty, Baines Reed, Marryat and other authors.

Chapter 6

'Get Me the Boy From the Age of Six':

D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd.

The most successful publisher of letterpress weeklies for women and for boys during this period was D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. of Dundee. In his lifetime Mr. D.C. Thomson, the founder, was branded a 'warlock', 'the newspaper Mussolini of Dundee', 'the Howard Hughes of publishing', and 'a man of reactionary views' who belonged to the 'Citizen Kane tradition'. The Sunday Observer in 1952 called him a legendary figure, a veritable 'Northcliffe of the North' whose influence extended beyond the confines of his printing plant: 'The citizens of Dundee have for long been as conscious of his existence as Edinburgh people are of the Castle looming over them'.¹ On the other hand, in recognition of the firm's brilliant achievements in magazine journalism (including such titles as The Beano and The People's Friend), D.C. Thomson has been praised as 'a publishing phenomenon', 'a brilliant success story', and 'one of the most powerfully-entrenched and successful publishers in the country'. Yet in spite of such notoriety little is known about this reclusive firm; Orwell's 1940 essay provoked a profound reaction in Dundee and is a

1 'Profile - D.C. Thomson', The Sunday Observer 18 May 1952 (D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. archives)

major reason why the firm to this day regards journalists and researchers with suspicion.² This chapter will attempt to explain the extraordinary success of D.C. Thomson by looking at the firm's history, the ways in which it entrenched itself as the dominant force in the market, and its editorial policies. As one employee on the boys' papers recalled, 'I think whoever was thinking in the background was trying to shape the nation's thinking too. Get me the boy from the age of six, and working it from there'.³ This was a reciprocal relationship, however, with the readership dictating much of what was published.

I

W., D. C. & F. Thomson, the forerunner of D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd., was founded in 1886 by a prominent Dundee family. In that year William Thomson II, a shipowner, rescued The Dundee Courier from financial trouble and acquired its publisher, Charles Alexander & Co.

2 As one Thomson employee explained in 1950: 'He wrote about our place once. Kicked the shit out of it, he did. They still haven't got over it. Naturally they'll do what they can to stop it happening again'. Orwell's views on editorial policy and influence were endorsed in later years by a number of writers, culminating in a scathing account of life at the firm by a former employee, George Rosie, in the Sunday Times. (Benny Green, 'George Orwell, Great Wilson and the Tuppenny Bloods', The Spectator 26 December 1970 p. 841; George Rosie, 'The Private Life of Lord Snooty', The Sunday Times Magazine 29 July 1973 pp. 8-16).

3 Jack Mackersie, 11 August 1987. Mackersie was interviewed in Dundee on two occasions: 10 April 1986 (JM-1) and 11 August 1987 (JM-2). He joined the firm as a junior subeditor on the Skipper. As Editor of Hotspur after the war he engineered its redesign as a picture-story paper, the New Hotspur, in 1959.

At the age of 23 his son, David Couper,⁴ was placed in charge, soon joined by another son, Frederick. In later years D.C. recognized his brother, who died in 1917, as the genius behind the firm's early success with such newspapers as the Courier and The Weekly News, and two weekly papers for women, Weekly Welcome (1896-1960) and Red Letter (1899-present). William Thomson died in 1896, and in 1905 the company name was changed to D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. The business has remained in the family's hands ever since. Twenty years of bitter competition with the publisher of The Dundee Advertiser, John Leng and Co., ended in 1906 when a pooling arrangement of the two companies was reached. D.C. Thomson retained two-thirds interest in the new firm, and John Leng (three different families) one-third.⁵ The companies continued to publish separately, however, until the 1930s. In time the management of both companies was assumed by D.C. Thomson. By 1939 separate advertising in trade journals ceased, replaced by listings of the 'Thomson-Leng Women's Publications', and by 1949 only one Leng family member was left on the Board of Directors. The Leng name, however, remains in use; it is one of several D.C. Thomson companies.

In retrospect, it is clear that the acquisition of John Leng was a shrewd investment that considerably strengthened D.C. Thomson. John Leng was an established fixture in the Scottish magazine market, renowned for the most popular weekly, The People's

4 Hereafter referred to as 'D.C.'

5 The exact reasons for this merger are unknown, but it may have been precipitated by the death, in 1906, of Sir John Leng. Leng, the founder of the publishing house, was the Liberal and Progressive M.P. for Dundee.

Friend (1869-present). They also published The People's Journal, a local-interest publication known throughout Scotland as the 'Ploughman's Bible'. These titles, along with My Weekly (1910-present), Secrets (1932-present), and Flame (1935-1940) were the most successful women's papers published by the firm, even after the Lengs were eclipsed on the management level. Hence, D.C. Thomson's statement, 'It has never been the policy to acquire outside papers (the exception being The Scots Magazine in 1927)', is hardly true.⁶ The Leng papers, moreover, found their largest following in Scotland, thereby giving D.C. Thomson an assured market there while it concentrated on penetrating the market south of the Tweed.

Thomson-Leng's letterpress weeklies for women and for boys exploited the demand for stories of romance, detection and adventure created by light fiction and the cinema. The firm did not publish titles exclusively for men or for girls, possibly because the women's papers contained schoolgirl stories for all ages, and men were readers of two Thomson publications which attracted both sexes and all ages: the detective-thriller monthly Dixon Hawke Library (1919-1941) and the football weekly, Topical Times (1919-1940).⁷ An early

6 Source: a current D.C. Thomson handout on the firm's history. The relationship between the Thomsons and the Lengs was probably a difficult one. There is some evidence to suggest this. For instance, Maurice Paterson, unlike other employees in Dundee, readily agreed to be interviewed, and unconditionally disclosed (in general terms) circulation figures for the women's papers, explaining, 'I'm a Leng man'. Until the eclipse of the Lengs at the management level, advertisements in trade publications freely included circulation figures.

7 The Dixon Hawke Library was published twice monthly, in novelette form, at 4d. This was D.C. Thomson's response to the successful Amalgamated Press detective series, Sexton Blake. The Topical Times featured pools tables, betting tips, the latest football, boxing and automobile racing news, and stories with sporting and crime themes

attempt at entering the girls' paper market (Blue Bird, 1922-1924) was unsuccessful.

The women's papers may be divided into two categories: the blood and thunder papers, and the romance papers. The blood and thunder papers had exotic titles which suited their sensational brand of fiction: Red Letter, Secrets, Flame (merged with Secrets in 1940), and two oddly-named ones, Family Star (1934-1977) and Red Star Weekly (1929-1983).⁸ Conversely, the romance papers had a homely ring: the People's Friend, My Weekly, Weekly Welcome, and Woman's Way (1927-1939, merged with Weekly Welcome). The longevity of the majority of these titles attests to the achievements of D.C. Thomson in a very competitive and changing market. All the papers had in common the Thomson commitment to service features, ranging from fashion patterns, gardening hints, and recipes to picture competitions, crosswords, humour, a children's page, and the ubiquitous advice column. Here especially the knack of Thomson editors of embracing the reader and making her feel at home (the so-called 'personal touch') was most apparent. Woman's Way, for example, featured 'Secrets told to Leonora Eyles: When you come to a difficult crossroads in your life and don't know which way to turn, please confide in me'.

('-And What a Fight!'). The correspondence columns advised readers on muscle-building and football trivia. The Advertisers' A.B.C. listed the circulation of the Topical Times as 257,386 per week, from 1926-1930.

8 Employees in Dundee are perplexed over the origin of the title for Red Star Weekly; according to one, 'Makes me think of the Red Star Allied Weekly'.

The average women's paper, cost 2d., was between 32 and 36 pages and included between six and ten short stories and serials. The character of the fiction varied according to the class of publication. The blood-and-thunder papers, for example, featured 'daring' stories about forbidden loves, domestic violence, and crime:

'The True Story of Mary Ashford - Were These Letters from the Man who Killed Her?'

Red Letter 20 May 1939

'A Rogue for a Sweetheart' - He was a jailbird and a thief - but that was just the sort of man Jill Cook wanted to walk out with.

Flame 27 May 1939

'No Mercy in her Heart' - The Story of Joan Morgan, whose Mother-in Law stole her baby from her.

Family Star 17 June 1939

The romance papers, on the other hand, contained traditional, sentimental fiction, usually love stories with just a touch of titillation:

'Someone Interested' - Just a gift of flowers, donor unknown, but they brought back youth and beauty and happiness to the lonely woman who received them.

My Weekly 21 August 1937

'A Stranger Steps In' - Janice was in love with handsome Hugh Wright, who could do everything. But that was before she taught a certain young man how to swim!

Weekly Welcome 23 July 1938

My Weekly and People's Friend published serial stories by such famous romantic novelists as Annie S. Swan and Mary Burchell, the latter one of several Mills and Boon writers under contract. These papers incorporated a particularly large percentage of advertisements, perhaps to defray the costs of purchasing serial rights.

It is hardly surprising to discover that the readership of the Thomson women's papers varied according to the type. Most papers were designed with a specific profile of reader in mind. For example, according to the firm, Secrets, Red Star Weekly and Flame were founded for mill workers in Scotland and in the industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire. These contained stories supposedly sought-after by working-class women. 'They liked not the spicy thing in terms of sex, but the spicy thing in terms of somebody murdering somebody else, this kind of thing', David Doig, who joined the firm in 1927, said. Flame, for instance, specialized in skullduggery stories: 'The heroes were baddies. This was slightly [what] we'd call downmarket'. Readers of Red Letter favoured a particular kind of serial story: 'a dastardly woman who schemed to get her way by murdering somebody cleverly. And then she got away with it. It was more or less a romantic detective story'.⁹ As we have seen, in the 1940s both Jenkinson and Jephcott highlighted the popularity of such blood-and-thunder papers as Red Letter and Red Star Weekly among working-class adolescent girls in particular.¹⁰

The romance papers, on the other hand, were socially more 'exclusive', given the old-fashioned nature of their fiction. This was reflected, moreover, in higher quality production and the more upmarket advertisements. 'Sell to the Housewives of Britain', a

9 David Doig was interviewed once, in Dundee on 17 July 1986. He joined the firm in 1927 and worked in turn on Rover, the Evening Telegraph, Topical Times, Weekly Welcome and, as Editor, Woman's Way. After the war Doig wrote fiction for the Thomson newspapers, including the Glasgow Sunday Post. He retired in 1978 as General Manager of the adult magazines.

10 Jenkinson, pp. 214-215; Jephcott, 1942, pp. 99-110; 1948, p. 113

Thomson ad proclaimed in 1931. 'The reader confidence which these papers enjoy ensures that your announcement will get a friendly hearing from a very large middle-class audience'.¹¹ According to Doig, Weekly Welcome was for the 'business' girl. 'This magazine dealt with very romantic stories, where people travelled off. In those days there weren't so many people catching planes; it was quite a thing to go abroad, whether you went by ship or plane'. Maurice Paterson, who joined the firm in 1940, noted that the People's Friend in particular has enjoyed a healthy circulation over the years, especially in Scotland, because it always 'stuck to the same line of old-fashioned manners and standards and morals...I don't mean they're narrow-minded, but they do uphold family life'.¹² The two market research surveys conducted for the advertising industry generally reinforce these conclusions.¹³

While Thomson-Leng shared the women's paper market with such strong competitors as Newnes-Pearson (Peg's Paper, Home Notes)

11 The Advertisers' A.B.C., 45th edn (1931), p. 310

12 Maurice Paterson, 16 July 1986. Paterson was interviewed on three occasions in Dundee: 10 April 1986 (MP-1); 16 July 1986 (MP-2); and 12 August 1987 (MP-3). After the war Paterson was chief subeditor on Secrets, and in 1961 became Editor of My Weekly. He retired in 1987 as Managing Editor of the women's magazines.

13 In Press Circulations Analysed (1928), four Thomson-Leng papers, People's Friend, My Weekly, Weekly Welcome and Red Letter were examined. Of these, only the People's Friend had an appreciable middle-class readership; the others were read by the working class and the lower-middle class. The People's Friend, however, was only mentioned by those surveyed in Edinburgh and Glasgow. In addition to Scotland, the other papers were as popular in Newcastle, Derby, Bradford, Exeter and Southampton. The Hulton Readership Survey in 1947 found that the People's Friend still had the greater middle-class following, but much decreased in favour of the working class; Red Letter's composition was unchanged. Regionally they were also unchanged.

and the Amalgamated Press (Home Chat, Woman's Weekly), they obliterated the competition in the boys' paper field. These publications represent their most enduring and significant contribution to the popular press in Britain. As the Religious Tract Society set the standards for boys' periodicals in the late nineteenth century, so did D.C. Thomson establish the mode between the wars. Their secret was a combination of creativity, spontaneity, and imagination which took boys out of the school-story setting (unlike the Amalgamated Press¹⁴), confronting them with all sorts of adventures and inventions. There were boys who could disappear at will, consume wonder drugs and grow stronger, even defeat the Nazis singlehandedly, as in this example from Adventure (4 November 1939):

THE SCHOOL OF DEADLY SECRETS

Doomed to live in a concentration camp? Tony, Jules and Roger hear plans for their kidnapping by the Nazis!...Col. Gerhardt had stationed German soldiers in the Headmaster's summerhouse to kidnap the 3 pals. But the boys had heard of the plot - and bombarded the summerhouse with stinkbombs!

The Thomson boys' papers entered the market with a fresh approach, and the audience responded.

These weeklies, 2d. each, were known by boys and the industry alike as the 'Big 5' papers, attesting to their popularity and dominance. The Big 5 papers were Adventure (1921-1963); The Rover (1922-1973); The Wizard (1922-1978); The Skipper (1930-1941) and The Hotspur (1933-1981). The Skipper was discontinued because of

14 The Gem and Magnet were exclusively school-story papers, featuring such characters as Tom Merry and Billy Bunter. It is significant that by the late 1930s the Amalgamated Press solicited adventure stories for the Magnet, perhaps in a last-ditch attempt to compete with the Big Five papers.

the paper shortage. Two other papers for boys were published but failed, presumably due to a saturated market: The Vanguard (1924-1926) and Red Arrow (1932-1933, merged with Adventure). The boys' papers catered for an audience aged between 8 and 14 years, and from all classes. As George Moonie, a Thomson veteran who worked on the Rover, Wizard, and Hotspur (and went on to found the Beano in 1938), claimed, 'I'm quite sure that Prince Charles read this sort of thing. I'm sure that when he came up to Glamis and stayed there as a boy, somehow our magazines would find their way to Glamis Castle'.¹⁵ The papers were also printed on letterpress, but contained almost exclusively fiction, six or seven stories with a prize competition and a joke page. Each title also published an Annual for the Christmas trade, usually 128 pages and an excellent seller. Physical appearance and layout were carefully planned, and even the paper names were chosen to be evocative. 'Hotspur', for example, brought to mind thrilling adventure (Shakespeare, and Percy Hotspur and the Border tales) as well as exciting sport (Tottenham Hotspur F.C.); 'Rover' recalled 'roving around'. Unlike some of the women's papers, D.C. Thomson aimed its boys' papers and comics squarely at the English market, in a bid, no doubt, for success and recognition:

We really had to gear...to the English market because that's where the large percentage of readership lay. If you look at the middle belt of England - that's the industrial belt: Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Nottingham, Northampton, these big places, very heavily populated - that was your first target. Then the south coast of England, again was a

15 George Moonie, 14 August 1987. Moonie was interviewed in Dundee on two occasions: 17 July 1986 (GM-1) and 14 August 1987 (GM-2). He joined the firm in 1930 as a subeditor on Rover. After the war Moonie founded two papers for girls, Judy and Diana. He retired in 1983.

great place. Scotland was only six million or so population; most of it was London. 16

In time each paper developed a unique flavour, featuring regular characters which entered popular folklore. Dixon Hawke, for example, was introduced in Adventure. The 'Wolf of Kabul', a British Secret Agent whose faithful Himalayan companion Chung wielded a deadly cricket bat, resided in the pages of the Wizard, as did William Wilson, the amazing 150-year-old athlete from Yorkshire. The Hotspur countered the Gem and Magnet with stories of public-school boys at the Red Circle School. Here lads from all countries studied and played and got into all sorts of mishaps. The Rover followed 'Middle Wicket Mulligan', an American baseball star who became one of England's best bowlers, and Morgyn the Mighty, the Strongest Man in the World. Finally, the Skipper chronicled the adventures of Puck McLean, the schoolboy who possessed a 'Vanishometer' to disappear at will (particularly when threatened with a caning), and Vortz, the legendary Hooded Spy, elusive mastermind of the German Secret Service. The editors of the boys' papers concentrated on a number of popular subjects. 'You couldn't go wrong with football, or boxing, or racing, blood and thunder, adventure types. In those days King and Country was a great thing. Khyber Pass was a mysterious and dangerous place',¹⁷ Moonie said.

By 1950 D.C. Thomson was the largest publisher of periodicals and magazines outside London, with thirty titles, as

16 GM-2

17 GM-1

compared with the London-based Amalgamated Press' 70 papers. Most of the Thomson publications, however, steadily declined in popularity during the 1950s (the exceptions being The Dandy and The Beano comics, still as popular today as then). In the case of the boys' papers, there were probably two reasons: the growth of television (Saturday serials which eroded demand for the papers), and the appearance, not surprisingly, of the picture-story paper, or comic. The Eagle, published by the Hulton Press, was an instant success in 1950, selling more than one million copies weekly. As the market for their boys' papers declined, D.C. Thomson found new success in storypapers for girls, beginning with Bunty in 1958. The women's papers, on the other hand, suffered from technical inferiority after the war, compared with such rivals as Woman and Woman's Own, both printed in colour. As a non-union house, D.C. Thomson had to train itself on the new gravure technology, a lengthy but in the long run successful process. My Weekly, for instance, is currently the fourth most popular women's paper in Britain; in 1985 its average weekly sale was 713,185. The People's Friend is still sustained by a loyal Scottish readership; 1985 average sales were 655,593. Somewhat surprisingly, Secrets and Red Letter are still printed, letterpress. Their circulations average below 30,000 but as they are inexpensive to produce, are still published.

Throughout its history the firm's provincial base, although unusual, nonetheless had its benefits. According to Moonie, D.C. Thomson had the advantage of watching over sales and distribution in the north of England and Scotland more closely and easily than its London-based competitors could, which resulted in a

stronger market showing in those regions.¹⁸ Paterson added that Thomson editors were more in sympathy with the needs of the entire country, rather than simply London. 'Up here, we work here, and then we all go to our own home, we have our own kind of friends, not journalists, and I think we're far more in touch with what goes on in the country. People in London can't see further north than Watford'.¹⁹

Unfortunately, space constraints here do not permit a discussion of the controversies which have surrounded this firm in recent years. The most famous of these concerns the ban on trade unionism, initiated by D.C. after a crippling strike in 1926, before the General Strike. A kind of 1920s Rupert Murdoch, D.C. required all employees to sign a pledge agreeing never to join a union. Nonetheless, underground unions in the Thomson offices and printing departments persisted, notably in Glasgow, where the sacking of a union sympathizer there in 1952 precipitated a major industrial dispute. In the end a Ministry of Labour inquiry recommended that the firm reconsider its non-union pledge, which it did; employees were no longer obliged to sign. Nonetheless, to this day D.C. Thomson remains essentially a non-union house, which is another reason why it is so secretive. As Paterson explained, 'We don't want a lot of publicity. It's in a way grist to the unions'.²⁰

18 GM-2

19 MP-3

20 MP-2

Relations between D.C. Thomson and newsagents have also been less than cordial over the past 80 years. The firm frequently clashed with the National Federation of Retail Newsagents over unfair pricing, and the union issue. Two retired Oxford newsagents recalled visits from Thomson 'reps' less than favourably. The firm apparently set strict limits on ordering, and refused to accept unsold copies. 'Whatever you didn't sell was your hard luck. They just didn't seem to care', H.R. Wyatt recalled. 'The trouble was, the magazines and stuff they were selling were popular, and they got you. You had to sell it because people wanted it'.²¹ R.D. Cooper reasoned that by keeping supplies low D.C. Thomson helped to increase demand. 'If you keep a thing tight, people have always got that impression that they'll have it. A lot of people would like to be one up on the neighbours - "I've got one". A system operated by Mercedes-Benz'.²²

II

The best method to gauge the success of the D.C. Thomson papers for women and for boys is through circulation figures. Unfortunately, few independent sources for these exist, apart from a handful of advertising journals (which largely excluded the boys' papers). Circulation figures, naturally, are a closely-guarded secret at D.C. Thomson. However, the firm agreed to release some

²¹ H.R. Wyatt was interviewed once, in Oxford on 18 March 1988. He opened his newsagent's shop in Cowley Road in 1945.

²² R.D. Cooper was interviewed once, in Oxford on 17 May 1988. He opened his newsagent's shop in Botley Road in 1955.

figures which confirm its supremacy in the market. According to Mr. L. Murray Thomson, one of the present directors of D.C. Thomson, these figures are an accurate representation of the trends in sales during the period of analysis, until 1950.²³ Figure 6-1 shows the circulation of the boys' papers for three dates: the first issue sale; January 1939; and January 1950. To place these in perspective, the following figures exist for 1924 Amalgamated Press titles:

<u>Boy's Friend</u>	99,794	
<u>Boy's Herald</u>	55,514	
<u>Boy's Realm</u>	114,653	
<u>Nelson Lee Library</u>	112,289	
' <u>Union Jack Series</u> '		
(Including <u>Union Jack</u> ,		
<u>Marvel</u> , <u>Magnet</u> , <u>Gem</u>)	354,694	24

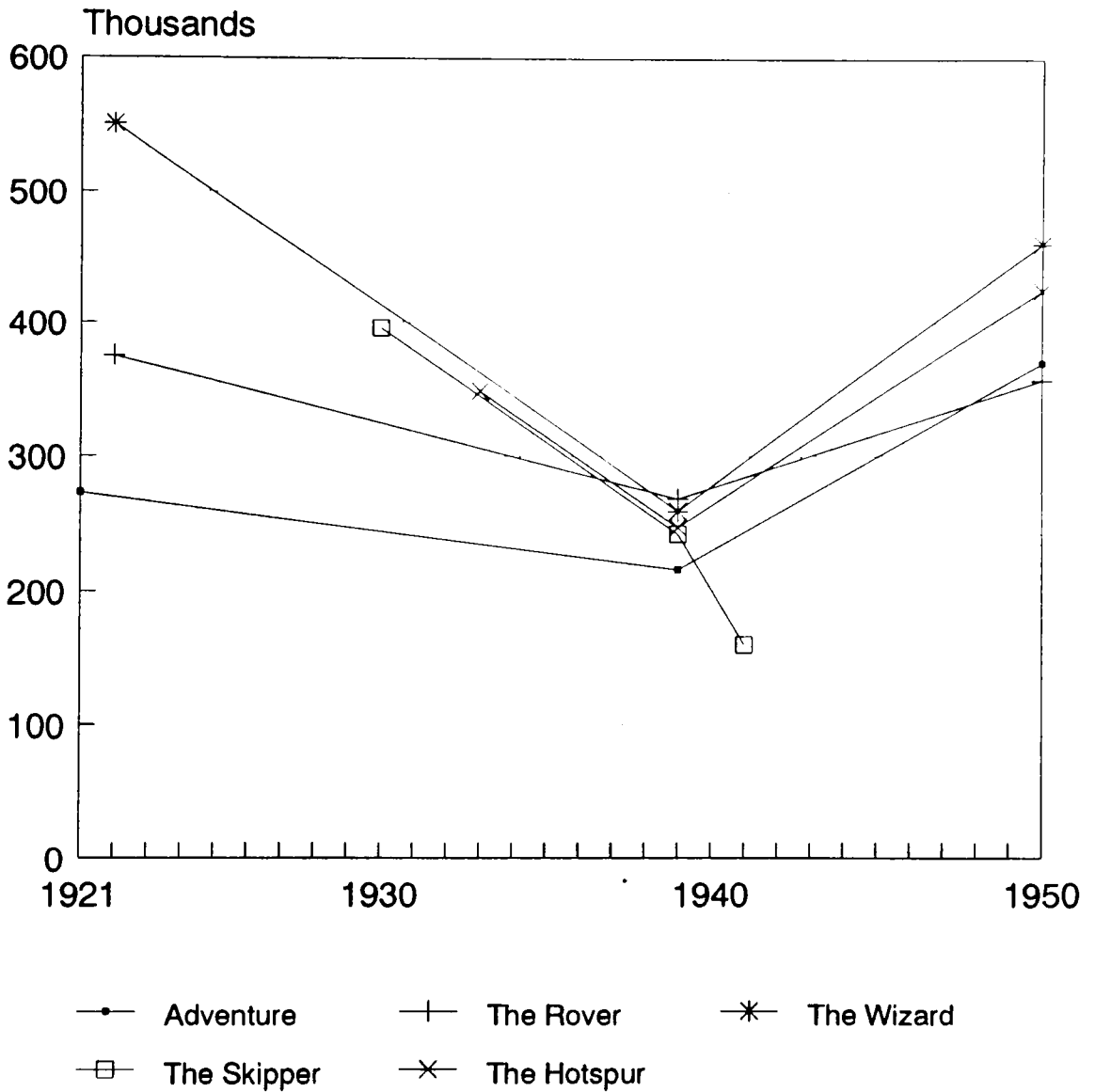
Given these figures, the launch of the Thomson papers in the early 1920s was impressive. In fact, judging from the reputation of the Big 5 papers, one can safely assume these sales were at the top end of the market. The Thomson circulation figures, moreover, confirm the general downward trend for magazines in Britain before the Second World War, and the dramatic recovery which the wartime reading boom initiated.²⁵ Bearing in mind, as the trade did, that each copy sold was read by at least three boys, in 1950, for example, The Wizard was probably read by 1.5 million boys weekly.

23 There is no reason to dispute the accuracy of these figures. The 1939 figures, for example, correspond to claims made by Thomson-Leng in an advertisement in that year. The 'Big 5' papers were advertised as selling 'Over a Million Copies Weekly', The 'Family Three' (Family Star, Secrets and Red Letter) a 'combined circulation 600,000 copies weekly', and the 'Feminine Five' (Red Letter, Red Star Weekly, My Weekly, Woman's Way and Woman's Welcome) 'Over 1,250,000 Copies Weekly'. (The Newspaper Press Directory, 1939 edn p. 364)

24 The Advertisers' A.B.C. 38th edn (1924), pp. 133-134

25 Kevin Carpenter, in Penny Dreadfuls and Comics (London, 1983), claims that the Wizard reached a peak circulation before the war of 800,000 copies per week, but the Thomson figures do not support this. (p. 65)

Figure 6-1
D.C. Thomson Boys' Papers
Circulations 1921-1950



Source: D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. First figures are 'No. 1 sale'. The 1941 'Skipper' figure is last number sale.

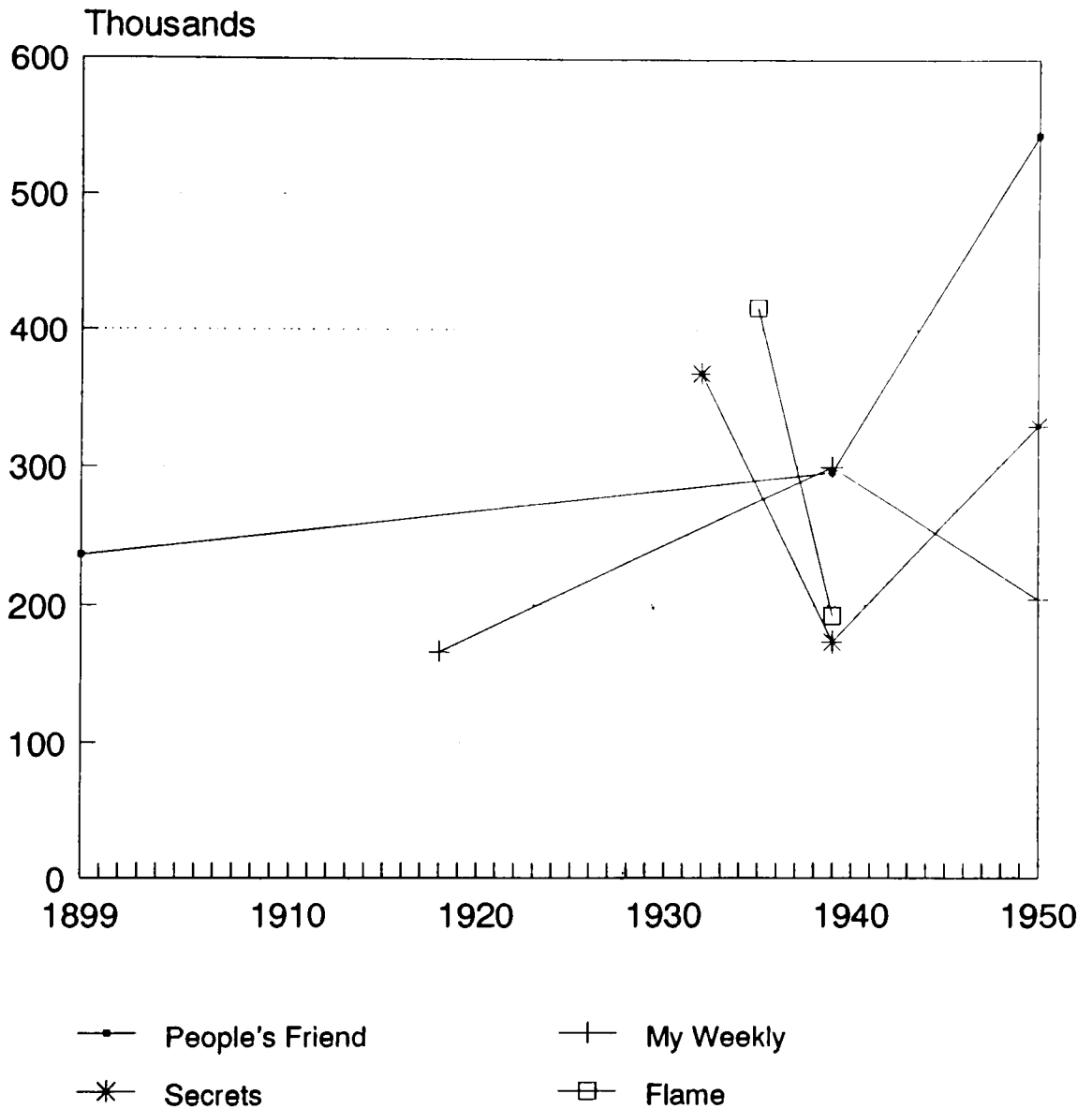
Figures 6-2 and 6-3 show sales information, on similar dates, for the women's papers.²⁶ Curiously, three titles: the People's Friend, My Weekly (both Leng) and Red Letter seemed to have resisted the market depression during the 1930s; this attests to the loyalty of their readers (Scottish women for the first two, and working-class women for the latter) and the skill with which D.C. Thomson picked their markets. The same specialised readership, moreover, sustained Secrets, Red Star Weekly and Family Star during their unusually long runs. Actual readership figures, it is worth repeating, would be much higher. The Hulton Readership Survey in 1947, for example, estimated the readership of Red Letter at 970,000, and the People's Friend at 1.06 million.

As the women's papers contained more advertising than the children's magazines, sources of circulation and readership figures are plentiful, and serve to place the Thomson figures in perspective. In Figure 6-4, circulation figures obtained independently of D.C. Thomson are plotted against the 'official' figures, in order to both support the latter, and illustrate the fluctuations in the market, particularly between the wars. The strong and consistent demand for Red Letter²⁷ and People's Friend can be contrasted with the decline

26 According to D.C. Thomson, the first issue sales figures for People's Friend, Weekly Welcome, Red Letter and My Weekly are unknown; the earliest available date for each title was provided instead. Figures for January 1939 and January 1950 were also provided.

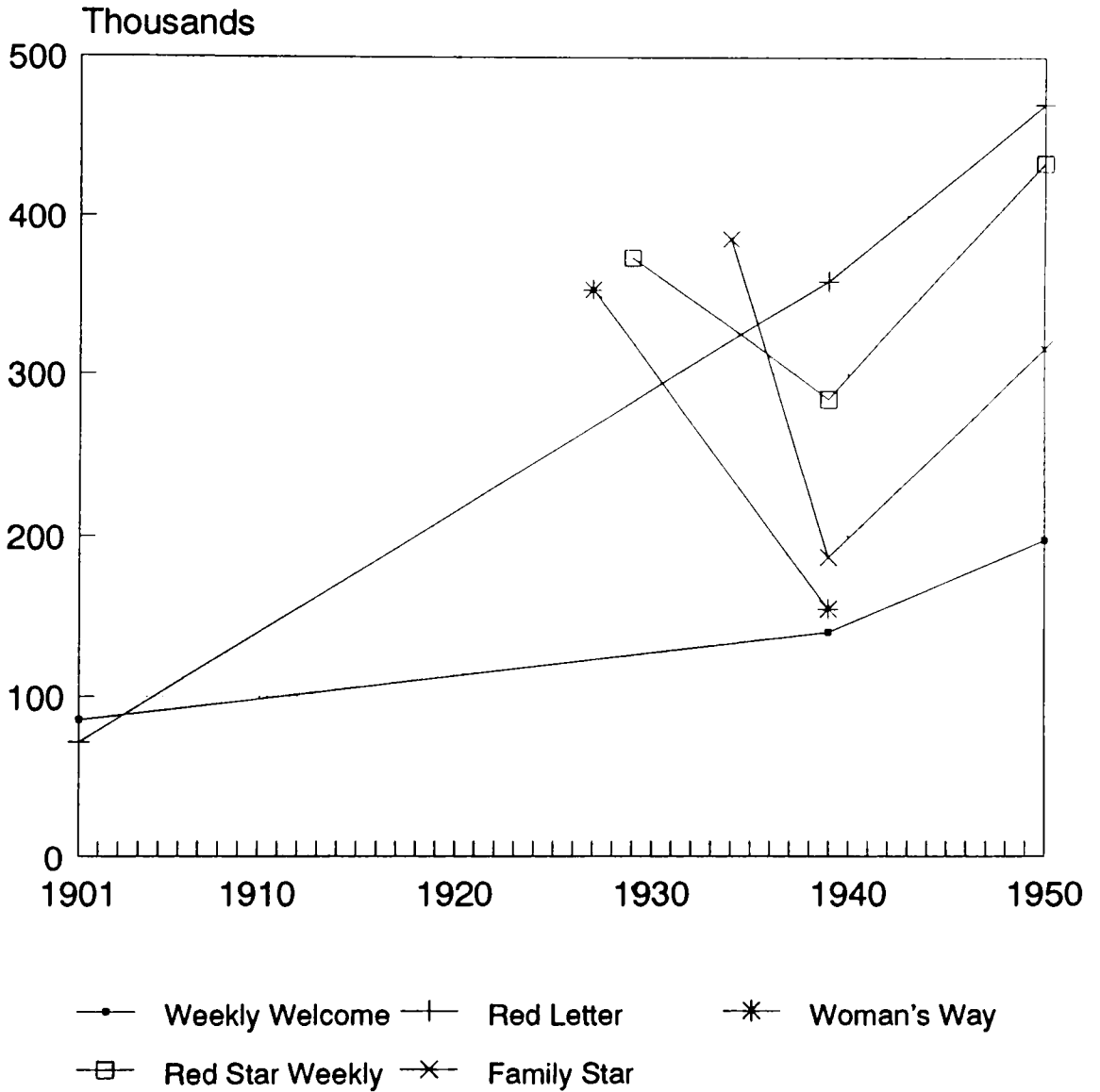
27 Throughout 1914 advertisements in Red Letter described the paper as having, 'Over One Million Readers Weekly'. According to the available evidence this was probably an exaggeration, although it is possible that Red Letter, selling about 200,000 copies in 1914, was passed around to as many as five people, in a factory for instance.

Figure 6-2
John Leng Women's Papers
Circulations 1899-1950



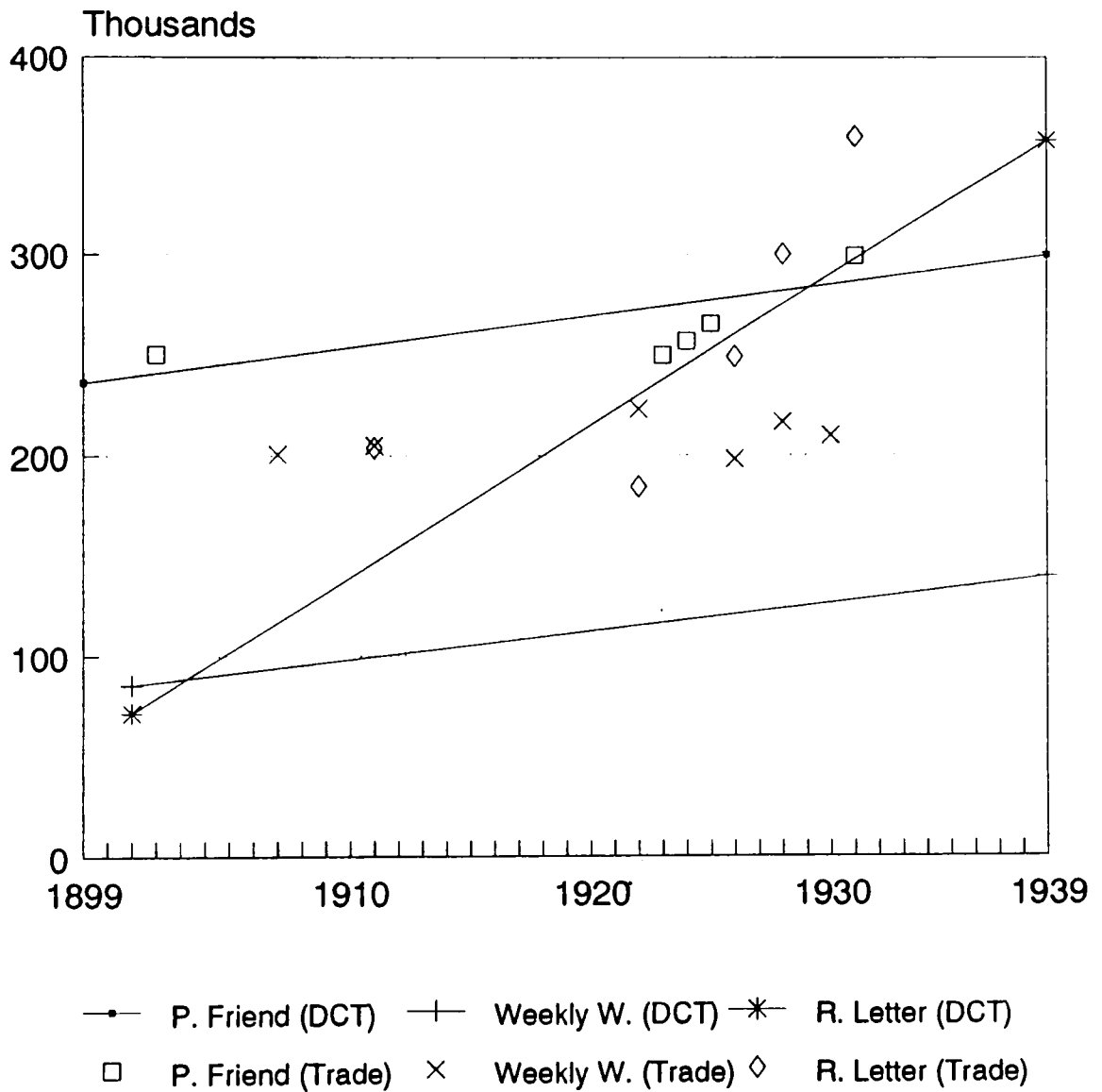
Source: D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. 'Flame' combined with 'Secrets', 1940.

Figure 6-3
 D.C. Thomson Women's Papers
 Circulations 1901-1950



Source: D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. 'Woman's Way' combined with 'Weekly Welcome', 1940; title changed to 'Woman's Welcome'

Figure 6-4
Comparison of Circulation Figures,
D.C. Thomson and Trade Publications



Sources: '99, '01, '39: D.C. Thomson;
'02: 'Success. Advert'; '07, '11, '22:
'News. Press Direc.'; others 'Ad. ABC'

in Weekly Welcome between 1922 and 1939. According to the readership surveys conducted by Investigated Press Circulations in 1932, in England and Wales Red Letter was the fourth most popular 'Ladies Paper' (so-called by I.P.C.) with an estimated 595,000 readers, or 1.25 percent of the population. The most popular titles were Woman's Weekly (1,093,000 readers); Home Notes (684,000) and Home Chat (601,000). Red Letter readers were about equally divided between the middle and working classes. In Scotland, the People's Friend won hands down over all other weeklies, with an estimated 1,520,000 readers, or 24.1 percent of the population. The next most popular in Scotland were My Weekly (203,000; 3.2%); Red Letter (184,000; 2.9%); and Red Star Weekly (80,000; 1.3%). Again, readership was divided among all classes. Woman's Weekly in Scotland only attracted 45,000 readers, or 0.7 percent. Audited figures for the following leading papers also illustrate that the Thomson titles were matching or surpassing their competitors in the letterpress market, with some exceptions. Woman's Own and Woman were gravure-printed, in colour, and thus belonged to a separate stratum of the market:

	Average weekly circulation	
	<u>1938</u>	<u>1950</u>
<u>Woman</u>	750,000	2.2 million
<u>Woman's Own</u>	357,000	1.8 million
<u>Woman's Weekly</u>	498,000	1.6 million
<u>Woman's</u>		
<u>Illustrated</u>	148,000	559,000
<u>Home Notes</u>	151,000	349,000
<u>Woman's</u>		
<u>Companion</u>	176,000	221,000
<u>Home Chat</u>	127,000	323,000

28

The Big 5 boys' papers were frequently and prominently mentioned in reading surveys during this period. We have seen that

these were the most popular magazines among boys of all classes in the 1933 St. Pancras survey and in Jenkinson's 1940 survey. Jenkinson also registered a strong interest among girls of these titles. Although they were well aware of girl readers, the Thomson editors believed that these were papers for boys and boys only.²⁹ Girls were specifically addressed in the Thomson comics, and eventually in storypapers founded in the late fifties. Jenkinson's survey also revealed the high percentage of schoolgirls aged 12-14 who were avid readers of the Thomson blood-and-thunder papers ('erotic bloods') including Red Letter. Similarly, Brew in 1943 announced that 'an astonishing number of Wizards and Red Letters are read' among adolescents of both sexes.³⁰

Mass-Observation, in the course of its ten-year investigation of popular reading habits, measured the popularity of the Thomson papers among the lower-middle and working classes. For example, one working-class man stated in 1942, 'I never buy books, I only read the Wizard'.³¹ A Fulham newsagent, when asked in 1940 which magazines were generally most popular, replied, 'Red Star and that sort of thing. You know they want just short stories and things

29 Kirsten Drotner has demonstrated how, by 1918, children's magazines in Britain had become 'an integral element of childhood', realized even by parents. But, if these papers - the Big 5 are outstanding examples - cut across social classes they still maintained gender differences. 'For if modern boys' and girls' papers displayed a reversion to the tactics employed in some of the earliest magazine ventures - they appealed to a whole generation of children through a medley of entries - no interwar publisher attempted to bridge the gender gap that had become firmly established in juvenile literature', she said. (Drotner, English Children and Their Magazines 1751-1945 [New Haven, 1988], p. 201)

30 Brew, 1943, p. 129

31 M/25/D, M-0 File Report 1332 (1942), p. 5

like that'.³² Another newsagent, on the basis of his weekly sales report, remarked that sales were unchanged during the war (On the women's papers: 'These kinds of books always go'). In his report for the last week in February, 1940, it is remarkable how many Thomson titles appear alongside the quality competition. Of the 48 titles on the list, nine were Thomson papers, accounting for 17 percent of total sales, although no paper sold more than six copies, as compared with 26 copies each of Everybody's and Radio Times.³³ The 1937 Middlesbrough inquiry, moreover, revealed both fans and critics of the Big 5 papers. K. Myers (U/5/A) wrote, 'There are books like the "Wizard" and "Hotspur" which a great number of boys read. I like to read these but some of the stories are silly and are not worth reading'. William Jefferson (L/4/B) agreed: 'Some books such as the "Rover" and the "Skipper" are books which put fantastic ideas into boys' heads'. But F. Marwood (U/4/A), a girl, objected: 'The best books are the Wizard, Rover, Etc. which are published each week'. Lastly, one boy, L. Coward (U/4/A), found reading the Hotspur educational:

Many of the stories are about foreign countries; they are adventure stories and about two paragraphs tell us how foreigners live. Therefore they tell us about some geographical parts of that country.

Other stories tell us about things that happened years ago e.g. in 'The Hotspur' a story called 'The wearer of the Scarlet Acorn must not die'. While we read it, small pictures of historical nature are in our mind. This story is about 'Hadrian's Wall', therefore pictures of that kind come to our minds...

32 George's Newsagent, Dawes Road, Fulham, M-0 'Newspapers' Box 2 File D (1 March 1940); K.B.

33 S. Hughes & Co., Estcourt Road, Fulham, M-0 'Newspapers' Box 2 File D (2 March 1940); K.B

Most people like reading, and I think some stories are thrilling and yet help us in our educational life.

D.C. Thomson's prominent position in the market was not achieved, nor maintained, by chance. Although the editors are inclined to deny it, throughout its history D.C. Thomson has kept a firm finger on the national pulse by vigorously researching its readership and its changing tastes. Several methods, some of them novel, were used to identify and cater to the readership. For example, a Thomson innovation was the editorial page, featuring a snappy, inviting title and a warm, friendly article that not only made the reader comfortable, but encouraged him to write in with information. For example, the editor of the Skipper addressed all his pals, 'What about sending me a postcard telling me all about yourself and your chums?' The Wizard featured a page headed, 'Step Right Up and Have a Chat with Your Editor!' In an early issue, it proceeded:

My dear chums,

See the heading? That's the spirit. No hanky-panky, get right down to bedrock and have a chat, you and I, like two pals...

You have as big a hand in the pie as I have. I've done a great deal of scouting around and have chatted away with hundreds of boys to find out what kind of yarns they like best...

I was pleased to discover that their tastes and mine were the same. I want stories of sports and stories of adventure, real go-ahead lively yarns with a kick in them...

Signed, Your Pal, The Editor.

34

One issue of the Wizard alone featured letters from Wigan, Cardiff, Dover, Kingstown, Heysham, Barrow, Larne, Sheffield, Manchester,

Nairn, Ealing, Cork, Wexford and Inverness. The Big 5 papers also received letters from 'Old Boys', fathers who were still regular readers, and were now bringing up their children 'in the faith'.

The editors of the women's papers also promoted an encouraging attitude in their columns.³⁵ The first issue of Woman's Way in 1927 promised 'to give you a paper which will be a 'complete chum' to you every week, and which will appeal to the wide and ever-growing interests of the modern woman and girl'. The first issue of Flame in 1935 asked its readers: 'When you write, please tell me all about yourselves. I want every one of us to be real friends, and the more I know about you - who you are, what you do, and everything else - the sooner we shall all be able to get to know each other'. The letters page in Family Star revealed that men enjoyed the paper; one, signed 'Old Soldier' from Cardiff, said: 'I'm ill in hospital with a bad leg, and my wife brought me your book to read yesterday. Believe me, it's made to-day fly, and I've hardly felt my leg at all, I've been so interested in the stories'.³⁶

Another Thomson novelty was the frequent and lucrative prize competitions and giveaways in each paper. These also generated response from readers, and often in an unwelcome volume. Doig

35 The editorial committee for each Thomson paper consisted of an Editor, and four or five Sub-editors. On the women's papers the Editor was usually a man, who wrote the weekly columns signed, 'Your Editress'. When questioned, the Thomson editors found nothing unusual in this; 'a job was a job'.

36 Family Star 1 September 1934. Annie S. Swan, commenting on the craze for serial stories in the People's Friend, claimed that women 'no doubt, form the main body of readers, but a good many men, I have heard, do not despise the People's Friend'. (Swan, p. 284)

lamented the occasions when a paper asked readers to send in their favorite stories, 'which were always a bane to everybody's existence because we'd get as many as 6,000 job stories, and somebody had to read them. We all took the stuff home, and we'd be up to our ears in stories. It took about six months to find a winner'. Twice-yearly the Thomson publications were 'pushed', which signified a competition or giveaway was conducted to attract attention and boost circulation. The push usually coincided with the start of a new serial, which would run for several weeks. If successful, a push could influence weekly sales by as many as 70,000 copies. Among the more bizarre giveaways in the boys' papers, unlike the usual footballs, cricket bats, and sweets, were the electric shock machines offered with the first issue of the Hotspur in 1933: 'It's a great prize, absolutely harmless and will give hours of fun. Just watch your pal's face when you give him his first electric shock!' The women's papers, apart from fashion patterns, recipes and cosmetics, gave away a large number of love charms, fortune-telling guides and gypsy rings, usually connected with Maria Marten of the Red Barn murder scandal. The public appetite for fortune telling during this period was, apparently, insatiable; any giveaway of this kind was a guaranteed sellout. In 1927 'The Gipsy Queen Book of Fortune Telling', presented free with My Weekly, contained such revelations as, 'If a baby cries a lot he will have great happiness in life, and make many friends' and 'When bread does not rise well the housewife should beware of meeting a red-haired man before seeing some one of her family, as bad luck is sure to follow the baking'. Similarly, the sequel publication on 'Dream Meanings' warned, 'To dream of varnish

is a sign of unexpected distress' and 'You will talk to a foreigner if you dream of melons'.

Thomson representatives were frequently dispatched to newsagents and schools throughout the country to listen in on gossip regarding their publications. Jack Mackersie, who joined the firm in 1934 and eventually became editor of the Hotspur, noted that during this period a newsagent was an excellent source of information for reasons why, for example, a boy bought a Big Five paper every week, or decided not to one week, or stopped buying altogether. 'A newsagent was on the ball, paying attention to customers' likes and dislikes. They would know what stories the kids liked and what stories they didn't like. Quite often a newsagent's kids themselves would tell them', he said.³⁷ Reports from the Thomson circulation 'reps' were received in Dundee on a monthly basis, and sales were carefully monitored, particularly during push times. In the case of the boys' papers, Moonie explained that a common practice was to send representatives to the major cities, such as London and Manchester, and stand outside school gates to ask departing boys about the papers, and inform them of any new pushes or features. This procedure was known in Dundee as 'speering'.³⁸ According to Moonie, 'This, of course, was frowned upon by school authorities because confronting children at school gates was a dicey, touchy business.

37 JM-2

38 'Speering', according to the O.E.D. 2nd edn, is derived from Scottish and northern dialect, meaning 'The action of questioning or inquiring; interrogation; inquiry' and 'Information obtained by inquiry'.

So it had to be done with permission. We got a lot of information'.³⁹

Finally, editorial staffs on each of the Big Five papers were deliberately stocked with younger men, some just out of school. It was assumed (as Mills and Boon did, with their youngish authors) that such men would be more in touch with the current readership, resulting in a lively, up-to-date paper. The Amalgamated Press maintained the opposite policy, to their detriment, as W.O.G. Lofts noted after speaking to editors:

Several have confessed to me that they were told by their Department chiefs to 'modernise' their papers, and this they were loth to do, mainly because of the old traditions and seemingly high standard of literature held at Fleetway House. The main trouble was that they were still producing papers appealing to boys of the twenties and did not move with the times.

40

Moonie noted that the Big 5 papers were as susceptible to changing tastes as the women's papers. 'You don't want too foreign a background; you want a normal sort of background, with normal people. You've got to keep up to date, have your eye on the papers and your ear to what's going on in school. Kids have got to identify; if he doesn't understand it, it's finished', he said. He added that D.C. Thomson 'went to various things for story ideas: books, cinema, newspaper, other periodicals, the radio, and certainly television,

39 GM-1

40 W.O.G. Lofts and D.J. Adley. The Men Behind Boys' Fiction (London, 1970), p. 13

which of course was coming into its own in the thirties', in an effort to remain current and lively to boys.⁴¹

III

Lofts, in praising D.C. Thomson and the Big Five papers, also wrote, 'The great success of all their papers is simply that they (the editors) were brilliant psychologists, as they seemed to know what exactly boys wanted to read and prepared their papers accordingly'.⁴² The same could be said for the editors of the women's papers, and the characteristic of D.C. Thomson throughout the period was editorial control.

The presence of D.C., until his death in 1954, loomed large in all facets of production, and particularly editorial policy. Alfred Anderson, who joined the firm in 1925 and subsequently worked on Adventure, Vanguard, and the Dixon Hawke Library, recalled the chairman as possessing a relentless, hard-as-nails personality:

He was terribly strict. He was very much the leader of the band. He didn't like anything smutty in his papers at all. It's not so

41 GM-2

42 W.O.G. Lofts, Letter, The Spectator 30 January 1971 p. 169

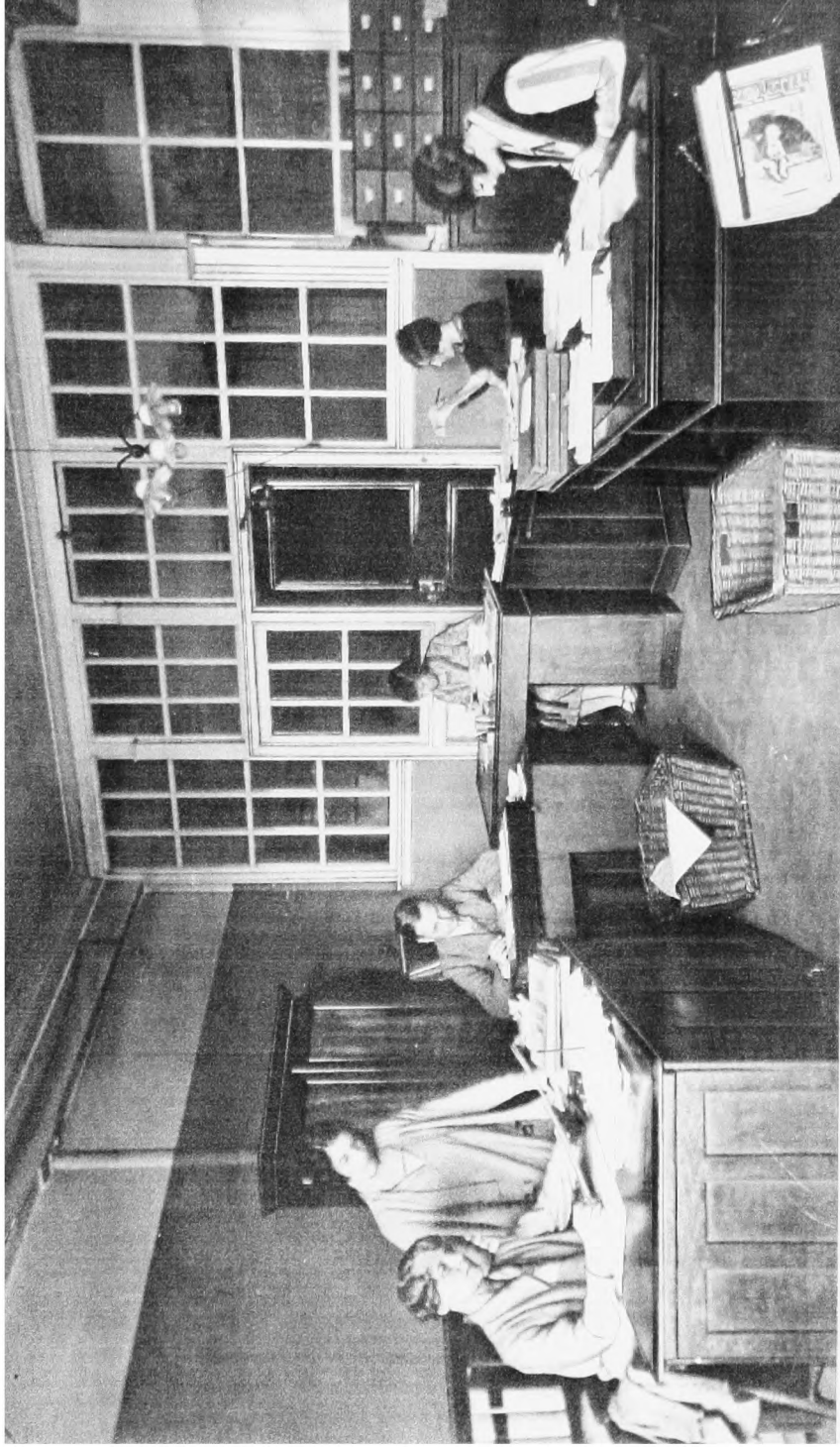
awfully long ago when you got a picture with a bit of cleavage in it, and you had to think. ⁴³

Company policy ensured close personal contact between employees at all levels. 'The team spirit has been well developed through the whole business. Every problem that arises is thoroughly discussed by directors, managers and editors concerned', D.C. wrote. 'I do not agree with the proprietors of other papers who leave all policy to the editors, for I hold that the proprietor is ultimately responsible for every word published'.⁴⁴ Mackersie recalled the fear among subeditors of straying beyond set boundaries, of annoying 'Upstairs', from whence 'Policy' came. 'I only ventured in on tiptoe when I was sent. You got the hell out of it as quick as possible, you know, because all the powers that be were up there'.⁴⁵

Nonetheless it is difficult to find any real signs of resentment of D.C. Thomson's authoritarian views among employees, despite the absence of unions. Morale was high, and the paternalistic nature of the firm guaranteed good wages and job security (even during the Depression), for as long as an employee wished to work. When a paper failed, the staff was not laid off, but transferred to other duties. Such reorganization was relatively painless at D.C. Thomson given the size of staffs; five or six people

43 Alfred Anderson, 10 April 1986. Anderson was interviewed in Dundee on two occasions: 10 April 1986 (AA-1) and 11 August 1987 (AA-2). Anderson worked on Dixon Hawke, and was Editor of the Topical Times. He retired in 1979 as Managing Editor of the newspapers, after 54 years with the firm.

44 D.C. Thomson, 'Memorandum by Mr. D.C. Thomson, Chairman and Senior Managing Director, D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd. and John Leng & Co. Ltd', Royal Commission on the Press, Minutes of Evidence 27th Day (31 March 1948). p. 8



'The Red Letter Room', D. C. Thomson, Dundee, c. 1925

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'The Adventure Room', D. C. Thomson, Dundee, c. 1925

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worked on the editorial side of each paper, for example, as compared with forty or fifty on each at the Amalgamated Press. Hence, it was not uncommon for employees to join the firm at age 16, and stay in Dundee for fifty years or more; Doig, for instance, retired in 1978 after 51 years; Anderson in 1979 after 54 years. The tribute paid by Glasgow workers to Mr. D.C. on the occasion of his jubilee in 1934 was typical of the general good will: 'We have always looked up to him as the head of the family. He has won our confidence by his just, generous and fairminded consideration of all matters affecting the welfare of his ever-growing household'.⁴⁶ And there was a certain egalitarian comraderie: Paterson attributed his firm's eighty years of success to the cordial relations between employees:

The biggest reason for success in this firm comes from the top. Our directors are very approachable people. In a way, although you're never friends with them, you're friendly with them. I mean I've golfed with my directors at Gleneagles and Turnberry, I've drunk with them, I've argued with them. There comes a time when the argument has to stop, and if I haven't convinced them then I'm the one who has to give way. But that's very rarely.

47

Mackersie remembered his years at Thomson with great affection: 'Everything was a lovely golden haze'.⁴⁸ Times change and attitudes change, however. Paterson claimed that the same spirit of dedication and hard-work is eroding at the firm today:

The generations behind us are completely different from what we worked with. Even the staffs are different; they don't have the same loyalty or dedication. To them, when I say 9 to 5, I don't mean that they slack, but their

⁴⁶ 'Jubilee Presentation to Mr. D.C. Thomson'. Dundee Courier and Advertiser 18 December 1934 (D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. archives)

47 MP-3

48 JM-1

own personal lives are equally important. I can't argue with that, but in my day if we had a problem, or we were running late the staff would come in and work in the evening without being asked. Nowadays if you ask them to come in the evening there's an awful lot of discontent.

49

One reason for such harmony, however, was that employees appear to have been carefully screened, so as to be compatible with the firm and its policies. Mackersie said that each applicant for a job at D.C. Thomson had to sit a test paper, 'to try and find out which way your imagination or your brain or your thoughts tended. On that, on your general knowledge as to the world about you, you either got a position or you didn't'. He added that no specific rules of behaviour or morality for employees were specified; it was taken for granted that you would know how to behave. 'You've got to be morally correct with children, and with yourself too. It was in you to be like that, otherwise you wouldn't be in that job. This is where your interview, your background and your test paper showed what you were made of'.⁵⁰

The relationship between writer and editor at D.C. Thomson was exceptionally close, probably to ensure that stories were written to the firm's strict specifications. As Lofts noted of the boys' papers:

On the question of which was the easiest firm to write for - D.C. Thomson or the Amalgamated

49 MP-3

50 JM-1. Julie Davidson, who was employed at D.C. Thomson in the early 1960s, has described the firm's intelligence test in her article, 'Speak Softly and Say Yes Please', in a collection of critical essays, The D.C. Thomson Bumper Fun Book (Edinburgh, 1977)

Press - many authors have told me (in writing for both firms) that the former was the most difficult and their stories had to be right up to the highest standard every time.

51

Perhaps this was the reason why D.C. Thomson never printed bylines above stories, except in the book-format Christmas annuals. 'The thing is, was it the writer's work entirely, or was it editorial and writer, in combination, producing it?' Moonie said.⁵² All of the writers (and most of the artists for the few line illustrations) were freelance; none were kept on staff. The senior editors paid periodic visits to writers to give them a roster of story ideas for six months' work. Those writers who have been identified came from a variety of backgrounds and wrote for both the boys' papers and the women's papers. Their output was enormous. Dugald Matheson Cumming-Skinner of Dundee, one of the most prolific contributors, claimed to have written eight million words of fiction during his eight years as a freelance writer; Gilbert Dalton once wrote every short story in the Hotspur for eight consecutive weeks. Frank Howe wrote 150 Dixon Hawke libraries.⁵³ Anderson noted that the writers themselves were 'moral' men who could be trusted not to breach company policy. One, Jimmy Watt, 'would never write a thing out of line - he was such a nice bloke, a fairly elderly fellow', Anderson said. 'Dugald Cumming-Skinner - his father was a minister. All was very right, you

51 Lofts and Adley. p. 13

52 GM-1

53 Lofts and Adley, pp. 109-110; 111; 198-199. Cumming-Skinner started work for D.C. Thomson after winning a juvenile literary competition run by John Leng; he 'soon became their most prolific contributor'. Similarly, just after the First World War the romance-thriller writer Jean Marsh got her first job in journalism after winning £25 ('a fortune in those days') in a Christmas short-story competition run by the People's Friend; the editor contacted her afterwards asking if she would do a serial for them.

know - no great violence or anything like that'.⁵⁴ Nonetheless the Thomson editorial grip on its writers was strong. As Norman Fowler, who joined the firm in 1934 and eventually became editor of the best-selling Wizard, explained, the writer 'would get on our wavelength. We would channel his way of thinking to our needs'.⁵⁵ We have seen, similarly, the attention paid by editors of the women's papers to the Mills and Boon serial writers.⁵⁶ In 1934 Annie S. Swan was florid in her praise for John Leng & Co. and the People's Friend:

Its public has been loyal and faithful to me for over fifty years, and there is no visible sign of waning enthusiasm even yet. The People's Friend has been ably edited by men who knew their public, its limitations, and its quality. I have fitted in - that is all: and much of my best work has appeared in its pages. 57

D.C. Thomson did not mind serving up sensations in its women's magazines, if they sold papers - and they did. The morals, however, were under all circumstances proper and correct. According to Doig, Thomson editors were very strict indeed. Drinking and smoking were not allowed, nor was the mention of the unmarried man or the adulterous woman. 'Oh, no affairs. No, no, no. You weren't allowed to enter that at all', he said. Adultery, in fact, was regarded as great a sin as robbery. even murder. Divorce, moreover, was not allowed, nor was anything bad ever said about the mother in a story. 'Crime does not pay' was a common theme. Doig accepted that

54 AA-2

55 Norman Fowler was interviewed in Dundee on 9 and 10 April, 1986. Fowler also worked on Hotspur and Rover, retiring in 1986 as the director of the girls' papers.

56 See chapter 4

57 Swan, pp. 283-284

writing with all these editorial restrictions in mind was difficult and challenging. 'Except when you went straight for it. What you could do, you'd have a nasty woman who everybody was terribly amazed about, who killed the poor little girl who was going to marry the man she wanted. This was all right, because it was just a straightforward sin'.

According to Paterson, in Dundee there was always a way around being too smutty and explicit in romantic serials. 'You can take somebody up to the bedroom door, but once the door's closed you don't need the colorful details. That's the difference between us and other magazines', he said. In violent situations, as when a character had vitriol thrown in her face, 'we didn't dwell on the screams of agony or this or that. It was a sentence, and that was it. We got the effect we wanted'. Paterson also cited the example of a story situation in which a man and woman were snowbound in Canada, found shelter, and obviously had to spend the night in the same room together. What the Thomson editors decided was to have two beds, with a blanket hung between them - and arrange for the man to be found out as a doctor, which made everything all right! There are few things D.C. Thomson have not done, Paterson said - it was simply the way they have done them.⁵⁸

The concern of both editor and writer, according to Doig, was to tug at the reader's heart strings. 'You know if you have this very great emotional ending - which is the "lump-in-the-throat" bit - you are going to have a saleable story', he said. Although he

privately admitted, as Mills and Boon did, that most fiction was written to a perfected and marketable formula, Doig claimed that editors tried to make each story seem fresh and unique. 'But you must try and put so much into the writing of it, that it seems you don't seem to have read the story before'.

On the Big 5 papers company policy also kept morals and subject matter in tight check. Correct spelling was a must; as an editor of the Beano once said, 'A high standard of English is strictly adhered to at all times nowadays with mis-spellings, abbreviations and slang carefully vetted'.⁵⁹ Expletives and slang may have been acceptable in the pages of the Gem and Magnet,⁶⁰ but never so in Dundee. Moonie summarised the taboo subjects at D.C. Thomson as follows:

You see we never stepped into politics, we avoided religion, and we never took advantage of people who were crippled and hurt in some way. We never did that. We really kept it very straight, moral. If there was anything bad, it had to be rectified. If anybody did anything that was wrong, it had to be punished. It was editorial policy throughout all the papers to keep a very strict control over what went into publication.

61

In fact, not much has changed in editorial policy governing the children's papers for some sixty years.

59 From a confidential script on the history of the D.C. Thomson children's papers, prepared at Moonie's request; no date

60 In The Magnet (17 August 1935), for example, Billy Bunter was described as 'esteemed and idiotic', a 'fat chump', a 'howling ass' and a 'blithering bloater'.

The overriding concern of editors on both the women's papers and the boys' weeklies was not to step out of line, and risk offending the readership, or the readership's parents - which could jeopardize circulations. Doig noted that the women's magazines, however sensational, were still regarded as 'family' papers. As such, there was 'always the fear that the mother in the family would say. "I'm not having that paper in the house", and that would be it'. This reasoning would explain the ostentatious efforts to make more obviously sensational papers such as Red Letter acceptable, by titling them, 'For the Family Circle', and including such features as a children's page. Paterson said that it would have been foolish to try to be offensive: 'If you have a readership that's family-minded, that wouldn't like their son living with his girlfriend, and that was the core of your readership, there's no use starting to put in things that's going to offend them'.⁶² Moonie noted that even the choice of slang words in the boys' papers was carefully scrutinized: 'Some of the words that had been adapted, like "Gadzooks", is "Godsakes". You might get people mistaking it and objecting to this type of language. We did get rebukes now and then'.⁶³ The management feared antagonizing the readership, and, in this case, the boys' parents. Above all, the purpose of the papers was purely to entertain, not to offend, and judging from circulation figures, so they did.

62 MP-2

63 GM-1

IV

According to Fowler, a good editor at D.C. Thomson 'will impose his ideas on the reader. The reader believes that this is the kind of story he wants to read. But really, the editor is saying, "This is the kind of story that I know you will want to read"'. In this fashion D.C. Thomson passed on socially-acceptable views on a number of issues to their readership. A selection of excerpts from the papers themselves here will demonstrate how editorial policy was actually translated into fiction, and illustrate the types of wish-pictures and symbols in use. The loyalty of thousands of readers each week to a particular publication probably is a fair indication that a kind of affinity existed between editor and reader.

What did such wish-pictures and symbols look like in practice? Two themes are prominent in the fiction in the Thomson women's papers during this period: the promotion of old-fashioned romance (without any sexual references) and the struggle, often violent, between the forces of good and evil (a staple in the blood-and-thunder papers). In the first case, the Thomson-Leng attitude towards romantic fiction is evident in a statement by the editor of My Weekly in 1911:

Fiction, which holds the mirror up to real life and reflects all our susceptibilities and heart-searchings, would be failing in its function if it did not deal exhaustively with

love.

64

My Weekly and the People's Friend were the two women's papers which consistently promoted a notion of 'feel-good' romance. Stories were advertised as 'strong in heart interest'; the 'lump-in-the-throat' bit which Doig described was omnipresent. Happy endings were essential:

'Babyclothes' by Gertrude Taylor

You'd think there could only be happiness at a baby linen counter - young mothers in the first pride of parenthood, little blushing mothers with dreams in their eyes, new-made grannies so bustling and important. And yet the girl who sold these little soft garments to those happy people had only sad, wistful dreams.

My Weekly 3 December 1927

'Follow Your Heart' by Netta Muskett.

At last for Eve the Storm is over - and she finds Peace and Contentment in the Haven of Jeremy's arms.

My Weekly 21 August 1937

'The Lovely Day'

Try it any way you like, it's still a plain, no-nonsense kind of name... But she needn't always be Jane Brown. One day she would marry - one lovely, lovely day.

My Weekly 2 December 1950

The skill of both writers and editors in moulding the same formula into different storylines is remarkable. The central character was usually a shopgirl, secretary or a poor farmer's daughter who either was unlucky in love, or suddenly met the man of her dreams - precisely the sort of scenario that would appeal to the readership. In 'Beauty in Distress', a People's Friend's serial from 1914, Freda meets Dick during a difficult Channel crossing. Dick turns out to be the nephew of Freda's horrible boss, who has just sacked her as his

private secretary. In one short paragraph Freda's fears of unemployment and single life vanish:

'Be my wife,' he said softly. 'I've loved you for ever so long - I believe ever since we first met on the Calais-Dover boat. I felt then that I wanted to take care of you and kiss away that frightened look in your eyes and now I want to more than ever.'

He laid his hand on her shoulder with a sudden caressing movement. She made no effort to release herself...

65

Paterson admitted that writers during this period received much inspiration from the cinema. There was an affinity between fiction and film. 'In those days your films were love stories. A woman could sit in the cinema and identify, just as she could sit at home and read a serial and identify', he said. Times have changed, though. 'Nowadays in the cinema you don't identify with your heroine. She is going through the mill, anything from rape to murder, kidnapping, whatever. It's not the family entertainment it used to be'.⁶⁶ The cinema, in fact, was probably responsible for the striking change in focus in the Thomson romance papers between the wars. During the First World War, and immediately afterwards, stories often had a gritty, realistic, and overtly working-class edge to them. Settings, for instance, were harsher - factories or the inner cities, probably where most of the readers lived. 'Molly King, The Mill-Girl Detective' ('Molly King was only a worker in a great factory in Litchborough. But Molly was a clever girl, and became a private detective')⁶⁷ and 'Mollie Summerton: A Romance of a Great

65 People's Friend 9 February 1914

66 MP-2

67 Red Letter 30 July 1914

Warehouse' ('Satan, who is always at hand to tempt people in their weakest moments...')⁶⁸ are two examples; 'Molly' is a common name. Towards the Second World War the outlook had become much rosier and certainly more 'middle-class'. The Writer's and Artist's Year Book, for example, chronicled the change in My Weekly. In the 1923 edition, the paper solicited the following:

strong love stories of the novelette type, and all subjects of feminine interest: light, breezy school-girl stories; stories of the adventuress 'above her station' type...All contributions should make their appeal to the working classes.

By 1939, however, the My Weekly entry included the significant change: 'All contributions should make their appeal to the modern woman'.⁶⁹ Two excerpts from My Weekly will illustrate this change. The heroine of the first story fights to survive, as do those around her; in the second, she is comfortable and amorously pursued.

Our Great Drama of Factory Life: 'A Daughter of the Mill' by Stuart Martin.

The Characters.

Emily Kay, the heroine, a weaver at Palm Mill, Oldham, who is pursued by the evil intentions of Frank Booth, manager at the Mill.

John Hall, a young operative at Palm Mill, who rescues Emily from Booth's hands. A love springs up between them. His plans for a new and improved loom, deposited with Mr. Livesey, late manager of the Mill, have been stolen by Frank Booth, now manager of Palm Mill.

Alice Hall, John Hall's sister, has been betrayed by Frank Booth. Overcome with shame, she flees from Oldham, is brutally repulsed by Booth, and commences to sing in the streets of Manchester. Two theatrical artistes, struck by her voice, engage her in a scene at the theatre...

(28 January 1911)

68 People's Friend 9 February 1914

69 Even more significantly, the My Weekly entry in the 1988 edn is unchanged.

'It Happened That Way' by Dorothy Black

Barbara Tetley was peculiarly alone in the world. Four years before, not long after she had left school and started work in a Government office, her father and mother were killed in an air raid...

One thing, she had no financial worries. Her people had left her amply provided for, and she had a pleasant home in a pretty, modern flat.

And she was in love. In love with Derek Lancing, a squadron leader in the RAF. Derek was handsome and devil-may-care, and although he hadn't actually said so, she believed he returned her love.

(18 November 1944)

Ironically, My Weekly's claim to appeal to the 'modern' woman was unrealized: the happily-ever-after heroines depicted in storylines such as the one above were actually regressive stereotypes.

The treatment of such issues as patriotism and the war also varied considerably over the years. First World War readers were exposed to more credible, socially-conscious storylines, while by 1940 the influence of Hollywood was certainly apparent. Throughout the period, however, love of country and a woman's duty were paramount in the papers:

'His Young Wife at Home'

Alice Langdale was one of those unknown heroines who, with a brave smile, sent their husbands out to fight for King and Country. Many were the trials she had to meet in the days that followed - days of sickening suspense, of fear for her loved one's safety, days made darker by the constant pinching and scraping to keep herself and her widowed mother on an all too meagre separation allowance. In trying to help those poorer even than herself she met Old Moll, a regular rough diamond, and this week is told how the pair visited some of the worst of London's slums.

Red Letter 14 November 1914

'The Big Thrill Came to Camp'

The A.T.S. girls just couldn't believe their luck when Terry Fraser, film star,

arrived amongst them. Right from the first moment they had high hopes of hooking him!

Red Letter 22 May 1943

'Afraid to Marry in War-Time'

The little, tired-faced woman dabbed her eyes and smiled across to Phyllis - 'In war a woman's job is to bear her troubles with a smile and keep her man's pecker up,' she said gently.

Phyllis flushed - she'd never looked at things in that light before.

Family Star 3 May 1941

Needless to say, all of the above stories ended happily, with the proposal of marriage, or the blissful reunion of spouses. The transition, moreover, from wartime romance to florid peacetime romance in peacetime was often immediate:

'Peggy in Peace Time - The Romance of a Farm'

Only a year ago Peggy had worn khaki with leggings and a soft peaked cap as she drove a motor ambulance backward and forward from a clearing station to a base hospital in France.

To-day she looked as smart in a short blue print frock, with a big white pinafore, as she milked cows, fed chickens, and made butter at her father's farm among the hills of Perthshire.

People's Friend 10 January 1919

'His Pretty "Boss" - A Complete Short Story of How a Plucky Shop-Girl Won Love'

She was one of the 'finds' of the war; the firm thought there was none like her. And Jim's heart was a bit bitter. He'd fought and suffered so that girls like Lil Carter could live in security. It was hard that they should keep the cushy jobs when the boys came home.

Lil never seemed quite at ease with Jim. When he wasn't looking her grey eyes had a way of watching him wistfully.

Red Letter 4 January 1919

The Thomson women's papers also explored the struggle between good and evil. No sensation - murder, bigamy, lies on birth certificates, poisonings, theft - escaped the pens of Thomson writers. The criminal, in fact, was often a woman, which may have

provided a vicarious thrill for most female readers (and, indirectly, reader identification of a kind):

'Katherine Birch - He had married a murderess!'

'To-morrow you can go where you like - I'm finished with you!' Jim said scornfully.

Maddened by his words, Katherine hurled herself at him, pushing him against the rail. At the unexpected attack, Jim staggered back, and, clutching wildly in the air, stumbled and toppled over -

What she had done was terrible, but she was free. The menace had gone.

Flame 18 May 1940

'Her Brute of a Sister'

'Gee, it's a chest!'

'Maybe there's a body in it.'

'We'd better tell the police.'

Esther Tapley's secret lies in the hands of two boys.

Red Star Weekly 3 October 1942

The moral, however, was always clearly and repeatedly presented: crime does not pay. The villain gets his due, and the protagonists are reunited in the end. In style and content, the blood-and-thunder papers owed much inspiration to the nineteenth century sensation novels. In most cases, an innocent girl is wronged by someone either trying to steal her dashing fiance, or break up her happy marriage.

'But He Married Her Mother!'

Most mothers are quite pleased when their daughters get engaged. But not Mrs. Leslie. She wanted Anne's sweetheart for herself!

Secrets 5 February 1938

'Rogue's Bride'

'Cancel Your Honeymoon - Get Back Home! He's Not Your Husband!'

Flame 18 May 1940

'Lady Norah's Secret'

John and Elsie gazed at one another in sudden fear. The door of the room was locked - and the house was on fire! Lady Norah had trapped them!...

'John', she said, 'kiss me, my darling!'

He held her close. The thrill of that

kiss seemed to draw the soul out of her...

Family Star 25 October 1941

The bigamous marriage was a common scenario. Again, the innocent engaged girl (or wife) is used by an evil fiance (or husband), who is already married. Presumed-dead first spouses return in droves in the Thomson papers.

'The Girl They Both Married'

Trudging along the dark lane Joyce's heart was heavy. What sort of welcome would she get from her dead husband's family? Would they help her when they learned he had married her bigamously? What was to become of her and her unborn child?

Family Star 8 November 1941

'With His Next Bride Chosen!'

Desperately Nora clutched at the upturned boat. 'Help Roger! Help!' she cried.

In the darkness Roger Seaton smiled - and went on swimming steadily towards shore!

Flame 13 April 1940

In the end, Joyce marries her brother-in-law to save the family name, whereupon her 'dead' husband returns. Roger marries his mistress, but Nora does not drown as planned. Violence in stories was often depicted quite graphically, and real-life sensational crimes were also dramatised in several parts ('The Dr. Reede Scandal - The Confession of a Woman who Stole a Dead Body'; 'Mary Sullivan's Wedding - Story of an Irish Poisoning Tragedy'⁷⁰). Then as now, people loved to read about a murder; one of the selling points of Red Letter in 1914 was, 'A famous Crime Investigator contributes each week the true story of a famous tragedy'. Unusually, the scheming woman was a common character, instantly recognizable as wicked because of her dark features. For example, Clarina Singlar, a circus dancer who attacked her husband with a lion, 'wasn't like other

70 Red Star Weekly 14 November 1942; Red Letter 10 January 1914

women. The warm blood of the South ran in her veins'.⁷¹ Robina Dawson, 'the woman with the face of an angel and the heart of a fiend', inherited from her Spanish mother 'eyes and hair as dark as night'. In Red Letter, Robina tries to steal her saintly step-sister's fiance through theft and blackmail, but is exposed by Grace. After a struggle ('Hate and passion swept over Robina Dawson like a red flood'), Grace is floored with a torch, and Robina makes plans:

A cold and cruel resolve took the place of the mad rage that had seized her. There was only one way. Grace Calvert must never recover consciousness to tell what she knew.

A knife? Yes, that would be best.

She remembered a Chinese dagger that hung on the wall of the landing just outside. She had seen it that afternoon.

Grace Calvert, lying on her side, moaned and put out a hand along the carpet as if seeking support.

A moment later, Robina Dawson had the dagger, sharp and deadly in her hand. With clenched teeth and eyes that blazed like burning coals, she crouched and plunged it into the back of the defenseless girl.

Red Letter 16 September 1933

Clearly, the Thomson papers exploited concurrent themes in published works of popular fiction, notably thrillers. It seems, moreover, that no one could be trusted in the Thomson papers, not even the saintly visiting priest in the parish church:

Mr. Samson was away on a fortnight's holiday and Kenneth Turner was taking the evening service. He looked more like an athlete than a minister, with his broad shoulders and his lean body. His eyes were blue and intense and his voice low and boyishly eager.

Listening to him Helen's heart hurt her, she loved him so much...

Flame 6 January 1940

Actually, Mr. Turner is a thief in disguise, and poor Helen escapes his clutches by becoming, of all things, a partner in a circus knife-throwing act. Religious characters were used, so long as the denomination was never mentioned, and the priest turned out to be an imposter.⁷²

The Big 5 papers also had recurrent themes, and these three - foreigners, patriotism and education - were the most recurrent of all. Predictably, the boys' papers promoted racial stereotypes then in vogue. Caucasians, with the noted exception of Germans ('Huns'), were regarded with affection. In the Hotspur, for example, students from all over the world attended Red Circle School, including Denys van Berg (South Africa) and Kit Delaney (U.S.A.). Blacks and Orientals fared less well: The Wizard featured several racist cartoons, including one in colour on its front cover every week (and as late as 1950), which followed the slapstick adventures of the natives on Spadger Island. Adventure followed 'Ginger, Joe and Sambo - Three pals out for FUN - a darkey, a donkey and a Cockney'; the Hotspur lampooned the Coalblacks tribe, and Sing Small

72 Apart from the promotion of patriotism D.C. Thomson also displayed its sympathy, in as apolitical a way as possible, for such issues as working conditions within factories, and urban poverty. In retrospect, the inclusion of such important matters within the context of a frivolous love story would appear naive and degrading, but was not intended at the time. Lines such as, 'Molly's father paid the penalty of most men whose day is spent in the presence of great crashing and thundering machines. He was deaf',* and 'She has a hard struggle, and at last is forced to part with her child... Unless she does this, the baby would die a lingering death by starvation',** were clearly intended to affect the reader. Even concern over the atom bomb did not escape the Thomson editors. In 'Coming Home', Natalie's husband Ken returns blinded from working in America 'on an atom pile...The specialists didn't know much about these kind of accidents yet.'*** (*People's Friend 7 January 1950; **Red Letter 3 January 1914; ***My Weekly 16 December 1950)

and his little yellow friends. (It also, however, lampooned Scots in a strip called 'The Clan McSporrán')⁷³ Chinese characters were depicted with great fear; the elusive villain in the Dixon Hawke Library was Chao-Feng, who seemed to be forever hissing, 'The white race will learn one day the power of the Yellow Peril'.⁷⁴ Black people were often terrifying, especially in groups. In Adventure, for instance, Ju, 'The Black Giant' from Nigeria, is given a potion that makes him invisible, and he proceeds on a mad rampage, terrorizing, of all places, Bedford and Leighton Buzzard.⁷⁵ A frequent storyline featured a white adventurer who is captured and tortured by natives; the debts owed to authors such as Rider Haggard, and to the cinema, are obvious:

They were an ugly group, and Dick counted that two of them besides the leader carried guns.

They began to talk, volubly and incoherently as niggers do, but the big fellow cut them short, roared a few orders, and spread them out in line...

The big man's overalls were open at the chest, to reveal hair matted like a doormat. His face was one of the most hideous the boy had ever seen, his nose broken and crooked, his cheeks scarred by knife slashes, and his broken teeth giving his mouth a one-sided appearance. 'Dey ain't done dat, I'se swearin! Dey's hid away somewheres, an' when I done git 'em I'se gwine to carve de flesh from dere bones'.

Rover 17 August 1929

73 Times have changed in Dundee, and the firm is now embarrassed by such comics. One Thomson employee, while thumbing through a Wizard annual, paused on the comic page, blushed, and said, 'You'd better not write anything about those'.

74 Anderson, recalling his days on the Dixon Hawke Library, added, 'Oh yes the Chinamen. Oh, they were a doughty lot. Wasn't it amazing how "Limehouse" and "Chinamen" conjured up the sinisters? Always have. There's so many Chinamen around now in our times, probably that's destroyed some of that'. (AA-1)

75 Adventure 4 January 1936

'You said, white dog, that you would bring the Ju-ju to-day,' snarled the witch-doctor. 'You lied!'

'That was your fault,' rasped Foster. 'If you'd left it alone I would have brought it.' 'If,' he continued in English, 'if I could get my fingers on you, you squinty-eyed little swab, I'd wipe the floor with you!'

Soka could not understand the words but he sensed the meaning, and he brought his face close to Foster's...

'My people demand a sacrifice, and I will make sure that you do not die too quickly. For you the death by ants!'

Skipper 4 April 1931

A 1938 story in the Skipper, 'The One Man to Fight the Klan', even depicted the racist American organization as having once 'always been a great power for good, and Rhet had been very proud to be accepted as a member' (Ultimately, the Klansmen are portrayed, not as a lynch mob, but as bank robbers in disguise).⁷⁶

Patriotism and war, popular subjects among boys, featured prominently in the Big 5 papers.⁷⁷ Apart from show-casing patriotic duties, such as notices on saving waste paper,⁷⁸ Thomson editors

76 Skipper 16 April 1938. The women's papers were not immune from racist remarks, although these were perhaps less conscious and intentional. In Flame, for example, a snippet informed readers 'a negro can blush! They don't turn red, but it has been proved that their skin becomes even darker when they are embarrassed!' (27 May 1939)

77 Mass-Observation in 1940 surveyed the Thomson boys' papers to examine the influence of the war on the fiction. During the last week in 1940, for example, Adventure contained 244 references to the war, the Wizard 259, including 114 references to Germany. (M-O 'Children and Education' Box 2 File E [22 March 1940]; H.P.)

78 Like many publications the Big 5 papers encouraged readers to do their patriotic duty and save waste paper. 'PASS IT ON - AND PASS THE WORD! When you've read your Adventure, Pass it on to your pal, and Pass the word along that it must end its career in the Salvage Bag. FOR WASTE PAPER IS WANTED FOR MUNITIONS'. (Adventure 3 July 1943)

cleverly made war approachable, interesting, and even fun for boys by weaving it in sport and school stories. Football heroes became secret agents, for example, and cricket bats deadly weapons. In 1941, for example, the Wolf of Kabul and Chung were sent behind Italian lines in Libya to thwart enemy plans. In this way Chung stopped one Italian officer from torturing his prisoners:

'Pronto!' A corporal rasped the command.
'Unal Due---'

It was the last command that ever passed his lips. The foliage of a nearby tree rustled and a strange object flashed down. It landed with a thud on the soldier's helmet and even his steel helmet failed to protect his skull.

The object which had hurtled down was a cricket bat, much battered and ominously stained. The blade was split and bound in places with lengths of brass wire.

'Ho! I crack skulls!' howled a terrible voice. 'Tremble, little men who serve He-of-the-Chin! The Shadow of the Wolf falls upon you!'

Wizard 29 March 1941

In the same year the football serial 'The Ninety Minute Nelsons' was published in the Wizard (1 November):

The 1938-1939 football season had just opened with a tremendous sensation. Captain Dick Nelson, the famous amateur centre-half of the Black Hawks, had been arrested as a traitor, accused of having gone to Berlin and sold Britain's secret defence plans to the Nazis...

But Dick Nelson was not a traitor. On the contrary, he had just made a tremendous sacrifice for his country. He was a member of the British Secret Service, and, though he really had sold plans to the Nazis, they were not the true plans of Britain's defences. They made out that Britain was far better prepared than she really was, and Dick had played the part of traitor to try and stop Germany's forcing war on Europe in 1938, when Britain was so unready that she might have been over-run by the mighty Nazi war machine.

The Gestapo agents are portrayed as buffoons and (perhaps the worst insult of all) completely ignorant of football. One, called Schenk, watches a practice and grows suspicious. 'These men speak of rifle practice. We must note that carefully. Plainly the Englanders are practicing shooting in large numbers. All these men can talk of is nothing else'.

Similarly, war and patriotism entered the school stories, resulting in heroic acts by schoolboys, or by agents posing as schoolboys. This was a dramatic departure from the tales of soldiers and battles which characterised the late nineteenth century boys' papers. By putting the boys themselves in the action (usually through the school setting), D.C. Thomson guaranteed reader identification and an enthusiastic reception. The fiction, moreover, was wholeheartedly patriotic during the war. In 'The Iron Teacher', a robot is enlisted by the Pahang School in Burma, isolated since the war, to help sink Japanese submarines. During one battle the robot itself is sunk:

'He - He's gone!' groaned Jim Nesbett.
'He's wrecked the submarine and saved the destroyer, but he - he's finished. Surely he - it can't swim. He's gone to the bottom.'

Even the sight of the Japs floundering in the harbour, yelling for help as the submarine sank lower and lower, could not cheer the youngsters...

Hotspur 1 January 1944

In 'Our School Flies a Hurricane', Jimmy Douglas of the R.A.F. aids the Resistance while posing as a schoolboy (a mature student?) in Remy. southeast France:

Jimmy's guess was that the cars were rushing in the direction of the spot where the parachutist must have landed.

'Hope I've got enough ammo left,' he growled as he went down...

Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat! The eight guns poured their terrible blast of bullets down on the highway, and when he looked back the trees were lit up by the flames of shattered, burning cars. Crumpled figures sprawled on the ground. A few staggered away.

It was a grim sight, but this was war, and Jimmy had a stern feeling of satisfaction as he roared away...

Hotspur 3 June 1944

'Boys of the Bulldog Breed' chronicled the adventures of schoolboys who sneaked into the Air Training Corps to assist the war effort. Ron's father was a pilot killed in the war; Ron's grieving mother forbids Ron to join up, but he does so anyway and, singlehandedly, prevents a crash during a German raid. This story is of particular interest because mothers rarely graced the pages of the Big 5 papers:

'I know everything, Ron', she said. 'I've talked to Mr. Watson and to your Commanding Officer. And I realise now I've been a very selfish woman. Because you went up in that plane to-day you saved the lives of four others - and all of them have mothers, Ron. And if those mothers can give their sons to defend our country then I've no right to try and keep you from your duty. I'm proud of you Ron - more proud than I can say and - and your father is proud of you too'.

Adventure 2 January 1943

One wonders how many eager readers raced to show their Mums this story. After the war the Wizard ran a series, 'The Making of a British Soldier', which conveyed, in story form, 'in thrilling detail what happens when young men are called up to do their two years of military training'.⁷⁹

There is, finally, in the Big 5 papers the treatment of education. Underlying the thousands of school stories was a strong

79 The Wizard, from 16 December 1950

belief in the importance of education and the respect for authority. Mr. Smugg, the Red Circle School headmaster, is the victim of countless pranks, but his wishes are respected in the end. According to the firm, public school stories were popular because most of the readers of the Big 5 papers were from middle and working-class families and did not attend such schools; hence curiosity about them was great. A popular serial in the Wizard, entitled 'Smith of the Lower Third', followed the adventures and discoveries of a poor boy who won a scholarship to the poshest public school in England. School, moreover, was depicted as fun, interesting - and obligatory. 'Scrapper Corrigan - Kid Catcher' in the Hotspur (5 January 1935) was one story which dealt with truants in the Wild West town of Stovepipe. 'Scrapper was the only man who was able to hold down the job of School Attendance Officer. The Tombstone boys were tough, but Scrapper was tougher, and he made them attend'. (Similarly, a recurrent Hotspur character was the 'Big Stiff', the amiable school inspector.) Another Hotspur story, 'Public Enemies Trained Here', was also set in America. In the most bizarre way, the British system of education earned high praise indeed:

Actually, Rockport was a school for crooks. Professor Derval, once of Sing-Sing Prison, was running it as a training ground for the sons of gangsters and members of the underworld. He encouraged a few honest pupils as a blind to fool the police, and Charlie was one of these...

All the fifty boys who turned out were expert gunmen. At Rockport they had a secret range where the pupils were taught to shoot at dummy policemen. Most of the boys had learned to be crackshots there.

Things of this kind would never have happened at the British schools he had attended.

Hotspur 27 April 1935

D.C. Thomson & Co., Ltd. stands as the best example of the type of magazine publisher which dominated the popular press in Britain: all-powerful, shrewd, paternalistic, conservative and moralising. The firm recognized the apparent needs of the reading public and perfected detailed formulas, repeated endlessly according to expanding public demand. We have tried to reveal the tight, aggressive editorial policy: D.C. Thomson kept its finger on the national pulse, testing the waters all the time ('speering') in an effort to keep its publications current and interesting. In presenting a conventionally moral, 'wholesome' product, however, editors of both the women's papers and the Big 5 were governed by commercial concerns, and thereby were perhaps more flexible and receptive to change (dictated by the readership - and the readership's parents) than has been publicly admitted. Consequently, the Thomson boys' publications in particular enjoyed decades of supremacy and avoided the fate of more fleeting papers, notably the Gem, Magnet, and Boy's Own Paper. As we shall see the contrast with the Religious Tract Society could not be more striking. The R.T.S., despite blazing the trail for these modern, 'tuppenny dreadfuls', made no concessions to the expanding competition: its unyielding editorial policy and laissez-faire approach to the market spelled commercial disaster in the long run.

Chapter 7

'The Public Mind Might Be Diverted':

The Religious Tract Society

D.C. Thomson and the Religious Tract Society had much in common. Both firms, for example, enjoyed immediate success as publishers of popular magazines; this success was sustained for decades, an unusual length of time in the publishing industry. In the field of boys' papers they were rivals to some extent; in fact, the Boy's Own Paper established the modern market for this schoolboy genre, just as the Girl's Own Paper did for the schoolgirl and, partially, for women in general. The R.T.S. and D.C. Thomson were paternalistic employers who excluded unions but enjoyed the loyalty of workers who remained with them for as many as sixty years. Both firms, furthermore, were conservative in nature and regarded their publications, to varying degrees, as organs for moral propaganda. Anne Hepple, the new editor of the Woman's Magazine, expressed the R.T.S.'s enduring campaign against 'dreadful' publications in a 1931 address:

The Society had now been engaged in its crusade of enlightenment for more than a century, but the need for its activities had never been more crying than at the present time. The sole appeal made by some of the cheap literature of to-day was an appeal to the lowest instincts of humanity. The films and their lurid posters were often very suggestive of evil. A vicious

monster seemed to have been let loose on the community.

Direct opposition might strengthen rather than annihilate this monster, but there was a more effective treatment. The public mind might be diverted to more agreeable topics. This was the self-imposed duty of the Religious Tract Society, which, in this and other respects, was faithfully carrying out its purpose in this and every other country except Russia. ¹

The fundamental difference between the two publishers, however, was in terms of experience, drive, and commercial considerations. The Religious Tract Society was, by nature, a publisher of books, not magazines. Consequently, it failed to grasp the intricacies of publishing within a mass market, displaying an ignorance of its readership and an amateur approach to the market. Their editors were also crippled by the R.T.S.'s evangelical concerns, which inhibited success in an increasingly secular world. As one former employee explained, 'All our magazines were nice magazines. That was why I suppose in a way it was a hard job to sell (them). Parents bought (them) for their boys whether their boys wanted it or not, didn't they?'

The decline of the once-mighty Religious Tract Society is the other side of the success of Mills and Boon and D.C. Thomson. Despite their impressive beginnings the R.T.S. magazines were only marginally successful in the long run. An examination of their history provides an insight into the types of problems which beset all publishers of popular fiction during this period, but through the

1 'The New Editor of "The Woman's Magazine"', P.C. 4 April 1931 p. 426. The R.T.S. titles were among the few magazines mentioned in either the Publishers' Circular or the Bookseller. This publicity was perhaps as indicative of trade approval and support as it was a concession to one of the largest and oldest book publishers.

experience of one which, unlike Mills and Boon or D.C. Thomson, was not able to overcome them.

I

The Religious Tract Society was founded in 1799 as an evangelical organization for the printing and distribution of tracts at home and abroad. An evangelical, anti-Catholic organization, the R.T.S. worked in sympathy with the established and nonconformist churches in Britain, and the Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist) and Orthodox churches on the Continent, acting as a kind of spiritual watchdog. In 1897 it had become an international organization which assisted in publishing literature in 226 languages and dialects; sixty million items - a rate of 120-130 publications per minute - were issued from various depositories around the world.² These included books (Biblical, devotional, missionary, story), tracts (evangelical and evidential, narrative and biographical) and magazines, designed to appeal to every age and class. The R.T.S., moreover, paid special attention to supplying 'a pure and wholesome literature' to the young.³ The scale and variety of their publications was staggering. The Invalid Library (1896), for example, contained inspirational short stories of stricken heroes, printed on long strips of cloth. In 1929 alone The Pilgrim's Progress (a best-seller) was published in 123 languages, a Dictionary

2 Centenary of the Religious Tract Society (London, 1898), p. 3

3 Ibid.

of the Nyanja Language at 12s. 6d. and a Russian Concordance to the Bible, 1,127 pages in length, at 21s.⁴ The R.T.S. was also a leading publisher of Sunday School 'rewards'. Their large list of juvenile fiction was the envy of the book trade and featured works by such authors as Talbot Baines Reed (an R.T.S. discovery), Elinor Brent-Dyer, Elsie J. Oxenham, and (in the 1940s) Captain W.E. Johns.

After the First World War the R.T.S. expanded and reorganized its operations. In 1932 the publishing imprint (books and magazines) was changed to the Lutterworth Press (named after the village from which Wycliff's followers set forth). In 1935 the R.T.S. was amalgamated with the Christian Literature Society of India and Africa (founded 1858) in a new firm, called the United Society for Christian Literature (U.S.C.L.), which exists today. The Christian Literature Society of China was incorporated in the U.S.C.L. in 1942. In 1941 the periodical business was established as a public company, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd. It remained, however, under the jurisdiction of the U.S.C.L., as did the Lutterworth Press.

Clearly, the R.T.S.'s expertise lay in books, not magazines, which makes its initial success with the latter all the more interesting. Over the course of a century the R.T.S. published a number of weekly and monthly papers, the majority of these inspirational and of limited circulation, mainly to members: Friendly Greetings, Light in the Home, The Child's Companion, The Cottager and Artisan, True Catholic, The Leisure Hour, Our Little Dots. Three of the R.T.S.'s magazines, however, are remarkable for their longevity,

4 '130 Years in the Publishing World', P.C. 14 December 1929 p. 823

initial mass circulations, and contribution to the development of the market: The Sunday at Home, the Boy's Own Paper, and the Girl's Own Paper.

The Sunday at Home (Sunday for short), a monthly, was started in May 1854. It was a popular paper which contained a mixture of verse, inspirational articles, anti-Catholic tracts and 'wholesome' fiction. One of its most popular serials, 'Jessica's First Prayer' by Hesba Stratton, was published in book form by the R.T.S. in 1868 and proceeded to sell over 1.5 million copies.⁵ Subtitled 'The oldest and best of the Sunday magazines', Sunday survived on a small but devoted subscription list, in spite of competition from weekly magazines such as the Amalgamated Press's Sunday Companion and, of course, the popular Sunday newspapers. Its most purely religious magazine, Sunday was the favorite of the R.T.S. General Committee, and its demise in 1940 was widely mourned. At one time the Sunday annual volume was stocked in libraries in seaside resorts for its holidaying readers. Like all R.T.S. magazines, moreover, the standard of printing was higher and the design more professional than the ubiquitous letterpress weekly papers.

The B.O.P. (1879) and the G.O.P. (1880) were purposely designed as 'healthy' alternatives to the penny dreadfuls. The B.O.P. closed in 1967 after 88 years, the longest uninterrupted publishing run of any boys' paper. It was published weekly from

⁵ Brian Alderson, 'Tracts, Rewards and Fairies: the Victorian contribution to children's literature' in Asa Briggs (ed), Essays in the history of publishing in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the House of Longman 1724-1974 (London, 1974), p. 268

January 1879 until September 1914 and monthly afterwards. The popular Boy's Own Annual, the bound collection of one year's issues, was published regularly until 1940, and then in various forms until 1979. The B.O.P. contained an assortment of exciting fiction, illustrations, articles on hobbies and current events, and an extensive correspondence page, all for one penny.⁶ Some of the most popular authors of boys' fiction, including Baines Reed, Henty, and Jules Verne, serialized their work in the B.O.P. The R.T.S.'s first attempt at producing a quasi-secular, mass-market magazine, the B.O.P. was an instant success, receiving the blessings of church leaders, the trade and, most significantly, parents. Its impressive circulation of 200,000 copies per week demonstrated that a quality paper with 'wholesome' stories was a viable concern. According to Patrick Dunae, the B.O.P. did not kill the penny dreadful, as it set out to do, 'but the large circulation which the paper commanded suggests that the B.O.P. did win many readers from the old penny dreadfuls'.⁷ This readership can be conservatively estimated at

6 The issue dated 4 August 1906, for example, contained installments of three serials, including 'The Voyage of the Blue Vega: A Story of Arctic Adventure' by Gordon Stables; a 'Chat' with A.E. Relf, M.C.C. and Sussex, with a page of photographs of 'Some Famous Cricketers'; a collection of school stories and school-related information called 'The Fourth Form Ferret'; and a correspondence page. The latter was a popular fixture of all R.T.S. papers, and the published replies to boys' queries make entertaining reading: 'No, Ferdinand, don't clean football boots with your tooth brush, and use it for its proper purpose afterwards', and the like.

7 Patrick Dunae, 'Boy's Own Paper: Origins and Editorial Policies', The Private Library (Winter 1976), p. 155. In 1888 Edward Salmon said that the 'best testimony' of the B.O.P.'s successful campaign against penny dreadfuls 'is the fact that its enemies - the proprietors of penny dreadfuls - try to induce booksellers to insert advertisement slips of their own rubbish into copies sold of The Boy's Own'. (Juvenile Literature As It Is, pp. 186-187)

600,000 boys (and girls, and their parents) before 1914, the golden age of the B.O.P.

The G.O.P. debut in January 1880 was also greeted favorably by the trade and the public, with a weekly circulation of 250,000 copies. In fact, as we will see, the G.O.P. was the most profitable R.T.S. title; it outsold the B.O.P. consistently until 1950, six years before its demise. Initially a weekly, the G.O.P. became a monthly in October 1908 and acquired a subtitle, 'and Woman's Magazine'. This was regarded as a natural progression for the G.O.P., which since its inception had attracted readers both young and old with its articles on fashion, beauty, cookery, gardening and sewing, in addition to its fiction.⁸ The G.O.P. and Woman's Magazine was retitled the Woman's Magazine and G.O.P. in 1927. In 1930 the old G.O.P. was revived as a magazine for girls and the Woman's Magazine (W.M. for short) was launched as a separate monthly. The W.M. ceased publication in 1951. The G.O.P. was redesigned in 1947 as a 'teen-age' magazine called the G.O.P.-Heiress, renamed simply Heiress in 1950. Heiress closed in 1956, bringing to an end the 76-year history of the G.O.P. Both the

⁸ The G.O.P. and Woman's Magazine for March 1926, for example, contained three short stories and two serial installments, all of a cheery romantic nature ('Mimosa' by L.G. Moberly; 'The Adventures of a Homely Woman' by Fay Inchfawn); two pages of photographs of 'Wives of the Great' (Mrs. Baldwin and the two Mrs. Chamberlains); several pages of verse and music; a book page; a travel piece on France; and articles on stitchery, 'Repairing Broken China' and maintaining 'The Bachelor-Girl's Boudoir'.

G.O.P. and the W.M., moreover, published an annual for the Christmas trade.⁹

What was the composition of the readers of these magazines? The B.O.P. was read by boys aged 12-16; the G.O.P. for girls of a similar age as well as their mothers; Sunday by all ages- it was described in 1919 as 'The Monthly Peal of Joy Bells for the Family Circle'.¹⁰ Ostensibly the papers were also designed with all classes in mind. The weekly price of one penny and monthly price of 6d. were within reach of every class; copies were freely passed around, and the R.T.S.'s papers were among the few 'popular' periodicals stocked by public libraries.¹¹ Sunday, moreover, contained a special corner and prizes for 'domestic servants' each month, and the G.O.P. featured articles of interest to single working girls. Edward Salmon in 1888 praised the B.O.P. as 'the only first-class journal of its kind which has forced its way into the slums as well as into the best homes', and the G.O.P. as one of three 'high-class' magazines which fell into the hands of the poor.¹² The

9 The R.T.S. also published five other fiction annuals for children before the Second World War: The Empire Annual for Boys/Girls; The Schoolboys'/Schoolgirls' Annual (both ages 10-15); The Light in the Home Annual (Girls, 12-16); and Little Dots Annual (under 8).

10 Advertisement in The Newsagent, Bookseller's Review and Stationers' Gazette 20 September 1919 p. 273

11 Jack Cox, the last Editor of the B.O.P., recalled how he and his friends couldn't possibly afford one shilling for the B.O.P. in the 1920s, but his Lancashire public library took a copy, in demand by a steady queue of boys. (Cox, Take a Cold Tub, Sir! [Guildford, 1982], p. 99)

12 Salmon, Juvenile, pp. 185-186; 194. The other girls' papers were Atalanta and A-1. Salmon also quoted details of the 1884 survey of 1,000 boys and 1,000 girls aged 11-19, which revealed the favorite magazines as B.O.P. and G.O.P., respectively.

magazines also achieved an international circulation through the R.T.S's existing network of channels for its book trade. Major J.T. Gorman recalled receiving the weekly B.O.P. as a schoolboy in Cape Town, and later in the Himalayas. 'I was about the only boy at the station who had a copy...the arrival of my copy was eagerly looked forward to by all my friends and passed from hand to hand'.¹³

As circulations declined before the First World War, the core of readers came increasingly from the middle class. The change to monthly publication and corresponding price increase would have militated against working-class sales. In an attempt to attract lucrative advertising revenue, publicity highlighted the magazines' 'quality' and appeal to 'better-class' readers and homes; in 1914 the G.O.P. and W.M. was described as being 'For Women and Girls of the Upper and Middle Classes'.¹⁴ The B.O.P., nonetheless, tried to retain its appeal to all boys. Jack Cox remarked in 1949 that in one village, 19 boys shared the two copies that arrived in the local newsagent's shop.¹⁵ In 1952, boys at the school in Mather & Platt's engineering works in Manchester were 'very keen' readers of the B.O.P., despite living 'in the poorest quarters of the City'.¹⁶

13 'Diamond Jubilee B.O.P. - Major J.T. Gorman', script of television programme 'Picture Page' (19 January 1939), p. 1 (B.B.C. Written Archives). Gorman, an ex-Indian Army officer, wrote many serials for the B.O.P. in the 1930s.

14 The Advertisers' A.B.C. (1914 edn), p. 499

15 Jack Cox, 'Teen-Age Critics Keep 70-Year-Old "B.O.P" On Its Toes', T.C. 15 January 1949 p. 5

16 Jack Cox, Report, Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., U.S.C.L. 143 (4 March 1952), p. 2

The popularity of the B.O.P. among girls was recognized by the R.T.S., but no attempt was made to cater to them in the paper. D.C. Thomson, we have seen, adopted the same attitude. Salmon, in commenting on an 1884 survey which found the B.O.P. to be the second most popular magazine among girls (after G.O.P.), reasoned that girls read the paper to supplement the rather staid contents of their normal reading. 'They can get in boys' books what they seldom get in their own - a stirring plot and lively movement'.¹⁷ The B.O.P. correspondence columns often featured replies addressed to 'A Girl Reader'. In 1930 one such reader wrote to say that so many of her girlfriends had now read the B.O.P. that it ought to be renamed the Boy's and Girl's Own Paper. G.R. Pocklington, then Editor, thought this (rightly so) 'a rotten idea':

The sort of girl who reads the 'B.O.P.' reads it because it is a boy's paper, and because she is interested in the sort of things in which boys are interested, and any attempt to provide a sort of milk-and-water 'Boy's and Girl's Own Paper' would almost certainly please neither...

As, therefore, we enter upon another year of the work of the 'B.O.P.', I can look forward with growing confidence to the ultimate realization of the aim I have set myself, to make its pages a really powerful agency for drawing together the boys and girls of the world.

18

As the magazines were treated, at least subconsciously, as propaganda organs of the R.T.S., editors were carefully screened as to their religious leanings. For much of the period the General

17 Salmon, Juvenile, p. 28

18 B.O.P. September 1930 p. 857

Committee,¹⁹ which supervised such appointments in addition to overseeing all workings of the R.T.S. (including various sub-committees), was dominated by clergy. When Charles Peters was appointed the first editor of the new G.O.P., the Committee was satisfied it had 'every assurance that he is truly protestant and evangelical in his doctrinal views. The evidence upon this point being satisfactory. the Secretary had confirmed the engagement'.²⁰ Flora Klickmann, who succeeded Peters and guided the G.O.P. and W.M. during the height of its popularity, came from the Wesleyan Missionary Society. The Rev. Kennedy Williamson, appointed editor of Sunday in 1926, pledged to 'loyally uphold the traditions and tenets of the Society, as set forth in the document called Foundation Principles, with which indeed I am in enthusiastic agreement'.²¹ Finally, in 1945 'Mrs. Goodall', the new editor of W.M. and G.O.P., impressed the Committee with her religious fervour and commitment:

She felt the sponsoring of the magazines was a most valuable piece of Missionary work and mentioned a letter from a Baptist Minister in Wales congratulating them on the way in which they were reaching girls through the articles in the magazines...

She ended by asking members to pray for all

19 Hereafter referred to simply as the 'Committee'

20 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 135 (18 September 1879), p. 1

21 Minutes of Committee, USCL 105 (19 May 1926), p. 101. I have been unable to discover a copy of the oft-referred-to 'Foundation Principles'. The guidelines for readers of tracts and manuscripts submitted for publication probably contained the spirit of these, though: 'State if the work is written on decidedly evangelical principles, or if the way of salvation by grace, through faith in Christ, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, is clearly pointed out. Or, state whether on other grounds the purpose and character of the work are such as to render it suitable and desirable for publication by the Society'.

associated with the production of the magazines that they might be given wisdom and grace. 22

Former R.T.S. employees remembered their experience with the same fondness and nostalgia as did workers at D.C. Thomson. 'We enjoyed ourselves. We were a happy crew', Michael Foxell, a former General Manager, recalled.²³ Some workers remained more for the camaraderie and friendly atmosphere than for the benefits. George Mihill and his wife both started work in 1924, aged 14, Mihill as an assistant on the new boys' weekly Rovering, his wife in the circulation department. Despite difficult working conditions, long hours, and 'terribly poor' pay, they stayed for fifty years. 'I was so happy there', Mrs. Mihill recalled:

It was so friendly, a lot of fun. My father tried terribly hard to get me to leave and go to Newnes (who paid much better wages). I went there for an interview and disliked it so much I didn't even wait for the interview. 24

Like D.C. Thomson, the paternalistic atmosphere at the R.T.S. may have been increased by the ban on unions. According to Foxell, the R.T.S. opposed unions, partly out of principle, and partly because, as a charity, it could not afford to pay union rates. 'There's no

22 Ibid., USCL 119 (18 December 1945), p. 125

23 Michael Foxell was interviewed once, in Farnham, Surrey on 22 June 1988. He joined the U.S.C.L. in 1949 as an editorial assistant, becoming in turn assistant publicity manager for the periodicals and assistant editor for books, instrumental in reviving the old annuals as Boy's Own Companions. He retired as General Manager.

24 Mr. and Mrs. Mihill were interviewed once, in Clevedon, Avon, on 3 August 1988. Mihill eventually became a 'rep', travelling about the country in search of book orders. He maintained that anyone who could sell religious books in the Welsh valleys at the height of the Depression, which he did, could do anything.

way in which the Press and the whole U.S.C.L. publishing could have survived if it paid union rates', he said.

II

With an apparently solid foundation of readers and the acclaim of the general public, what went wrong? In order to understand the erosion of the Religious Tract Society's leading position as a magazine publisher at the turn of the century, it is necessary to realize that its titles were flawed from the very beginning. Their handicap was their very success. The 'best-seller' by its nature has a limited lifespan because inevitably it will have a rash of imitators where before no competitor may have existed. These, moreover, often improve upon the original and ultimately outsell it; the original is relegated to a kind of sweetly nostalgic, quasi-legendary but commercially unviable status. This was the fate of the R.T.S. periodicals: their initial success was fleeting, competition intensified and inexperience coupled with a resistance to accept change and new ideas spelled financial disaster.

It should be understood at the outset that the R.T.S. was relatively inexperienced in the weekly magazine market. Their forte was books, and books in a highly specialised and 'safe' market. As the R.T.S. was a charity, the magazines were regarded as an adjunct to the main book business; any profits were ploughed back into the missionary effort. Losses, moreover, were common among the R.T.S.

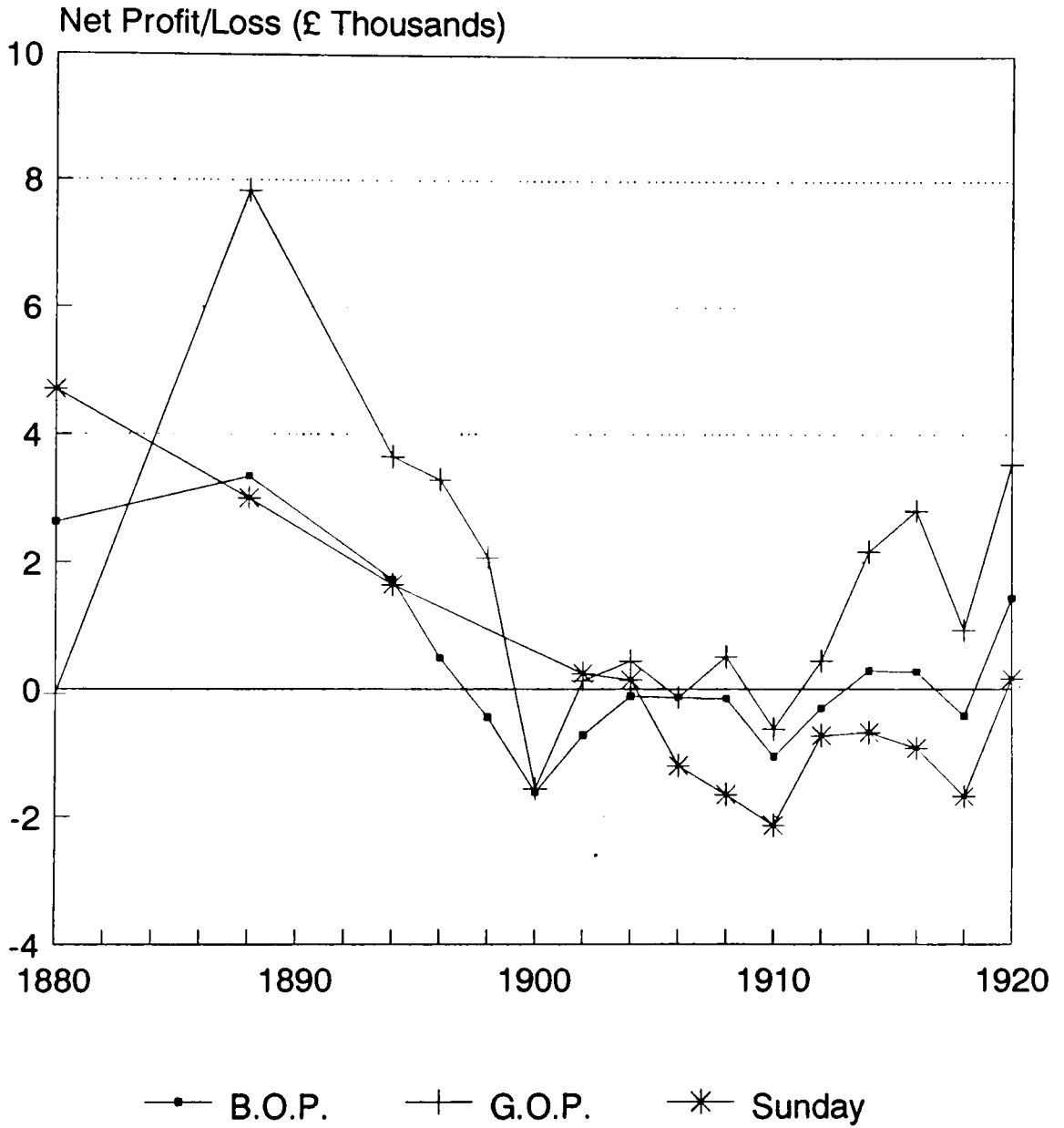
titles; the Leisure Hour, for example, was continued for decades despite a mounting deficit.²⁵ Foxell claimed that the B.O.P. was unique because it managed to survive 'by the skin of its teeth, because I think it was run by a charity. and they were prepared to, not subsidise it, but to not expect profits from it. They expected it to be self-supporting'. Hence, so long as the magazines paid their own way the R.T.S. was satisfied. Panic set in, however, when profits declined and the periodicals began accumulating large debts.

Despite the popular legend, the initial success of the B.O.P. and G.O.P. was temporary; within ten years both publications were set in a decline not reversed until after the First World War. In retrospect this is hardly surprising as these titles seem old-fashioned and dull beside their competitors, especially those from the Harmsworth stable. Consequently, they were increasingly less attractive to advertisers, and advertising revenue is the lifeblood of any magazine. Figure 7-1 shows the net profit and loss accounts for the three R.T.S. magazines. Both the B.O.P. and G.O.P. peaked within ten years of their debuts, admittedly a long time in the magazine business. The decline of Sunday was even more severe. One reason why profits were depressed despite healthy sales were costs of production. The R.T.S. magazines offered superior quality - better paper, gravure printing, photographs - than its competitors, but at the same price. High overheads and low advertising, therefore, consumed profits.²⁶ The new century brought some measure of stability, and the First World War set the magazines back to

25 Dunae, p. 151

26 Ibid., p. 147

Figure 7-1
 Net Profit/Loss of R.T.S.
 Magazines 1880-1920



Source: U.S.C.L. archives

prosperity, although they were saddled with debt. Even in its later reconstituted formats, the G.O.P. was always the more successful of the titles; one reason was because it had much less competition to face until the real growth of magazines for women in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁷

The realization in the 1880s and 1890s that the magazines were losing money provoked much discussion, even alarm, in the Committee and associated sub-committees. In 1888 the Finance Sub-Committee was informed that circulations had declined by 4.7 percent for B.O.P. (average weekly circulation: 153,000); 5.4 percent for G.O.P. (189,000); and 1.4 percent for Sunday (119,000).²⁸ In 1895 this Committee called the attention of the B.O.P. and G.O.P. editors to 'the upward tendency of expenses and the decrease in sales'.²⁹ In 1897 the 'Special Accounts Investigation Sub-Committee' urged the following action:

Will the Committee permit the suggestion that as the November parts commence new volumes, and as the principal advertising expenditure is made to bear upon these issues, that extra efforts should be made to render these the most attractive possible in bulk, matter, illustrations, coloured plates, &c. If the start is a good one, people are likely to continue taking the magazines.

Very much depends upon the first monthly parts. Let us have extra good November parts, and then make special arrangements with the large London

27 Annual bonuses awarded to the editors of the children's papers, calculated according to circulations, were, in the case of Charles Peters of the G.O.P., consistently double or triple that of his B.O.P. counterpart George Hutchison.

28 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 135 (19 April 1888), p. 239

29 Ibid., USCL 136 (13 June 1895) p. 81

& Provincial Wholesale Agents, by personal interviews or otherwise, that they may have the magazine sent, on sale or return to their retail newsagent customers.

There is no better advertisement than showing a good article, but the article must be good. No advertising will make people buy what they do not want.

30

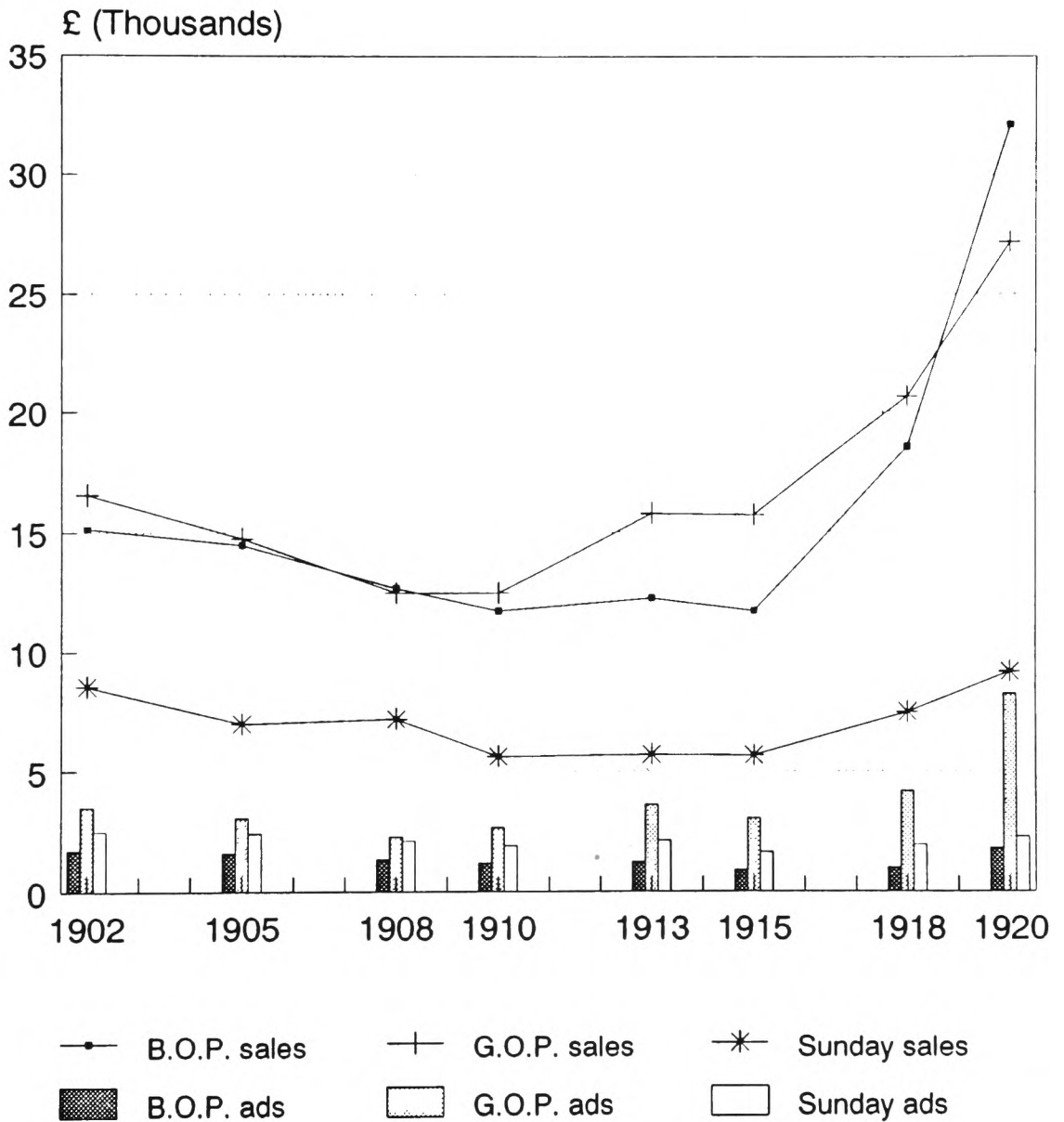
As illustrated in Figure 7-2, sales and advertising revenue were closely linked; a decrease in one prompted a decrease in the other. Here again the G.O.P. fared better than the others, largely because its broad-based readership and domestic nature were more attractive to a wider range of advertisers. Sharp increases from 1915 were as much a result of wartime price increases as of greater demand. It should be noted that the magazines did not disperse ads throughout their pages but confined them to their coloured covers and 2-3 pages at the front and back. Hence, any expansion of revenue from advertisements was limited from the start.

If concern about the state of the periodicals, notably the B.O.P., was expressed around the Committee tables, it was never displayed in public. In reply to a correspondent in 1890, the B.O.P. was described as having 'a larger circulation than all the other boys' journals put together; and this has been the case for many years - ever since the second volume, in fact'.³¹ Given the archival evidence, and the fact that three Harmsworth boys' papers: Wonder, Marvel, and Union Jack, were selling, respectively, 184,000, 144,000,

30 Minutes of Special Accounts Investigation Sub-Committee, USCL 140 (27 July 1897), no p.

31 B.O.P. 17 January 1890 p. 256

Figure 7-2
Sales and Advertising Revenues,
R.T.S. Magazines 1902-1920



Source: U.S.C.L. archives

and 132,000 copies per week in 1894,³² this was untrue. Similarly, while the Publishers' Circular in 1898, on the occasion of the magazine's 1,000th number, stated that 'The B.O.P. caught on from the first, soon reaching a circulation of nearly 200,000; and it still holds its own',³³ privately the Finance Sub-Committee admitted that the B.O.P. was 'dropping dangerously'.³⁴ In 1900 the General Committee was informed that 'The falling off of the sale of "The Girl's Own Paper" and The Boy's Own Paper is even larger than last year and demands serious attention'.³⁵ According to Dunae, at the turn of the century the R.T.S. was forced to place the B.O.P. on its financial subsidy, and it is unlikely that it was weaned from this support until the Second World War. 'Thus it was largely for altruistic, rather than financial, reasons that the paper continued to be published', he noted.³⁶

Circulation claims, therefore, must also be regarded with suspicion. In 1913, commenting on the death of George Andrew Hutchison, the first editor of the B.O.P., the Bookseller said that under his effective guidance, the B.O.P. had become 'an immediate success, and it now has a circulation of over 200,000'.³⁷ The

32 Pound and Harmsworth, p. 165

33 P.C. 12 March 1898 p. 307

34 Advertising report, Minutes of Special Accounts Investigation Sub-Committee, USCL 140 (25 January 1898), item 2

35 Minutes of Committee, USCL 81 (15 May 1900), pp. 56-57

36 Dunae, p. 151. It is unknown whether the other magazines enjoyed such a subsidy; it is probable that Sunday, a consistent money loser, did, while the G.O.P.-W.M. managed on its own.

37 B. 14 February 1913 p. 220

evidence suggests that sales of this paper had substantially declined by the First World War. Other claims that the B.O.P. sold 'approximately' 500,000 copies in the 1880s; 650,000 in the 1890s; and 400,000 from 1900 to 1914, must be qualified.³⁸

Faced with its first real crisis with the periodicals, the R.T.S. squarely faced the question of market differentiation. 'Is it not time, after twenty years, to start a new series of this magazine also?' a special sub-committee suggested of the B.O.P. in 1898. 'Not, perhaps, descending to the Chums level but yet catering to a larger extent for the Board School boy'.³⁹ Similarly, in 1903 the General Committee considered the creation of two new papers, 'A Halfpenny Boys' Own Paper for boys of a humbler grade than the present B.O.P. Readers', and 'A Monthly Paper for Working Women at Twopence',⁴⁰ and in 1909, a new (but not a replacement) boy's paper that was 'more popular in character' than the B.O.P.⁴¹ None of these recommendations was taken up. The precarious state of R.T.S. finances may have inhibited this, and the Committee was resigned to accepting its increasingly middle-class readership.

The Committee's control of editorial policy at this time also contributed to the waning of the magazines and their diminished competitiveness. Creativity and bold ideas were stifled by clergy

38 These claims are made in both Dunae, pp. 133-134, and Carpenter, p. 46

39 Advertising report, Minutes of Special Accounts Investigation Sub-Committee, USCL 140 (25 January 1898), item 2

40 Minutes of Committee, USCL 84 (n.d., c. 1903), pp. 210-211

41 Ibid., USCL 89 (10 August 1909), pp. 356-357

who, almost inevitably, resisted change. The G.O.P., despite its position as the most successful title, was the worst behaved in the eyes of the Committee. A series of misjudgments by Charles Peters, the editor, before the First World War culminated in a Committee decision in 1908, upon Peters' death, that the G.O.P. should be proofed before going to press.⁴² Peters was frequently requested to 'speak' to the Committee on a number of lapses in the G.O.P., many pertaining to sexual matters. In November 1900 the Committee decided to eliminate the 'Answers to Correspondents: Medical' column, because of 'the character of replies', including one addressed to 'Ixia Blossom' which contained 'a paragraph apparently referring to a criminal operation', a charge which Peters denied. He added that the magazine 'would seriously suffer' if the popular column were ended, but the Committee was unyielding.⁴³ The Rev. W.H. Griffith Thomas, who supported this decision, also raised concern in 1903 over the first installment of a G.O.P. serial entitled 'Barty's Love Story'. This was the tale of a 24-year-old 'would-be artist' in London who finds a disheveled waif on his doorstep on Christmas Eve. Resurrected from his depression, Barty is determined to keep his 'human Christmas Box', takes sheer delight in bathing the girl, performs a mock baptism in the bath, and lays her down to sleep in his bed. In a characteristically firm statement after this story had appeared, it was resolved by the Board members:

42 Ibid., USCL 88 (14 January 1908), p. 363

43 Ibid., USCL 81 (20 November 1900), pp. 295-256, (27 November 1900), p. 305; USCL 82 (30 April 1901), pp. 115-116. Peters disregarded the Committee's decision and continued the column until May 1901, when he was strongly reminded of the Committee's ruling. The reply to 'Ixia Blossom' was removed from the issue bound into the Girl's Own Annual, published in October 1901.

That the Committee view with deep concern the appearance in one of their publications of the passages to which their attention has been directed and call upon the Editor for an explanation of the circumstances under which they have appeared. 44

The Committee's ire may have been directed at the following passage, dwelling on Barty's delight in caring for this girl:

There are some men who have almost been admitted into the mystery known as mother-love, and among these Barty was to be counted. Heartily masculine as he was, there had been dropped into the ingredients that together resulted in his totality several sparks from female fires. Already he yearned over the Foundling in a manner that was not fully masculine. Jealousy was already showing her teeth; a queer ache for a few minutes troubled his heart. 45

It is possible that this 'queer ache' could have been mistaken for peculiar leanings. Indeed, sexual references of any kind were strictly taboo. An article in 1900 on 'The Physical Training of Girls' was unanimously condemned by the Committee as 'inconsistent with the tone and character of the Magazine'; Peters was requested 'to avoid anything of the kind in the future'.⁴⁶ This article, by 'the Editor of Physical Culture', was illustrated with line drawings of women in various poses, including one depicting a woman elevating her legs from a supine position.⁴⁷

The B.O.P. also came under the close scrutiny of the Committee, particularly in reference to its treatment of war,

44 Ibid., USCL 85 (27 October 1903), p. 94

45 Dr. Norman Gale, 'Barty's Love-Story', G.O.P. 24 October 1903 p. 58

46 Minutes of Committee, USCL 81 (15 May 1900), p. 57

47 G.O.P. 7 April 1900 pp. 422-423

patriotism, and current events. By its nature, the R.T.S. was susceptible to the concerns of its members, and often had to placate them. In 1903, for example, the Committee strongly denied the claims in a letter, from Mr. T. Pumphery and two other members, all from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which protested that 'the inflammatory and warlike character of the Society's Boy's Own Paper was an obstacle to their support of the Society'. Given the contents of the Boy's Own Annual for 1903, such accusations of militarism were hardly justified. Although the contents included a serial, 'Val Daintry: His Adventures and Misadventures During the Graeco-Turkish War'; colour plates of 'Orders and Medals worn by British Soldiers'; and a stirring tune, 'Drilling: Song for Boys - With Chorus', this was, by the standards of the time, tame stuff. The resolution passed by the Committee in response was a reasonable defence of the B.O.P.:

the Committee having heard the correspondence are unable to accept Mr. Pumphery's characterization of The Boy's Own Paper. They feel that the periodical has been conducted with a jealous regard for the danger suggested: they know that during the South African War the Editor's conduct in keeping out of his pages all that could influence the minds of his readers entailed heavy loss on the Society and they do not find it their duty to contemplate any change of policy.

48

The hostility of some of the non-conformist churches to the South African War would have prohibited any such mention in the B.O.P., leaving its notoriously xenophobic competitors, Harmsworth's Boys' Friend and Boys' Herald, to exploit popular opinion and passions. Whether the 'heavy loss' incurred by the R.T.S. was financial or social is unclear.

Nonetheless, measures were taken before the First World War to make the B.O.P. more competitive. In 1906, on the urgent advice of the Lay Secretary to 'very seriously consider whether anything more can be done to further arrest the falling off in Sales particularly in regard to the B.O.P.',⁴⁹ the Committee gave its unanimous approval to Hutchison's proposals for a series of prizes, including watches, to be awarded to boys who obtained new subscribers. By 1911 a new, invigorated B.O.P. began to appear. Hutchison issued a call to arms in an appeal for new readers:

My dear friends, old and young -

With this week's number of the good ship B.O.P. we start a new voyage, and are arranging to make it the most enjoyable ever attempted.

We are introducing several new features and improvements that we are confident will secure your hearty approval and intensify your interest; and we would now like to make a personal request to all our readers throughout the world.

It is this: that you should each do your best to make this paper still better known than it is in your own immediate circle. A prompt and cheery word of recommendation by one and all just now may do wonders and have far-reaching results.

Yours heartily, George Andrew
Hutchison

50

But it did not take the Committee long to realize that one of the main problems with the B.O.P., as with the G.O.P., was the age of the editors. Hutchison was over 70 when, in 1912, the Committee recommended, in response to 'continued falling off in the circulation', that an assistant be appointed, with a view to his early succession as Editor.⁵¹ With A.L. Haydon's appointment, the

49 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 137 (16 October 1906), p. 65

50 B.O.P. 7 October 1911 p. 6

51 Minutes of Committee, USCL 91 (27 February 1912), p. 328

B.O.P. became a monthly magazine.⁵² Similarly, Flora Klickmann's election as editor of the G.O.P. upon Peters' death in 1907 ultimately ensured the future of the title. Klickmann was one of the first women in Fleet Street to edit a national magazine. The G.O.P. also became a monthly, and began its transformation into an elegant magazine for older women. The lack of references to the G.O.P.-W.M. in Committee minutes throughout Klickmann's tenure (until 1931) is an indication of its prosperity. In fact, in 1914 the Bookseller took the unusual step of announcing that the 'entire edition of the "Girl's Own Paper and Woman's Magazine" for May was exhausted before publication, and a second edition is now ready'.⁵³

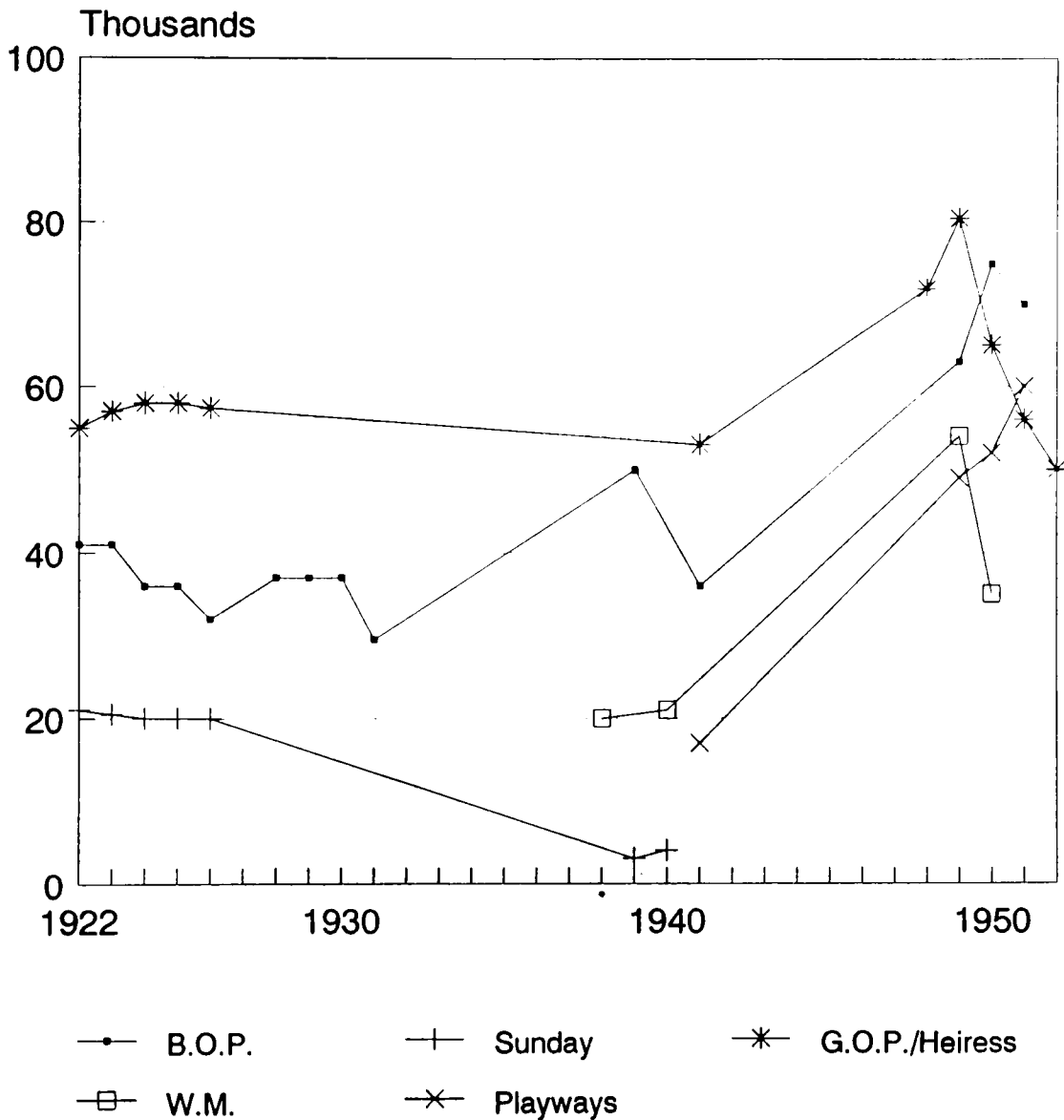
The transition to monthly publication, combined with increased demand during the First World War, restored a measure of prosperity to the magazines. This is best illustrated by the relative stability of circulation figures for the B.O.P. and G.O.P.-W.M. between the wars (Figure 7-3).⁵⁴ Monthly publication meant higher prices, and the broadening of the G.O.P. attracted new and different advertisers. The First World War, as during the Second, witnessed a period of growth for all the magazines, despite increased costs of paper and production. In December 1915, 'a marked increase

52 And none too soon. In 1913 Ralph Rollington published what is the only history of 'old boys' books' from this period. Admittedly biased towards the author's own publications (including The Boy's World) and those of Brett and Fox, Rollington dismissed the B.O.P. in a single paragraph. 'The Boy's Own Paper' is also still being issued, though it does not now possess the vitality it did when those grand authors, Talbot Baines Reed, Jules Verne, H.G. Kingston and R.M. Ballantyne were writing for it'. (Rollington, pp. 107-108)

53 B. 1 May 1914 p. 608.

54 Although, given the lack of figures for much of the 1930s, the stability illustrated by this graph may not be genuine.

Figure 7-3
R.T.S./Lutterworth Magazine
Circulations 1922-1951



Sources: U.S.C.L. archives; P.C.;
'Advertisers' A.B.C.'

in the circulation' of B.O.P. was reported, as in Sunday; the success of the latter was a source of pride for the R.T.S. in its Annual Report: 'It is felt that the testimony of the magazine was never more necessary than in times like these'.⁵⁵ The magazine annuals 'sold better than ever' in 1917. despite the price increase,⁵⁶ and in 1919, when the wartime ban on returns was lifted, retailers were urged to order extra copies of the G.O.P.-W.M. and Sunday to cope with the anticipated demand.⁵⁷ Given their new, middle-class stance, the magazines were thus able to exploit a dependable (if not mass-market) readership at a time when the market for weekly magazines for working women and for schoolboys was expanding. Apparently, the R.T.S. was financially sound enough to launch the G.O.P. and W.M. as separate magazines in 1930, and to introduce, in 1924, a new title for boys: Rovering, 'A Weekly Paper for Young British Manhood'.

Rovering was not designed to replace the aging B.O.P. or even to supplement it. Rather, it was aimed at an older age group, 18-24, with a special appeal to the 'Rovers', the senior members of the Scout Movement. It cast its net widely, aiming to interest 'the many thousands of youths throughout the country and in the Dominions overseas, who stand on the threshold of a new life, and many of whom have no association with any organised body'.⁵⁸ Rovering, therefore,

⁵⁵ Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society (116th edn, 1915), p. 159

⁵⁶ B. May 1918 p. 199

⁵⁷ Advertisement in the Newsagent, Bookseller's Review and Stationers' Gazette 20 September 1919 p. 273

⁵⁸ P.C. 15 March 1924 p. 319. The Committee had debated whether 'Manhood' was a better, less restrictive title, but settled on Rovering.

was to appeal to the boy as he outgrew the B.O.P.. The new paper featured 'high-class fiction' ('Held Up in Mexico' by Ashmore Russan), articles on outdoor sport, camping, stamp collecting, the wireless, and books, and competitions for 'thousands' of free gifts (including a 'nickelled match case for tear-off matches') Finally, Rovering reflected its proprietor's missionary zeal with a 'Migration Bureau', containing information on career opportunities overseas, and a weekly column, 'What the Empire Offers You'. The R.T.S. contended that Rovering filled 'a definite gap' in the market,⁵⁹ and it was an initial success, achieving a circulation in its first month of 150,000 copies per week,⁶⁰ a respectable figure (although pale in comparison with the D.C. Thomson titles). Tag-lines in the paper ran, 'YOU MUST ORDER your copy of ROVERING as the Newsagent is ALWAYS SOLD OUT'.

Despite its limited lifespan (it closed within fifteen months) Rovering is a good example of the R.T.S.'s response to the competition by the creation of its first letterpress weekly, price twopence. Its style was strikingly similar to the Thomson papers, with line illustrations and the use of cheaper quality paper. But its specifically religious concern was obvious, particularly in the 'Up to You' Papers', a series of talks to young men about adolescence and the approach to manhood, 'the Gethsemane of life, and every lad worth his salt passes through it'.⁶¹ Rovering's demise can be attributed to poor planning. The R.T.S. displayed an amazing

59 Ibid.

60 Minutes of Committee, USCL 103 (12 February 1924), p. 32

61 Rovering 22 March 1924 p. 22

ignorance of the magazine market. By the age of 18, boys were already satisfied with newspapers, illustrated magazines (John Bull) and 'adult' fiction, and the appeal of religion was waning in an increasingly secular society. Hence, the market for Rovering simply did not exist. In June 1925 the Finance Sub-Committee agreed that '£5,000 be transferred from Capital Account to the Credit and Profit and Loss Ac. on account of the loss on "Rovering"',⁶² a not inconsiderable loss.

As we have seen, the decade of the 1930s was a difficult period for magazine publishers in Britain. The Religious Tract Society was no exception. Public praise for the R.T.S. titles 'holding their own' during this time masked a crisis in Committee. At a special meeting in 1932 the Finance Sub-Committee, 'Having carefully considered the present financial position of the R.T.S., and the best methods of dealing with the circumstances due to the long continued trade depression', recommended a reorganization of the magazine staffs in an effort to cut costs. The Sunday editor was now responsible for the B.O.P., too, and the W.M. took over the G.O.P., - which probably resulted in significant staff reduction and savings.⁶³ In other retrenchment measures, Anne Hepple's annual salary as Editor of W.M. was cut from £600 to £360, and all other R.T.S. staff were engaged at not more than £156 per year.⁶⁴ Employees, moreover, were no longer paid for magazine contributions, unless directly sanctioned

62 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 138 (9 June 1925), no p.

63 Ibid. (15, 22 November 1932), no pp.

64 Ibid. (6 December 1932), no pp.

by the General Manager.⁶⁵ In 1933 the customary free gift of one guinea to new Sunday subscribers had to be discontinued, although the Committee was confident that this would not affect circulation.⁶⁶ The Annual Report in 1934 made an unusually direct and frank appeal for support:

we have to adopt new methods of production and use newer machines which only print on mass production lines; and, to make ends meet, we must have more and more readers. So will our friends remember to recommend R.T.S. magazines? All profits go to assist our missionary work. ⁶⁷

Finally, from October 1935 the B.O.P. was reduced in price, from one-shilling to sixpence. Presumably, this was a bid to encourage sales, as the G.O.P., already price 6d., was holding its own.⁶⁸ In a suspiciously favorable 'review' of the new 6d. B.O.P., a reader wrote in The Boy, 'The price of the paper has been reduced, so that there is no reason why any boy should not be able to take the finest boys' paper that is published'.⁶⁹

Coupled with the financial troubles of the R.T.S. during the 1930s was a more fundamental problem concerning editorial policy. The increasingly secular nature of British life, evidenced in the expansion of leisure (particularly on Sundays) and the decline in church attendance and in church schools, 'created grave problems for

65 Ibid. (24 January 1933), no pp.

66 Minutes of Committee, USCL 111 (27 June 1933), no p.

67 Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society (134th edn, 1932-1933), p. 112

68 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 138 (4 June 1935), p. 262

69 The Boy 8 (Winter 1935-1936), p. 338. The reviewer was aged 15; this was surely set-up.

a society which was founded primarily for Christian evangelism at home', Gordon Hewitt, the R.T.S. historian, wrote.⁷⁰ The Committee, beset with financial problems, was faced with the dilemma of whether to continue the R.T.S.'s religious mission (not a lucrative prospect) or to make some concessions to the changing tastes of its readers and society in general. The latter path was taken; according to Foxell, by the Second World War the R.T.S. had begun to shed its traditional evangelicalism. 'I suppose the Society fell between the stool of piety and secularism, without touching fundamentalism', he said. 'And so this sort of stool probably began to collapse on the pious side. People are no longer pious, are they? Except fundamentalists'. The insertion of 'Biggles' and 'Worrals' serials in the B.O.P. and G.O.P. during the war was one example of the extent of this secularization, Foxell claimed. When the R.T.S. had previously published 'non-religious' books, such as on gardening or insects, he explained:

All of them had chapters saying, 'God is there, inventing these things', and so on, blessing these things, doing something with them. And so it was very pious. I suppose when you publish in the Boy's Own Paper 'Biggles' you begin to say, 'Well, why not publish "Worrals"?' - without any piety in it at all. It begins to sort of release the clamp of being pious.

Consequently, a 'new kind of piety', based on such things as patriotism, was increasingly adopted in the magazines, to their commercial gain. This secularization, moreover, was advanced through new employees recruited according to editorial expertise rather than piousness. Henry R. Brabrook, General Manager from 1921-1938, was formerly Glasgow house manager at Blackie & Sons, the R.T.S.'s main

⁷⁰ Gordon Hewitt, Let the People Read (London, 1949), p. 73

rival in the juvenile book trade. Brabrook was instrumental in preparing Blackie's successful series of reward and picture books.⁷² In 1928 a layman, George J.H. Northcroft, was appointed Editor of Sunday, and the paper's subtitle, 'The Magazine for Christians', was dropped.⁷² Similarly, Mrs. Len Chaloner was appointed Editor of W.M. in 1939 as much on the basis of her previous experience in journalism as her religious belief. The General Manager believed that 'she was not merely a writer with full knowledge of editorial work, but also an expert on matters of production, and he considered that this was definitely a move in the right direction'.⁷³ Leonard Halls, the new B.O.P. editor in 1942, came from - of all places - the Amalgamated Press, where he was in charge of their juvenile papers and annuals.⁷⁴ Foxell further recalled that difficulties in obtaining staff during the war also served to change the complexion and outlook:

In the old R.T.S. days, when someone like George Mihill joined, he was expected to know his catechism when he joined the staff. But that began to ease off - it must have been during the war. When I joined (in 1949) we had a Roman Catholic - imagine it, a Roman Catholic - assistant book editor. And that, in such a diehard Protestant organization, would never have happened in the twenties. No way.

In light of these changes, the demise of the Sunday at Home in 1940 is hardly surprising. Sunday rarely showed a return on investment; it was principally a propaganda organ for the R.T.S., and

71 P.C. 29 October 1921 p. 439.

72 Minutes of Committee, USCL 107 (30 October 1928), no p.

73 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 138 (24 October 1939), p. 359

74 Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (22 January 1942), p. 17

maintained for that purpose. Although the First World War brought some prosperity,⁷⁵ in 1920, a year which witnessed the introduction of many new magazine titles, Sunday's circulation lagged and caused concern, while its main competitor, the weekly Sunday Companion, had a circulation of 240,000.⁷⁶ A number of proposals to increase circulation was considered, including a change of title and the gift of twelve free issues to new subscribers.⁷⁷ Sunday even assumed a more worldly character: verse and evangelical pieces were interspersed with articles on the latest fashion and travel, and semi-romantic serials such as 'The Vision and the Deed' by Captain Frank H. Shaw (September 1928), about a handsome young curate whose comes to see the misguidedness of his ruthless ambition to be vicar. But in the 1936 Annual Report the R.T.S. admitted that Sunday served 'a limited circle of friends', a 'striking testimony to their worth when it is remembered how few are at home on Sundays in these days and how few take any time at all, not to speak of thinking great thoughts'.⁷⁸ In July 1940 a decision was reached to keep Sunday going, 'particularly from the point of view of the use of the magazine as a propaganda medium for the R.T.S.'s work', with the General Manager commanded to reduce the magazine's loss as much as possible. But in the following month the Committee admitted defeat;

75 In 1919 the editor of Sunday was congratulated: 'The Committee expressed its gratification that the loss on the magazine was so small'. (Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 137 [22 July 1919], no p.)

76 The Advertisers' A.B.C. 36th edn (1922), pp. 152-154

77 Minutes of Committee, USCL 99 (23 November 1920), p. 226; USCL 100 (31 July 1921), no p.

78 Annual Report of the United Society for Christian Literature 137th edn (1935-1936), p. 80

Sunday's losses were too great, an analysis of recent accounts having convinced the Committee 'only too clearly that it cannot pay its way'. Although circulation in 1940 had increased slightly, from 3,000 to 4,000,

From experience it was clear that a circulation of 10,000 was needed, though 6,000 would enable us to scrape through this critical period... there was a very small public for this type of magazine, and to reach that public we would have to spend a great deal of money with only slender prospects of success: in our present financial situation we could not do this.

79

Furthermore, as no 'positive connection' could be found between Sunday subscribers and the legacies received by the Missionary Department, its closing would not have an adverse effect, and would also release paper supplies to keep the other magazines going. It was 'regretfully moved' to close the magazine in December 1940.

Before the Second World War, the R.T.S. was perpetually falling between stools (to use Foxell's phrase) in terms of editorial policy. This inconsistency, a result of warring camps within the Committee, could only have had a detrimental effect on morale, content, and sales. This is most evident in the Committee's stand on the issues of patriotism and war. The R.T.S., governed by past policy and its evangelical nature, could never have been as aggressively patriotic as, say, D.C. Thomson could. Hence, they had to walk a fine line between fervent patriotism and the glorification of war. At the height of the First World War, for example, the B.O.P. editor drew attention not to the fighting, but to the future, commanding his readers to be prepared for leadership in a new and

changed world, as worthy successors to 'a great imperial heritage' and 'all the great traditions of our country and race, founded on Truth and Justice'.⁸⁰ In 1933 the Committee extended its congratulations to the editors of the B.O.P. and G.O.P. for the 'excellent' articles on the subject of Peace.⁸¹ In the G.O.P. this was entitled, 'Need there be Another War?' by Hebe Spaul, author of The World's Weapons. Spaul encouraged participation in the Junior Branches of the League of Nations Union as well as the Pioneers and called to the attention of young people 'the entirely changed character of modern warfare':

To their parents and grandparents war used to suggest something heroic and full of adventure. This was because war, while morally wrong, did provide opportunities for those taking part in it to display heroic qualities, and the nature of warfare in those days, despite many horrible features, did provide opportunities for adventure and hair-breadth escapes.

To-day the nature of war has so changed owing to the invention of the aeroplane and poison gases that, as a Cabinet Minister said not long ago, in the next war the safest places may be the front-line trenches and the most dangerous the towns where women, children, and old people are living. There can be nothing gallant or heroic about this kind of war.

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Significantly Spaul was careful not to condemn past soldiers, the fathers of G.O.P. readers. The corresponding B.O.P. article is harsher and used sporting references to drive the point home to boys. Dr. R. Cove-Smith, author of 'Who Wants War?', was described as 'the famous sportsman, the well-known Rugger player, who has forsaken the

80 B.O.P. April 1916 pp. 353-354

81 Minutes of Committee, USCL 111 (7 November 1933), p. 222

82 Hebe Spaul, 'Need there be Another War?' G.O.P. November 1933 p. 50.

gallant British winter game for the honorable paths of doctoring. But he knows what war is and he tells us of its stupidity and wickedness'. Striking charts illustrating armament stockpiles and the number of soldiers killed and wounded during the last war accompanied the article which condemned the 'glamorous' picture of war which fails to mention the dead, the surviving physical wrecks and the devastation of the countryside. Cove-Smith urged his young sportsmen to foster an international team spirit such as glimpsed during the Olympic Games:

The true understanding of the team spirit surely means regarding the whole of mankind as a human brotherhood with the clear vision of their mutual interdependence - in matters of money and trade, in matters of social welfare, in matters of morality and in matters of religion. The world, after all, is one big family jostled together in one home and it should have the family spirit. That is why the World Conference will fail to preserve peace if it puts purely national policy before international co-operation - as we read in I Corinth XII, 'The body is one and hath many members', and 'if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it'.

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But the endorsement of pacifism did not imply appeasement. In 1936 the Committee debated whether the Society 'should or should not permit material appearing in the Society's magazines commending the fighting Services as careers for boys?' A motion, proposed and seconded by two ministers, to ban all such ads in the future was defeated by a vote of 8 to 4.⁸⁴ Similarly, during the Second World War all the magazines vigorously supported the war effort.

83 Dr. R. Cove-Smith, 'Who Wants War?' B.O.P. November 1933 p. 194

84 Minutes of Committee, USCL 114 (20 October 1936), p. 153, (27 October 1936), p. 156

Having scraped through the 1930s, two events postponed the almost inevitable decline of the R.T.S. periodicals for another decade: the Second World War, which boosted publishing in general, and the creation of Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd. in 1941. The latter, in fact, was organized following discussions throughout 1940 about the possible winding-up of the periodical business; the uncertainty of obtaining paper (allocations were based on 1939 circulations, an admittedly poor year for the magazines) and the presence of a large debt served to diminish hopes of a recovery. In December 1940 the General Manager reported that despite planned economies, estimated to save £22,500, 'he could not see how we could hope to pay back £30,000 to the bank during 1941. We might be able to do something by the spring of 1942',⁸⁵ but 'equilibrium' between expenditure and revenue was not foreseen for at least three years. In order to generate working capital, Lord Luke, the R.T.S. President, announced the creation of the public company in 1941. Of 40,000 £1 shares, the U.S.C.L. retained 20,000 (safeguarding its interest in the magazines), and the remaining shares were offered to the public to raise capital.⁸⁶ In retrospect, this bold move was both a bane and a blessing. The periodical and book businesses were separated just in time: the former had already been evacuated to new offices in Surrey when, on 10 May 1941, a bomb completely destroyed the R.T.S. offices and warehouse in London. Over 1.5 million books and tracts were lost, effectively crippling the Lutterworth Press. But if the new company saved the periodicals, it also worked against their long-

85 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 138 (18 December 1940), p. 393

86 Report, 'Chairman's Notes on Publishing Business', Minutes of Committee, USCL 118 (25 June 1941), p. 1

term financial interests. As a charity, the R.T.S./U.S.C.L. was exempt from taxation; as a public company Lutterworth Periodicals was not. 'All publishing in the end during the war was very, very profitable', Foxell explained. 'The result was that they made a lot of money and it all went away in tax. If they had not (created the public company), they would have kept all this money'. Indeed, the Lutterworth Periodicals' strong profits during the war, which otherwise could have been ploughed back into magazine development, were virtually eliminated:

<u>Financial</u> <u>Year</u>	<u>Profits</u>	<u>Taxation</u>	<u>S u r p l u s</u> <u>left to</u> <u>Company</u>	
1941-42	£ 5,401	£ 5,000	£ 401	
1942-43	19,994	19,200	794	
1943-44	32,240	31,499	741	
1944-45	35,508	33,071	2,473	
1945-46	28,597	24,912	3,685	
1946-47	18,065	11,549	6,516	
1947-48	19,760	9,938	9,822	
1948-49	8,412	4,257	4,155	
1949-50	6,437	3,074	3,363	
Totals:	£174,414	£142,500	£31,914	e7

Nonetheless the Second World War did restore some prosperity to the newly-formed company. Figure 7-4 illustrates the sales and advertising revenues generated by the new company's four remaining periodicals, including the monthly juvenile magazine, Little Dots-Playways, which was quite successful on its own.⁸⁸ The

87 'Report on the Trading and Financial Position of Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd.', Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (October 1950), p. 1

88 In another example of the bow to secular and commercial concerns, Enid Blyton became a regular contributor to Little Dots-Playways, which was eventually renamed Enid Blyton's Playways. In 1951 the Committee was told that Blyton was a fan: 'She was prepared to do anything to help us which did not entail much extra work because she

steady increase in advertising revenue was crucial after the war in generating profits, as seen in the above listing. The decline in sales of roughly £9,000 in 1942-1943 was caused by the loss of revenue with the termination of the R.T.S. Annuals. The prosperity of the firm was evident when, in 1943, Lutterworth Periodicals loaned its financially-embarassed parent, the U.S.C.L., £15,000, and salary bonuses of 10 percent were given to staff, in 'view of the very satisfactory results of the Company's trading operations for the last financial year'.⁸⁹ Rumours of a takeover of the periodicals were strongly denied, after inquiries were received from W.H. Allen and Co; the Argus Press Ltd; and the proprietors of the glossy monthly Queen.⁹⁰

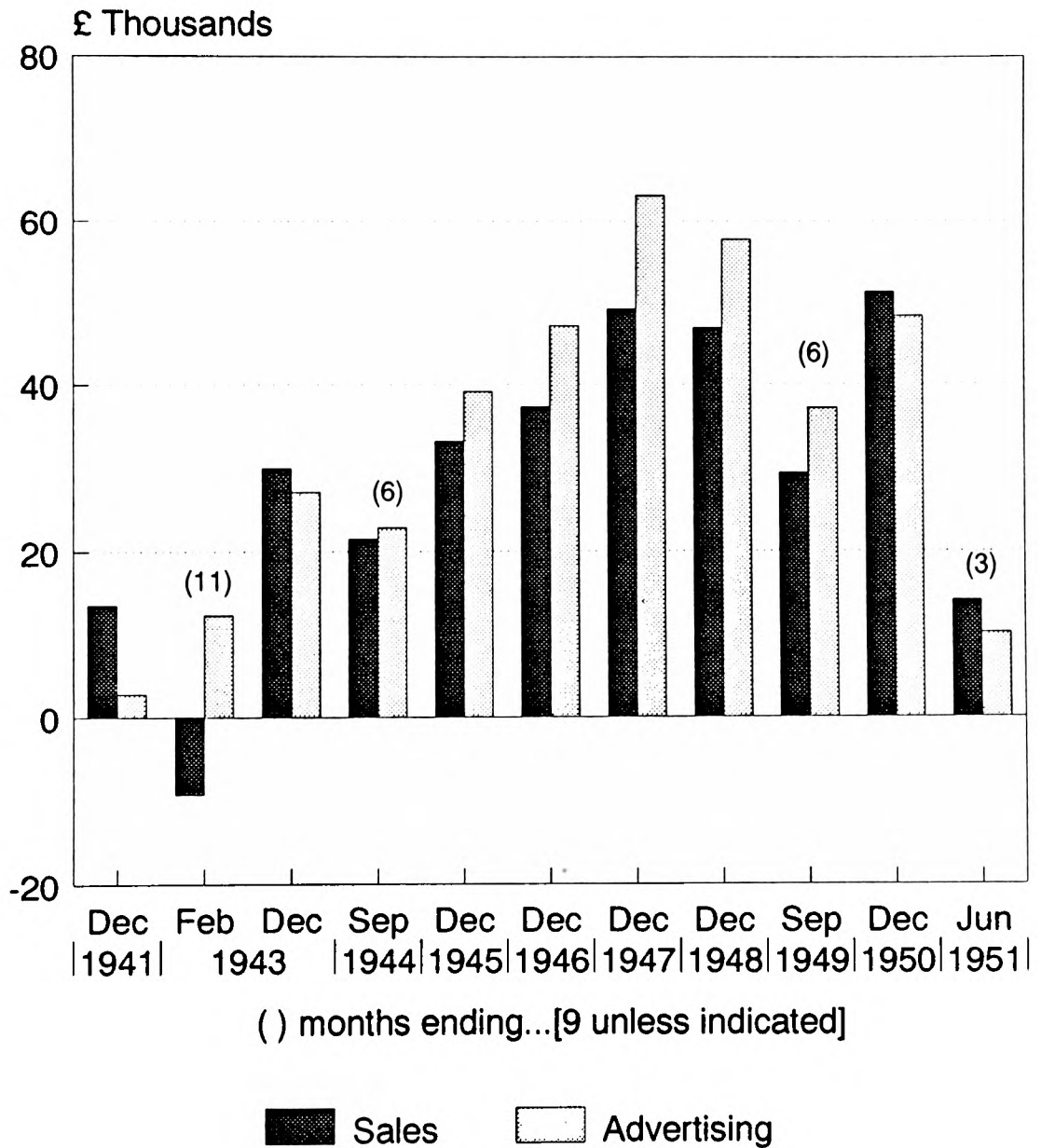
In order to account for the astonishing near-collapse of Lutterworth Periodicals, Ltd., in 1950, we should remember that the company's wartime prosperity was wholly artificial. This reality was obviously not grasped by the directors of the firm who, heady from the ample postwar profits after 15 years of heavy losses, embarked upon a reckless programme of expansion. The firm underestimated the costs of the 'circulation war' and intense competition which accompanied the lifting of paper rationing in 1949, and consequently were ill-equipped to compete, let alone survive. The titles which were worst affected were the W.M. and the G.O.P.

was so fully occupied. She was very much in sympathy with what the Society was trying to do'. (Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 [12 December 1951], p. 180)

89 Minutes of Finance Sub-Committee, USCL 139 (1 March 1943), p. 41

90 Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143, (2 June 1943), no p.

Figure 7-4
Sales and Advertising Revenues,
Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd. 1941-1951



Source: U.S.C.L. archives

The monthly W.M. had made a genuine effort during the war to broaden its appeal and resemble its weekly, mass-market rivals, such as Woman and Woman's Own. Its redesign dated from 1939, when (after a decade of mounting losses), the General Manager announced the 'need for a broadening of policy': the latest fall in advertising revenue had been steeper than the fall in sales, an indication that the circulation (then standing at 20,000, about that of the boys' paper Gem) was not attractive to advertisers.⁹¹ With unusual frankness, A.H. Sabin, the chairman of the Committee, admitted that in the past the W.M. editor 'had been cramped to some extent by a too rigid adherence to what has been understood as "past policy"'. The Committee therefore decided to admit a greater degree of editorial freedom.⁹² This was an extraordinary concession for the former R.T.S. and could only have reflected the desperate state of the magazine. The following proposals, which were approved, would hardly have featured in Flora Klickmann's homely, inspirational magazine:

Articles for dealing with various home problems, such as the young wife's attitude towards the husband preoccupied by his work and the loneliness of the young married woman.

Further features such as how to get the best out of life from limited means and articles dealing with the pursuits and recreations of slightly better off women, married and unmarried;

It was also agreed to admit 'slightly bolder stories' featuring the more modern type of

91 Minutes of Publications Sub-Committee, USCL 141 (31 January 1939), p. 1

92 Ibid., p. 2

woman; and the introduction of humour.

Clearly these measures sought to improve circulation among lower-middle and working-class readers who might be especially interested in articles on getting-by; rags-to-riches stories; and the 'bolder' fiction resembling that in the 'blood-and-thunder' papers. From January 1940, the W.M. shrugged off its dowdy past with a new, sleek look, organised into three sections: Fiction; 'Special Features' (including biographies of famous and admirable people, such as Madame Chiang-Kai-Shek); and Regular Features (cookery, embroidery, gardening, and an increasingly popular film gossip section). The most striking change was in the character of the fiction. Typical serials in the past included, 'So I Retired', the adventures of an elderly widow, and 'A Change for Mrs. Carrington', about a 'nervy' woman who gets a rest-cure which changes her life. The magazine's new editorial directives, coupled with the war, opened the door for more exciting tales reminiscent of the Hollywood cinema. 'Breakfast in Bed' by Heather Harrington (May 1941) concerned the spoiled ex-wife, now reformed, of a factory owner who applies for war work to her ex-husband; not only does she save his life and foil an enemy sabotage attempt, but they become reconciled. Capt. Johns was a frequent contributor; 'Nocturne Aeronautique' (March 1942) followed the adventures of a British pilot's rescue of a female American ambulance driver in France. He reluctantly agrees to fly her to England; the only space in the plane is on his lap:

Thrusting the joystick forward he skimmed the wave-tops in a sweeping rush, and then, as a questing searchlight found him, rocketed like a hard-hit pheasant. Centrifugal force

crushed the girl against his breast, her face against his.

'Sorry,' he murmured as he levelled out.

'Forget it,' she suggested.

'I wish I could,' he sighed.

The W.M. had never seen anything like this before. Complementing a vigorous series of articles on civic duty and support of the war effort (their so-called 'Good Neighbour Policy'), the W.M. also made a direct appeal in its fiction to elevate the status of the working class. 'Dawn for Jessica' by Henrietta Street (February 1943) concerned the attempts of a wealthy woman to thwart her D.F.C.-recipient son's 'hopelessly unsuitable' choice of a W.A.A.F., from 'an ordinary working-class family', to be his bride. Isobel is pitied by her sensible friend Frances, the narrator:

I leaned back and stared at Isobel. She had been shut up in this lovely remote spot since the beginning of the war and she didn't realize what was happening.

The war had taken Graham away. of course, and she'd lost her servants one by one, so that now she was left with the old gardener and his wife and daughter at the cottage to look after her. But she had never experienced the amazing transformation taking place among the people in the towns.

'You know, Isobel,' I said thoughtfully. 'the war has brought great changes and I don't think we can be blind to them. The old barriers of class and, well, money are just disappearing. It's character, courage and sympathy and other qualities that count now.'

Isobel's prejudices are wiped away when the resourceful working-class girl saves her life during an air raid.

After the war the Committee took steps to maintain the prosperity of the W.M., which had increased its circulation to a healthy 50,000 copies. The most pressing need was to increase the number of pages, reduced during the war, as the paper ration was

slowly increased. In 1945 the Committee appropriated £15,000 for development of all the magazines, with a special sum of £250 per month earmarked in order to obtain 'higher standards of stories'.⁹⁴ With the paper allocation increased to 40 percent (of 1939 levels) in 1946, pages were added to each magazine, resulting in an increase in advertising revenue.⁹⁵ In November 1946, with an increase in circulation of W.M., G.O.P. and Playways by 10,000 each, an annual increase of £11,000 for 'wider and more varied publicity' was earmarked.⁹⁶ Along these lines, from 1947 the Committee lifted the old R.T.S. ban on cigarette advertising in the W.M.⁹⁷

The W.M.'s demise in 1951, however, was a direct result of the lifting of paper rationing in 1949. Lutterworth Periodicals simply did not share the enormous financial resources of its rival publishers (including Odhams and the Amalgamated Press) which would have allowed it to keep pace with their explosive expansion. The Committee anticipated a battle when the imminent release of paper was first discussed in December 1948:

The Managing Director considered that it would be necessary, as a first step, to enlarge our magazines to compete with others, especially the new magazines which would be likely to flood the market. In this event cost would, of course, be increased and would need to be offset by economies in other directions.

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94 Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (13 July 1945), pp. 74-75

95 Ibid., 28 March 1946 p. 82

96 Ibid., 26 November 1946 pp. 91-92

97 Ibid., p. 93

98 Ibid., 8 December 1948 p. 128

The G.O.P.-Heiress was the first Lutterworth title to be enlarged in size to its pre-war dimensions, despite the fact that the firm could not afford the extra production costs. By August 1949 competition from the larger publishers was beginning to show:

The recent national advertising campaign launched by the larger periodical Houses had led to a loss of circulation and during the last few months it had been increasingly difficult to dispose of all copies printed—particularly in relation to Woman's Magazine. Reports of the Publicity Manager and sales staff were read indicating the general trend. °°

Consequently the firm worried about the pending lifting of the ban on returns, upon which it would be faced with the prospect of thousands of unsold copies. To counteract this, the Committee agreed to increase the dimensions of the other magazines, including the W.M., from the February 1950 issues. This cost alone was estimated at £10,000 per year, bringing the firm's annual expenditure to £146,104. 'But if sales could be maintained at present level, total income would be £146,000. It was pointed out, however, that if the sizes were not increased the circulations would drop and a net loss sustained',⁹⁹ the General Manager reported. Hence this was the only way to stem further decline. The measures were successful in terms of sales, but not in terms of attracting advertising revenue, as circulations were not competitive. In July 1950, given the rate of decrease in advertising revenue (£10,000 per year) and sales (£2,000), it was estimated that the firm would face a deficit of between £14,000 and £15,000 at year's end. Agreement was given to Managing Director George Martin Lewis's 'drastic measures' (Lewis was

99 Ibid., 25 August 1949 pp. 140-141

100 Ibid.

an accountant by profession) including extra pages and an increase in selling prices. The W.M. was in the most precarious state, as it suffered the greatest competition in the market. In a dramatic gesture to boost circulation (which had dipped to 30,000), the paper's advertising rates were reduced, despite the incurred loss of more than £8,000. The W.M. editor was also authorized to seek a fine work of fiction; 'a serial by a popular author, such as Frances Parkinson-Keyes, Ernest Raymond or J.B. Priestley should be sought despite the fact that it might well cost between £1,000 and £2,000 to cover six issues of the magazine'.¹⁰¹

In the end, the firm decided to cut its losses, authorizing the closing of the W.M. in May 1951. This was agreed during a debate (the first since 1940) on the winding-up of the company during November 1950. Faced with an annual deficit of £35,000, the Committee agreed that the logical step would be the closure of the W.M., which would result in savings of £11,360 per year. The W.M. was the logical choice as it was in the worst state; the following figures were estimated to 31 March 1951:

	<u>Deficit/ Surplus</u>	<u>Net Profit/Loss</u>	
<u>B.O.P.</u>	Surplus: £7,006	Profit: £ 180	
<u>Heiress</u>	Surplus: £1,134	Loss: £ 5,672	
<u>Playways</u>	Deficit: £1,792	Loss: £ 4,963	
<u>W.M.</u>	Deficit: £4,768	Loss: £15,075	¹⁰²

101 Ibid. Frances Parkinson-Keyes was selected, and Foxell worked on the extensive publicity campaign.

102 G. Martin Lewis, 'Report on Trading and Financial Position of the Company, October 1950', Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (16 November 1950), supplement p. 5

Reluctantly, the Committee accepted Lewis's proposal for the W.M., although the paper was continued until May 1951 out of deference to readers enjoying the Parkinson-Keyes serial; 'It was with deep regret that the Chairman and Members of the Board agreed that this step was necessary, particularly as there was no other magazine published with such a high moral standard'.¹⁰³

Whereas the Committee's handling of the W.M., from its redesign in 1940 until its demise in 1951, demonstrated sound judgement and an acute awareness of the market and the competition, its treatment of the G.O.P. was astonishing, displaying all the lack of foresight and knowledge which led to the Rovering debacle in the 1920s. Why, in 1947, the Committee should have wanted to fiddle with this prosperous monthly (which was selling 60,000 copies, its largest number in 20 years), is unknown; one can only assume that in this case the Committee truly was misled by the wartime boom.

The new G.O.P.-Heiress was doomed from the start, for it was the young woman's equivalent of Rovering which, like that old title, could not find a market - for the simple reason that one did not exist. In July 1947 the Committee was advised that, as the G.O.P. had been 'growing up' over recent years (the same case was made in 1908), a unique opportunity presented itself, to cater to an older, post-school-age girl:

the change should begin to take place now, while there is such a demand for a teen-age magazine of high standard. Furthermore, the

¹⁰³ Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (16 November 1950), p. 158-159

present readers of G.O.P. have no alternative magazine to turn to while the initial stages of growth are taking place - and when alternatives can appear (with freer paper) the new young G.O.P. will be the first in the field to fill the gap. Thus our present readership should be retained.

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Indeed, before the 'alternatives' appeared, the relaunched G.O.P.-Heiress was an initial success. The radical redesign of the G.O.P. into a 'teen-age magazine' illustrates the extent of change in editorial policy. An array of new features included articles on character building, psychology, personal careers, fashion, charm and beauty culture. The most significant change, however, was in the attitude towards religion. 'Religion will be mostly implicit in the general content, and specific only. probably, in the Rev. H.T. Wigley's answers to correspondents', the Committee recommended.¹⁰⁵ The B.O.P. had already adopted a similar attitude; instead of a lengthy article written by a clergyman, 'we...infer the policy elsewhere, or discreetly arrange for it to be put over in many other ways - an odd line or phrase in a story; the theme of a story; or a line in a reader's letter which may give untold encouragement to other readers'.¹⁰⁶

At its peak in 1949, Heiress was selling 80,000 copies per month. But the same factors which struck the W.M. - the de-rationing boom, fall in advertising revenue, and forced economizing - also precipitated Heiress's demise. By reorientating the G.O.P. to appeal

104 Report, 'Girl's Own Paper - Heiress', Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (8 July 1947), supplement p. 1

105 Ibid., p. 2

106 Jack Cox, Report, Minutes of Committee, Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd., USCL 143 (7 February 1952), p. 4

to older, aged 18-21 'girls', the Committee unwittingly encouraged competition from the established women's weekly magazines - which, in the case of the old G.O.P., would never have happened. In the end it simply could not attract the following or the advertising to remain viable. A 1952 report indicated the severity of the competition:

In the case of HEIRESS severe outside competition was felt when WOMAN and WOMAN'S OWN reduced their general age appeal and spent large sums on intensive publicity and sales campaigns. Newnes spent over £50,000 in publicizing one Royal family feature alone in WOMAN'S OWN.

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Heiress was closed in 1956.

The former employees of the magazines all have views of what went wrong. George Mihill, for example, blamed the contents of the magazines. The fiction was dull and old-fashioned, and it was foolish to attempt to run serial stories in monthly magazines. He believes that the B.O.P. should have contained more, better-quality fiction and fewer articles. Given the growth of specialty magazines on all kinds of hobbies, the B.O.P. could have dispensed with articles on photography and the like, as boys would have spent their pocket money on these magazines. 'Well, if the money went on (a) photography (paper), then he didn't have the money for the Boy's Own Paper', and circulation suffered, he explained. Mihill recalled the B.O.P.'s heyday and such excellent contributors as Henty, Verne and Westerman. 'In the end I suppose they couldn't afford these good authors. It was a job to keep the circulation going, really hard going'.

Michael Foxell said that the R.T.S.'s finances were just large enough to support the limited circulations of the magazines, but much too small to contemplate any serious competition with other publishers. Overheads were low because staffs were so small: editors and artists were shared, no writers were kept on staff, and there were two sales representatives to cover the entire country. The Hulton Press, by way of contrast, had 38 full-time salesmen on the Eagle alone. In terms of the B.O.P., Lutterworth 'didn't spend money. It was running on a shoestring, really. I mean the print order in the end was 10,000 or something, quite inadequate for running a magazine', he said.

Coupled with the lack of financial resources was the firm's inexperience in dealing with a mass market. Jack Cox (who died in 1981) expressed his exasperation in 1952 over the lack of promotion of the monthlies. 'We have the finest magazines there are for young people - quality, prestige, fine writing, good stuff - they are all there', he said. 'But they will not succeed unless they are backed up by enterprising sales promotion and publicity'. Cox's own newsagent could not recall whether a Lutterworth salesman had called in the past five years, while a 'rep' from Newnes checked in weekly. 'We cannot buy our mass circulations as Hultons, Newnes and Odhams do', Cox admitted, but unless the Press was willing to spend money, he maintained, it would not make money. By 1952, it was clearly in a position to do neither.¹⁰⁸

The collapse of the Religious Tract Society's once dominant position in the popular magazine market can be attributed to a number of factors: the firm's inexperience in trading within a mass market; inborn resistance to change; inconsistent editorial policies; and its more ambitious and affluent competitors. This decline, although perhaps inevitable, should not, however, overshadow the R.T.S.'s achievements in magazine journalism. The initial success of the B.O.P. and G.O.P. singlehandedly established the mode for children's papers, laying the foundation upon which the Amalgamated Press and D.C. Thomson built their empires.

Indeed, the contrast between the R.T.S., whose fortunes had started to fade well before the First World War, and D.C. Thomson, with its star firmly in the ascendant throughout this period, could not be more striking. D.C. Thomson kept a much tighter grip on all facets of production; inappropriate passages or references simply would never make it into print. The R.T.S. Committee, on the other hand, usually discussed damage control after offending articles had been published. The Dundee firm, moreover, constantly researched its readerships, always keeping a finger on the national pulse in order to keep its titles lively and up-to-date; the R.T.S. was much less ambitious, a consequence of its smaller financial reserves. Indeed, even before the first D.C. Thomson boys'

paper had appeared in 1921, the baton of leadership was already being passed on from the R.T.S. to the moderns, slowly closing the door on a significant period of British publishing history.

Conclusion

It is clear that Wilkie Collins and George Orwell were often correct in their conclusions about the reading public and the popular publishing industry. We have seen, for example, that reading among both adults and children in these classes was a popular leisure activity, as both Collins and Orwell had claimed. In some cases, the amount of 'light' fiction consumed was substantial, particularly in wartime. We have also agreed with Collins' suggestion that in general these readers sought entertainment, rather than instruction, in their choice of novels and magazines.

Orwell's celebrated claim that attitudes expressed in popular fiction represented a conscious effort on the part of the publishers to try to influence their readership towards their view of 'proper' social and moral conduct was also accurate: the moral 'code' in such fiction was always a 'wholesome' one, with the partial exception of some of the grisly thrillers. We can also agree with two of his assertions about the contents of boys' weeklies and romantic novels. The resolution of conflicts in stories was always either personal or accidental or a result of good fortune. There was no social or collective solution, and no alternative image of social improvement or organization was presented. In fact, publishers such as Mills and Boon and D.C. Thomson were careful to make their plots

as apolitical and uncontroversial as possible. While Mills and Boon novels contained references to such 'modern' practices as divorce and illegitimacy, these were neither endorsed nor discussed in much detail, nor did they distract from the focus of a story.

The weaknesses in both Collins' and Orwell's arguments, however, are equally significant and worthy of our attention. This 'Unknown Public', which we have tried to define, did not graduate to 'high-brow' novels and non-fiction, as Collins predicted with robust optimism. Although there is some evidence of a trend towards 'serious' reading among these classes, by and large the preference for 'low-brow', 'escapist' books and periodicals was consistently superior. This demand was nurtured after 1914 by personal and national crises (unemployment, war), the wireless and cinema ('the book-of-the-film'), and aggressive marketing techniques adopted by publishing houses. The relationship between publisher and reader was not as one-sided and doctrinal as Orwell maintained and feared. For the successful publisher this was a reciprocal relationship governed by commercial considerations; the changing tastes of the reader were carefully monitored and accommodated, within 'moral' reason. We have seen how Mills and Boon relied upon its authors and magazine serial editors to fine-tune its 'formula', while the Religious Tract Society, to its financial ruin, resisted all attempts to modernize its editorial policy until it was much too late. We have also revealed the concern of D.C. Thomson editors to keep their publications up-to-date and interesting to children (through such techniques as 'speering'), while at the same time avoiding any controversial insertions which might upset that unseen but omnipotent

quality, the parent. Orwell missed this important point: editors had to tread a fine line between two markets, the positive children's and the negative parents'. Without the approval of each, substantial sales were impossible. The Religious Tract Society was probably aware of this dichotomy but chose to ignore it. Similarly, D.C. Thomson regarded the women's weeklies as 'family papers' which were, they believed, left around a house in view of the children. Clearly, the 'violence' in papers such as Red Letter would not have exceeded that which any child would be exposed to in the cinema, or indeed in his 'blood', and the moral, 'Crime does not pay', was omnipresent.

The intricate relationship between editorial policy and market forces is hardly surprising. Although publishers of popular fiction, as we have tried to show, were anxious to pass on certain views to their readers, their overriding concern was, in the end, to make a profit. Mills and Boon's transformation to a romantic fiction publishing house during the 1930s was wholly a commercial decision which the Boons have never regretted, as it gave them a large, captive and loyal audience. A substantial part of D.C. Thomson's success lay in its complete break with the B.O.P.-Magnet tradition: its 'Big 5' boys' papers offered young readers a completely different kind of weekly magazine: bright, varied, and personal. Although these were still 'penny dreadfuls' at heart, their wrappings were different, exciting, and instant attention-grabbers. The Religious Tract Society resisted change for as long as it was financially possible. The redesign of its titles in the 1940s, with a diminished emphasis on piety, was an attempt to accommodate to a changing world; but this was a question of too little, too late.

The reciprocity between publisher and reader was perhaps responsible for the significant change in content and style of popular fiction after the First World War. The Big 5 papers, for example, invigorated and democratized a declining genre with exciting, if implausible plots, international settings and characters, prize competitions, and aggressive attention to its readers ('the personal touch'). These changes paralleled similar developments (commercialization) of adult popular literature, and the influence of the cinema is obvious. Similarly, romantic fiction became more 'glamorous' (another nod to the cinema) while at the same time less fantastic, in an abandonment of two strains of storyline: the florid, sensual romances of Marie Corelli and Elinor Glyn, and the gritty, 'mill-girl' rags-to-riches stories popular during the war. Plots became more bourgeois in tone and 'realistic'. Taste 'improved', therefore, perhaps as a result to exposure to other mass media. In the 1930s Graves and Hodges observed of the 'low-brow reading public' that:

the annals of the Land of Tosh no longer carried wide conviction and the mezzo-brow 'Book of the Month' choice of the dailies became (through the Twopenny libraries) the shop-girls' reading too - or such of them as did not sweep all modern fiction aside as 'capitalistic dope'. Even Elinor Glyn's passionate novels then appeared a little grotesque, with their tiger-skin and orchid settings; and, aware of the growing influence of famous book reviewers on the semi-literate public, she ceased to send out review-copies of her new books.

The Rebecca plot was now used repeatedly with great success. Mills and Boon heroines, for example, despite their lower-middle/working-

1 Graves and Hodge, p. 52

class background (of which they are proud) consistently win the respect, even admiration of their social superiors through hard work and a natural common sense. The dream embodied in such fiction was not aristocratic, as in the Victorian 'sensation novels', but something more plausible. 'The idea is to give the bored factory-girl or worn-out mother of five a dream-life in which she pictures herself - not actually as a duchess (that convention has gone out) but as, say, the wife of a bank-manager',² Orwell correctly observed.

In many respects, the most important influence upon popular publishing between 1914 and 1950 was war. We have seen how little affected service industries, including publishing, were by the economic depression; the First and Second World Wars, on the other hand, had lasting consequences. In general, wartime served to preserve, and perhaps heighten, demand for reading when other leisure activities (wireless, sport, cinema-going hours) were curtailed. It also made the escapist motive less something to be ashamed of, and sales of light fiction boomed - although whatever printed sold. An artificial prosperity for publishers was therefore created: paper rationing, by restricting output, ensured ready sales of all titles in print (which effectively saved the magazine trade after 1939). While these static conditions necessarily inhibited profits, they also served to bolster many shaky publishing houses (the Religious Tract Society is a notable example). We have seen, moreover, how postwar economic conditions served to restructure the publishing industry. Rising production costs promoted commercialization of the

2 Orwell, 'Boy's Weeklies', p. 527

book trade during the 1920s and 1930s, at the expense of the magazine trade. The depression in magazine sales favoured the larger publishers with many titles: these firms possessed the financial reserves to corner the market with new, different, technologically superior titles. The Big 5 papers, Woman, Picture Post and Eagle are some examples, as is the fact that Lutterworth Periodicals Ltd. was crippled after the Second World War by such 'giants' as Newnes and Hulton. The magazine trade was more at risk from the increased expenditure of all classes on leisure between the wars, for unlike the book trade (bolstered by the 'tuppenny' libraries) no means of cheap distribution existed for magazines, when spending money was directed towards other leisure activities.

Judging from contemporaries and readers, the principal motive of the 'new reading public' during our period appears to have been 'escapism'. While this was not unique to the poorer classes (Neville Chamberlain said he looked to reading for 'something that takes me out from my daily life and away into a world as remote from reality as possible'³), these readers were more apparently dependent upon light fiction. It may be fortunate that the lower-middle and working classes regarded light fiction, with its reliance upon the happy ending and the rule of law, as their 'drug', rather than the real thing. Frederick Cowles expressed this sentiment in 1938:

The highbrow critics who assert that a reader cannot obtain anything of value from a light

3 'Prime Minister's Solace', The Times 4 May 1939 p. 9. Chamberlain was fond of Dumas, Conrad - and crime stories. 'I am always swallowing one myself as a sort of literary cocktail, but it is as easy to become an addict to detective stories as to opium and to crossword puzzles. I prefer therefore to treat them as an occasional excess'.

novel only display their own ignorance. Even the most sensational fiction often contains some out-of-the-way information which can be easily assimilated. The readers of light fiction obtain something more than actual facts and figures - they obtain either a mental opiate or a mental tonic. Both are badly needed in these days when so many of us have to live upon our nerves.

'Escapism' was not new: in response to a Scottish librarian's claim that 80 percent of the books she issued were 'disgraceful', Rose Macaulay explained that the reading public through the ages had been obsessed with the 'three S's': sensation, sentiment and the sordid. 'Most of us like to enjoy with our reading a shudder of excitement, a tear and a smile of sympathy, and a feeling of superiority to the sordid persons read about'.⁵ 'Escapist' reading, particularly of violent thrillers, may thus have served as a type of safety-valve, a method to disperse tensions and anxieties which otherwise might have erupted furiously, particularly among the unemployed. The only harm, it would appear, is that it was so addictive. As such, lower-middle and working-class readers had no incentive to graduate to high-brow fiction; the continuity between adults and children is evidence of this ingrained dependency.

In some respects, however, the character of 'escapist' reading was markedly different after the First World War than before. Critics tended to use this phrase loosely, when 'escapism' implied more than just a happy ending. The most striking example is in romantic fiction. Given the shift in emphasis towards more

4 Frederick Cowles, 'Public Libraries and Fiction', P.C. 19 March 1938 p. 422

5 Rose Macaulay, 'Marginal Comments', The Spectator 23 August 1935 p. 289

'realistic' plots, escapism represented, to an increasing degree, aspiration. It is not unreasonable to assume, for example, that readers of Mills and Boon novels thought that the lifestyle presented to them was both socially desirable and 'proper', and was, furthermore, though probably out of reach, not absurdly out of reach. Sara Seale (perhaps the firm's most successful author) was correct in claiming that the secret of the popularity of romantic novels was that they combined escapism with 'a story which could conceivably apply to many of its readers' lives'.⁶ Similarly, Richard Hoggart has noted that working-class readers preferred not a complete escape from ordinary life, but something which 'assumes that ordinary life is intrinsically interesting. The emphasis is initially on the human and detailed, with or without the 'pepping-up' which crime or sex or splendour gives. For them passion is no more interesting than steady home-life'.⁷

This aspiration was ideological. 'What any generation wants to do in its leisure is the expression of its characteristic ideal',⁸ C. Delisle Burns wrote in 1932. This was certainly the case with popular fiction: many of the attitudes expressed in novels and magazines reflected the ideological views of the period. According to Kirsten Drotner, the D.C. Thomson boys' papers, for example, satisfied a child's natural need for protest, challenging the natural infallibility and dominance of adults. This was

6 Seale, p. 23

7 Hoggart, pp. 94-95

8 C. Delisle Burns, Leisure in the Modern World (London, 1932), p. 174

expressed in the use of two types of character: the 'superhuman' hero with extraordinary powers, and the youngster who, through force of circumstances, quite literally saves the (child's) world by foiling Nazis, crazed scientists and dishonest sportsmen.⁹ For perhaps the first time, the child was presented as omnipotent and vital, and readers obviously responded to such flattery. D.C. Thomson may have sensed a popular urge and responded in a relatively harmless, unsubversive way. Similarly, Mills and Boon's emphasis on propriety, companionate marriage and full-time motherhood reflected the predominant ideological view of sexual relations between the wars. Jane Lewis has suggested that by the Second World War, middle-class wives (the role-model of most Mills and Boon novels) 'had greater mobility, more legal freedom and probably increased expectations of sexual pleasure'.¹⁰ The ideal of 'modern marriage', moreover, was togetherness and companionship (paramount in the novels) rather than passivity and separation. Furthermore, despite a declining birthrate, rising illegitimacy and divorce, marriage and motherhood were still sacred and sought, and women were regarded as both the moral guardians of the home and the expression of proper behaviour to society. Rachel Anderson has noted how the ideal of virginity in popular fiction remained standard in romantic fiction when the reality was quite different:

Despite the new ideas on sexual freedom, free love, and the biological urges which were being advocated in the twenties by writers like H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley and Bertrand Russell, and the practical advice being offered by Marie Stopes...free love was by no means what the fictional heroine sought. For her, there was

9 Drotner, English Children and Their Magazines, pp. 222-223

10 Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950 (Sussex, 1984), p. 135

still one man for one woman, and chastity was still a virtue...marriage was still the ultimate dream.

11

Interestingly, religion was no longer a part of this ideal (although heroines did sometimes 'pray' to an unspecified deity), as we might expect given the conventional character of such 'wish-pictures'. Thus the Religious Tract Society, as we have seen, was forced to accommodate the increasingly secular nature of society between the wars.

Finally, popular fiction reflected changing attitudes towards class divisions and differences encouraged by both wars. 'Discretion and reticence about class became the hallmarks of the two most public of all the media, films and radio',¹² Arthur Marwick observed; popular fiction was no exception. In a decided departure from the Victorian and Edwardian literary tradition, class divisions were blurred. The Big 5 papers, for example, were more 'classless' than the Gem, and tales of boys set around the world reflected the spirit of Anglo-Saxon internationalism and social mobility, as did the Boy's Own Paper. Similarly, but with less success, the Religious Tract Society during the 1930s and 1940s made a conscious effort to broaden the appeal of its magazines to all classes. Mills and Boon also managed to transcend class by elevating the status of the lower-middle/working-class heroine, accentuating the value of her class-qualities such as common sense, propriety and fortitude.

11 Anderson, pp. 200-201

12 Arthur Marwick, 'Images of the working class since 1930', in Jay Winter (ed), The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling (Cambridge, 1983), p. 234

Hence, it is arguable that publishers of popular fiction reinforced the predominant stereotypes and ideals of the period, rather than imposed them. Attitudes expressed in novels and magazines often reflected what people thought they should be, even if reality was different. Consequently it is doubtful whether such publishers could have had as direct and immediate an influence upon the reading public as, say, a tabloid newspaper proprietor did.¹³ But Mills and Boon, D.C. Thomson, and the Religious Tract Society did believe that they were reaching and helping their publics, at least in an instructive fashion. D.C. Thomson, for example, prided itself in introducing proper spelling and grammar to children. 'The vital thing was, in a prose story there's only one way of spelling a word, and that's the right way', Jack Mackersie said. 'And they were being taught good English, and good spelling, and loving it, and not knowing they were being directed in this fashion, which is what I suppose good education is all about'.¹⁴ The boys' papers also served to nurture the reading habit in young people by providing 'a good read'. The Religious Tract Society, as we have seen, regarded its magazines as propaganda arms in support of the organization's missionary efforts overseas. Similarly, Mills and Boon believed that its novels had the potential to influence a readership which it considered quite gullible and vulnerable. Mary Burchell expressed

13 Lord Beaverbrook, publisher of the Daily Express, unashamedly told the Royal Commission on the Press (1947-1949) that his main purpose in publishing was power and influence: 'I run the paper purely for the purpose of making propaganda, and with no other object'. (Royal Commission on the Press, Minutes of Evidence 26th day [18 March 1948], p. 4 question 8656)

14 JM-2

well the sense of responsibility which Mills and Boon authors felt in approaching their readers:

The thing I can truly say is, I have never got out of my mind that romantic fiction has more influence than anything to do with its literary worth. That is because it is read by unsophisticated people.

I truly don't think I have ever let a girl of mine do anything that I wouldn't like to see a girl of that age do, or if she does, she's punished.

Publishers of children's books also assumed a role in loco parentis, as did such prolific and popular authors as Captain W.E. Johns. This management of popular fiction was, we have seen, the legacy of the 'quality' movement initiated in the 1870s by such pioneering publications as the B.O.P.

In the end, however, the extent to which readers were actually influenced by such fiction, and by the publishers' views on morality, class, and patriotism, is difficult to gauge. We can determine how successful a magazine or a novel was, by the number of copies sold, but whether financial success was an endorsement of editorial policy is another matter. Drotner's assertion that children's magazines were excellent 'seismographs' of taste is flawed, for example, because of the degree of parental supervision in the choice of reading matter. The answer may lie in what Cynthia White called 'the cornerstone of modern publishing for women': the 'all-important concept of "reader-identification"'.¹⁵ Each publisher, we have seen, went to great lengths to accommodate their publications to the personal taste of each individual reader. The

15 White, p. 87

B.O.P. appealed to all young men; the Wizard to all 'chums'; My Weekly to all 'friends'; and Mills and Boon addressed a notice ('the bait') to each reader. The trust undoubtedly established between publisher and reader, reflected in the fierce loyalty of women and children to their publications, must have inculcated attitudes and values through endless repetition. Given the extent of market research, moreover, there must have been much common ground. George Moonie, in fact, claimed that the Thomson boys' papers represent 50 years of social history, as the need for the child to identify was constantly encouraged among editors:

All the time we are subconsciously aware of the social conditions of the time when we are creating these characters in a story. We are drawing upon things that are happening, and we've seen happening, when the papers are published, using these as props in a story.

16

Popular literature in Britain during our period embodied a number of common attitudes and concerns. In general, it was fiercely patriotic and pro-Empire, but decreasingly xenophobic. The importance of good manners, respect and public service was emphasized. Good always triumphed over evil, and the consequences of crime and 'sinful' behaviour were depicted, often graphically. Marriage, motherhood, and 'middle-classery' were all endorsed, in a kind of pan-class crusade. In many respects, therefore, the status quo owed much to D.C. Thomson, Mills and Boon, the Religious Tract Society, and other publishers. Editors acted as educators, both openly and subliminally, for as long as it was financially possible. Fortunately for the predominantly Conservative Government, as Orwell

observed, popular publishing was wholly a preserve of the Right, and thus non-confrontational. These publishers were consequently never troubled by censorship laws as the cinema was.

It is unlikely, however, that popular publishers cast themselves - or could cast themselves - as agents in a master plan for social control and domination, as Bridget Fowler has suggested. 'Archaic elements litter its pages, both in style and the images of society it employs', she claimed. 'At its most conscious, such social control is exerted by editorial selection on the basis of practical rules of thumb about the genre and 'what the audience wants' which filter out any ideologically or stylistically alien product'.¹⁷ This certainly is true, but as we have seen, financial misfortune could lay waste to even the holiest of intentions, as Lutterworth Periodicals discovered after the Second World War. Lutterworth, moreover, could not make such an 'archaic element' as religion sell papers. Successful popular literature, furthermore, was an organic genre and subject to change. Even the most prosperous publishers have had to adapt in order to maintain their market position. The landing of the Eagle comic in 1950, for example, struck the Thomson Big 5 papers squarely and presaged their transformation in the 1950s to picture-story papers.¹⁸ This was the

17 Bridget Fowler, 'True to Me Always: An Analysis of Women's Magazine Fiction', in Christopher Pawling (ed), Popular Fiction and Social Change (London, 1984), p. 105

18 According to Audit Bureau of Circulations records, the Eagle averaged a weekly sale of 735,895 copies between January and June, 1950. The best-selling Big 5 title, the Wizard, only sold 460,500 (according to D.C. Thomson). After the Second World War most of the Big 5 papers experimented with picture stories; Adventure featured a continuing picture serial on its cover from 1947.

first serious challenge to the Thomson supremacy. and the firm, not surprisingly, responded. Similarly, 'romantic' fiction, although littered with stereotypes, was not regressive for its period, and in the 1970s and 1980s Mills and Boon has faced some of the same problems as Lutterworth Periodicals did. The 'formula' which it projected in the interwar years was well-suited to the predominant 'romantic' ideals of companionate marriage and motherhood. But postwar changes in gender role allocation and in women's aspirations have, to some extent, cut the ground from beneath them. Despite their confidence that they were purveying timeless ideals, Mills and Boon have always struggled to fit the 'formula' to the times.¹⁹ During our period the firm acknowledged 'modern' problems such as employment and single parenthood, and began to admit more passion between spouses. The inclusion of premarital sex in the novels today is embarrassing to some; the Boon brothers feel resigned. Mary Burchell scorned the fact that commercial concerns have had such an influence, standardizing the product which is marketed like soap flakes. 'The paperbacks, of course, changed the whole scene. We weren't all very pleased', she said. 'I think that the influence today is very much for what sells. We're in the business to sell'. As were all publishers of 'popular' fiction.

19 But Barbara Cartland, as we have seen, has refused to change her 'formula'. Consequently, her British sales pale in comparison with Mills and Boon's today. Cartland's celebrity status belies the fact that most of her current sales are in translation, mainly to the Third World.

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1 We have decided to dispense with the traditional demarcations of 'Primary Sources' and 'Secondary Sources'. The nature of this thesis has made it difficult to discern between the two. For example, is a 1935 article from the Bookseller on the publishing trade, or A.J. Jenkinson's 1940 work on children's reading habits, a primary or a secondary source? Consequently, we have decided to list all sources together here.

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