Chapter I

THE DEPRESSION OF 1837-43 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AMERICAN BOOK TRADE

Perhaps nothing in the nineteenth century so influenced the American book trade as the depression of 1837-43. Established firms faltered but somehow carried on. New publishers sprang up only to disappear a few years later amidst the ranks of debtors and insolvents. Editors moved from one journal to another, seeking to stave off the inevitable. Prices for books and periodicals fell lower and lower, till proprietors began to wonder if it would not be cheaper to suspend business altogether. A mania for cheapness had descended upon the trade, and things would never be the same again.

England was undergoing a rather similar time of trouble, but this was small comfort to the average American bookman. If he paid any attention to the economics of the situation, he knew that British sterling was at a high premium, and American bank notes almost worthless. This was especially true in the spring and summer of 1837. It was brought home to even the largest and most prosperous of the American publishers when they could neither secure credit nor transact business in London. Harper & Bros of New York had agreed to pay the English novelist, Edward Lytton Bulwer, for advance sheets of his latest work: a history of ancient Athens. To their great chagrin they had to write and explain:

By the packet which sails tomorrow, we were desirous of sending you a bill of £150 for 'Athens' – but upon consultation with some of our friends, we are told that a bill cannot be safely purchased at present. Nearly all of our bankers have failed – and it is feared that the remainder must fail before long. We were treating with one of our large Houses for a bill – but before the sailing of the packet the House failed! We cannot remit the specie, as the banks have suspended
specie payments. Under these circumstances, we shall defer purchasing a draft until we hear further from England, and ascertain something more respecting the solvency of our bill drawers. We shall procure a bill as soon as we can possibly do so with safety, and of course will include interest for the delay.

Two months passed, but the Harpers' financial predicament persisted. Resorting to more bizarre channels of procuring funds, they advised Bulwer:

*It mortifies us greatly that, owing to the present deranged state of affairs, we cannot remit to you as usual. As yet there is no ascertaining the fate of our bill drawers — Those generally considered good, will not draw upon any reasonable terms.*

We have just received a letter from our agent in Calcutta, (Mr. Henry T. Hall), advising us, that he should place in the hands of Messrs. Baring, Brothers, & Co. some funds (941 sicca rupees) on our account, — the exact value and amount of which we cannot ascertain — for which, however, we beg leave to enclose a draft. In case the funds have not arrived, or for any other cause, Messrs. Baring, Brothers, & Co. should decline paying the draft, we do not wish it protested — but beg that you will inform us of its reception, or otherwise, the amount received, &c. &c.

The crisis in credit and banking which overshadowed the year 1837 was only the prelude to something worse. The American economy recovered for a time and 1838 looked promising. Then in 1839 panic set in again: a depression whose severity, according to one recent economic historian, 'can most accurately be compared to that of 1929'. The signs were apparent enough. Major banks failed, companies went bankrupt, and even States of the Union defaulted on their debts. By 1842 there was still no interest forthcoming on bonds issued by Pennsylvania, Maryland, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Much of the capital for these bonds had been raised in Britain to permit various states to finance the building of roads, canals, railways, and other public works. Once constructed, these works would have yielded a sufficient profit to cover both principal and interest. This plan might have worked had the depression not come along, making the bonds seem worthless since the public works were incomplete and the major political parties could not agree on how to repay the debts.

Some looked for help from the Federal Treasury. Others, especially the Democrats, advocated an increase in local taxation combined with a reduction in expenditure and a general lessening in the power of the
Federal Government. The Whigs thought money could be raised from the sale of public lands, the Government making up for lost revenue by substantially raising tariffs. However, nothing was done. The crisis continued: the states were in default and British creditors cursed the day that they had been tempted by the speculative prospects in America.

The depression was deeper than met the eye. The nation's economy had become heavily dependent upon the growth, financing, and exportation of cotton. Between 1831 and 1836 the value of cotton exports almost trebled. More and more marginal land was pressed into its cultivation, the market in slaves boomed, plantation banks over-extended credit; all combining to encourage Eastern merchants to finance shipments to Liverpool and there set up their own commercial exchange. The panic of 1837 changed all this. With the contraction of credit and the consequent mistrust of American currency, cotton prices inevitably fell. Production was over-committed, so that each year as prices declined and demand slackened more and more raw cotton came on to the market, depressing the price still farther.

The book trade in America may not have been hit harder than any other business, but the depression certainly took its toll among authors, editors, and publishers. Horace Greeley, later proprietor of the New York Tribune, told how his magazine, the New Yorker, was progressing fairly well 'till the Commercial Revulsion of 1837 swept over the land, whelming it and me in the general ruin'. When he married in 1836 he fancied himself modestly but comfortably secure. His assets were worth about $5,000, and his magazine provided an annual income of $1,000. Then came the depression:

instead of that, or of any income at all, I found myself obliged, throughout 1837, to confront a net loss of about $100 per week. . . . It was in vain that I appealed to delinquents to pay up; many of them migrated; some died; others were so considerate as to order the paper [magazine] stopped, but very few of these paid; and I struggled on against a steadily rising tide of adversity that might have appalled a stouter heart. Often did I call on this or that friend with an intent to solicit a small loan to some demand that could no longer be postponed nor evaded, and after wasting a precious hour, leave him, utterly unable to broach the loathsome topic. Most gladly would I have terminated the struggle by a surrender; but, if I had failed to pay my notes continually falling due, I must have paid money for my weekly supply paper – so that would have availed nothing. To have stopped my journal (for I could not have given it away) would have left me in debt, besides my notes for paper, from fifty cents
to two dollars each, to at least three thousand subscribers who had paid in advance; and that is the worst kind of bankruptcy.

The experience of Park Benjamin was not much happier. As editor of the American Monthly Magazine, he became increasingly involved in its survival and found himself pouring what money he had, plus what he could borrow from relatives, into the venture. The Magazine survived the first wave of 1837 only to succumb in the backwash of 1838. Benjamin long remembered this personal disaster to his own fortunes, and it is not surprising that he turned his efforts to editing a cheap newspaper which would be more likely to meet the cut-throat competition.  

Even the major publishing houses struggled to stay afloat. In 1837 the Harpers seriously considered bankruptcy as the best means of extricating themselves from the effects of the panic. The better alternative seemed to be one of retrenchment, in an effort to cut costs and overheads. Other firms contracted their operations and tried to ride out the storm.

Though a crude measurement of business stagnation, the numbers of titles published by these firms is some indication of their plight. In the early 1830s Harpers were averaging over fifty titles a year. The annual number fell below this figure for the years 1837, 1839, and 1842. In the last of these, some thirty-six works were published, many of which reflected earlier commitments to schoolbook publications. Their general trade sank to an unprecedented low. By contrast, the next few years testified to the restoration of confidence: 75 titles for 1844; 87 for 1845; 94 for 1846; 113 for 1847.

The Cost Book or Paper and Print Book of Ticknor & Fields reveals a parallel struggle. This Boston firm, a much smaller one than Harpers, was expanding its publishing in the early 1830s only to find its progress severely checked by economic conditions. Table 1 shows approximations of their yearly output.

It was also an epoch of ever-diminishing retail prices. Whereas books averaged about $2.00 in the 1820s, they dropped to around 50¢ by the depression of 1837-43. Readers were also victims, and the amount of spare income allocated to reading matter was drastically reduced. Naturally tempted by the fall in book prices, they were even more attracted by cheaper periodicals and newspapers.

Perhaps most marked was the effect which the depression had on the leading Philadelphia firm of Carey & Lea (see Table 2). Unfortunately the later cost books are not published, but the production curve is plain
### Table 1  Yearly output

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<tr>
<td>1833</td>
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<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>13 (year of sharp recession)</td>
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<td>1839</td>
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<td>1840</td>
<td>13 (reflecting the growing panic of the previous year)</td>
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<td>1841</td>
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<td>1842</td>
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### Table 2  Carey & Lea

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<td>1837</td>
<td>52</td>
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enough. Even when one takes into account that some titles obviously sold more readily than others and that several best sellers offset a score of nonentities, the overall trend of the times emerges clearly. Popular novelists such as James Fenimore Cooper also felt the effects. In an effort to compete with price-cutting, Carey & Lea, Cooper’s publishers, ripped the hard covers off thousands of his unsold volumes and replaced them with cheap paper ones. Until 1837 Carey & Lea successfully held their own against the rising competition from the Harpers of New York. However, in trying to adjust to reduced circumstances, they decided to lessen their dependence on both fiction and foreign reprints; the Harpers were geographically closer to the source of supply of imported books, and fiction was more volatile than other forms of literature. They reasoned that doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers would continue to order books even when the fickle reading public ceased buying new romances. Their strategy paid off. Within a decade Carey & Lea were leaders in the publication of medical and technical books. Gone were their editions of Dickens, Irving, and Cooper. Gone too, as of 1838, was Henry C. Carey himself from the ranks of prominent publishers. In spite of family tradition – he was the son of the illustrious publisher Mathew Carey – Henry increasingly turned his attention to the field of political economy. The substantial profits and opportunities for expansion which so characterized the latter 1820s and early 1830s had evaporated. The depression brought with it the passing of an era.

During these years of trade distress, cheap newspapers and periodicals came into their own. They dominated the book trade and came to symbolize both the best and the worst in American journalism. Two weeklies set the pace. These were *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World*, followed by a host of rivals and imitators, and contemporaries began to speak of a revolution in the production and marketing of literature. Their rise to prominence was meteoric; their decline almost as swift.

The first to make its appearance was *Brother Jonathan*. The capital for the venture seems to have come from a New York printer-publisher, James Gregg Wilson, while the editorial inspiration belonged to Park Benjamin and Rufus W. Griswold. As so often happened in these years, weekly journals were the offshoot of daily newspapers. Thus, Wilson’s primary undertaking was the *Evening Tattler*, which he began to publish on 8 July 1839. On 13 July he announced his intention to publish a weekly as well. *Brother Jonathan* would be ‘the largest folio sheet in the world’, and would combine important news from the daily issues of the *Tattler* with
THE DEPRESSION OF 1837-43

as much more original and selected, prepared exclusively for the Jonathan". A keynote was sounded on 24 July when the Tattler prepared its readers for the first of sixteen instalments of Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby. The Great Western steamship had brought this first instalment from Liverpool, while the slower sailing packets from London would supply the Tattler’s competitors. Taking pride in their accomplishment, the Editors informed their readers that their agent in London would be sure to send ‘by the big ships, all the original sayings and original productions that are indigenous to that capital’.

These ingredients spelled radical change in the American book trade. The excess capacity of printing presses so frequently idle during the years of depression had great potential for rapidity and volume. People could ill afford to pay much for their reading, but the Tattler for a penny or the Jonathan for 6¢ were attractive bargains. For such modest outlays of cash, readers were to enjoy the advantages of both news and periodical literature. Few papers could boast of an agent in London, especially one who could make good use of the regular steamship service begun the previous year. Now British literature could make its way to the American shores in a matter of two weeks instead of the usual but uncertain thirty to sixty days. To be sure, most of these characteristics were not new, and other newspapers and periodicals exploited some of them. However, it took the peculiar combination of circumstances associated with the trade, technology and reading tastes of the late 1830s, to produce Brother Jonathan and the New World.

A step-child of Brother Jonathan, the New World made its first appearance on 26 October 1839. Their similarity was hardly coincidental. Feeling unappreciated, Benjamin and Griswold deserted Jonathan, and with the backing of another printer, Jonas Winchester, launched this new venture. As before, there was to be a daily newspaper in conjunction with the weekly, and Winchester’s Evening Signal duly made its appearance a fortnight before the New World. As the demand for stories and poems grew, these literary periodicals began to overshadow their daily counterparts. The weeklies in turn spawned monthlies. As early as January 1840 Evergreen appeared as a compilation of the New World’s best articles. Brother Jonathan was somewhat slower, but by January 1841 it could point with pride to its Dollar Magazine. In the early 1840s the same pattern was repeated elsewhere. George Roberts, the Boston publisher, combined the daily Boston Times with the weekly Boston Notion and Roberts’ Semi-Monthly Magazine.
The distinctive feature of the new weeklies was their inordinate size. They all vied with each other to be the largest folio sheet in the world. On 30 November 1839 the *New World* brought out the first of its Leviathans, and claimed thereafter to lead the pack. Leviathans were issued sporadically and eventually became extra issues for which an additional charge was made. By the beginning of 1841 they had reached the absurd dimensions of five feet eight inches long by four feet four inches wide. This in turn gave way to the record-breaking Christmas Leviathan of 1841, measuring a modest six feet seven inches by four feet four inches! The surface area was 3,500 square inches, and subscribers were confronted by forty-eight columns; each a solid four feet of small type. The term 'mammoth' was applied to them, and even in their ordinary folio size they were more than a handful for the average reader. One had to spread out an issue on a table, or better yet, on the floor.

There was more than mere gimmickry in these large folios, however. The newspaper format held distinct advantages for the publisher of a weekly journal. A single sheet of printing paper could go through the post at newspaper rates instead of those for magazines, and such large sheets could be cheaply printed, required no binding or stitching, and yet had more reading matter than most literary periodicals. As the *New World* was not slow to point out, one of its issues contained more material than six daily newspapers. The editors of *Brother Jonathan* liked to make invidious comparisons with ordinary books: why not purchase as much reading for 6¢ as would otherwise cost $2.00 in a duodecimo volume? One volume of Irving’s *Columbus* or Bancroft’s *History* at $3.00 contained no more than a weekly issue of the Jonathan.¹⁰

The unwieldiness of the folios eventually induced publishers to issue quarto editions as well. Within the trade there was a relentless pressure for bigness, and subscribers had to be continually reassured that they were receiving as much reading matter as before. Having begun a quarto edition in June 1840, the *New World* ushered in a 'large quarto' one year later, with four columns to the page instead of three. The next year *Brother Jonathan* pointed out that the size of its printing sheet was larger than that used by its competitors. The quarto editions generally had sixteen pages, but the *New World*’s three or four columns per page held more print than the *Jonathan*’s two columns. By 1842 quarto editions had pretty well replaced folios in most people's libraries.¹¹ They lent themselves to binding in one or two volumes a year, which reinforced their publishers' claim that they contained literature worth preserving. The
seemingly innocuous decision to emphasize the quartos had one unforeseen effect. It was but the first of many steps to deprive the 'mammoths' of their uniqueness and eventually to relegate them to the mass of undifferentiated cheap periodicals.

In the meantime the weeklies took everyone by storm. Increasingly they filled their columns with stories from abroad and capitalized on readers' anticipation of coming instalments. Emulating the newspapers of the day, they sent newsboys on to the streets to hawk the latest issues. In large cities arrangements could be made to deliver copies to subscribers' doors, or people could pick them up at designated outlets. Unlike newspapers, they developed not only a local but also a national market. They did this by appointing local agents in major cities throughout the country. In this respect the New World seems to have been more successful than Brother Jonathan. In 1840 it had about thirty-five agents, one to a town, scattered throughout a dozen states. By the beginning of 1841 there were fifty-two in seventeen states and the District of Columbia plus an additional five in Canada. Most of these were concentrated in the North-Eastern quadrant of the country where readers could avail themselves of the same price of 6¢ charged in New York, while Southern and Western agents supplied their customers for as little as 12½¢ per copy. New World agents in the North-East were supplied copies at the rate of one hundred for $4.00, giving them a profit of 2¢ on each copy sold. They were also encouraged to solicit annual subscriptions for $3.00 each, from which they could retain 75¢. Towns without an agent were urged to provide themselves with one, and if this were not possible, to use the authorized travelling representatives. However, since there were only three of these throughout the United States and Canada, subscribers were cautioned against imposters.12

The other important means of developing a national market was through the post. This proved particularly convenient for communities lacking an authorized agent, in as much as Brother Jonathan or the New World could be mailed to subscribers for $3.00 a year. To be sure, payment had to be made in advance and sent to the publishing offices in New York, but this was facilitated by one of the regulations of the Post Office: local postmasters were allowed to use their franking privilege when forwarding subscriptions and payments to newspapers and periodicals. Similarly, renewals required no postage as long as the local postmaster transmitted them.

Clearly, it was an easy step to convert postmasters into unofficial
subscription agents, and as with authorized city agents, they could also retain 75¢ from every $3.00. Payments to publishers were to be made in 'funds current in New York', a reminder of the currency and banking instability of the time. A few months later even these qualifications were relaxed in the interest of encouraging new subscriptions. 'We are quite willing to receive "Red Back" bills, in spite of the machination of the New York Brokers.' They went on to explain that the panic over currency was not as bad as it was pictured by those who stood to profit from it.

By the summer of 1841 a very different tone was assumed towards subscribers and their payments. 'We have paid during the past year more than fifteen thousand dollars in discounts on uncurrent or Southern and Western money, a sum quite too large, and which ought to be diminished.' Even the North-East subscribers were henceforth charged an extra 8 to 20 per cent if their banks were unchartered. By the same token, outlying agents would have to content themselves with 50¢ instead of 75¢ commission on each $3.00 subscription.

Once having established a nation-wide clientele, the weeklies launched further campaigns of expansion. As precursors of twentieth-century Madison Avenue, the columns of the New World trumpeted valuable premiums for those who renewed their subscriptions promptly or secured new ones. The multi-volume edition of Sears' Illustrated Bible was offered as tempting bait. Each volume was said to be worth $2.00 and was awarded in exchange for two new subscriptions. Alternatively, one could begin to collect the eight-volume set of the American Family Magazine with its one thousand woodcut illustrations; the really ambitious might acquire the whole set by collecting merely fifteen new subscribers. Somewhat later, seven new subscriptions qualified for a $5.00 premium in the form of Stephens's Incidents of Travel in Central America.

Absolutely essential to the successful functioning of Brother Jonathan and the New World was the notion of narrow profit margins based on volume sales. The New World, for example, made an impressive beginning in October 1839, when its first printing of 15,000 quickly sold. A month later, the first Leviathan realized a sale of 20,000. Gradually, in the next six months, the regular weekly issues and occasional Leviathans climbed to the imposing figure of 25,000. During the course of 1841 the average weekly circulation was somewhat under 20,000, although the special Leviathan issues might reach as high as 30,000. Brother Jonathan was more discreet about its weekly circulation figures, and while they were no doubt imposing, they were probably somewhat less than those of the
New World. Both journals far exceeded the circulation of other American periodicals, with the exception of Graham’s Magazine and a few of the leading daily newspapers. Neither were there many publications in Great Britain which approximated these figures.

Large sales depended in turn on rapid and efficient printing presses. Never modest in its accomplishments, the New World crowned its wave of success by moving to larger premises. This was in the spring of 1840 and a year later it could boast of two Napier presses capable of printing 20,000 sheets in three or four days. From rather humble beginnings, Jonas Winchester had become one of the leading printers in New York City. It was only a matter of time until this increased printing capacity was put to additional use. What began as a premium for new subscribers eventually turned into a whole new publishing industry. The beginnings were rather unspectacular: in the New World of 19 June 1841 appeared an announcement for Charles Lever’s Irish novel, Charles O’Malley, to be issued complete in a special quarto edition, distinct from the regular weekly issue. This would be sent free to new subscribers or to anyone renewing a subscription. Of course there was nothing unusual about reprinting British novels, but till now they had been presented in weekly or monthly instalments. A few long poems or plays by Bulwer, Knowles, or Moore, were sometimes printed complete in one weekly issue, but now for the first time readers had a whole novel squeezed into the many columns of a single printed sheet.

The implications of this experiment were not immediately grasped, and it was not until the following spring that novels began appearing in supplements of one, two, or three sheets, comprising 16, 32, or 48 quarto pages. Brother Jonathan followed suit as did other newspapers and periodicals to a lesser extent. During the course of 1842 the New World put out twenty-one works of fiction and non-fiction in the form of ‘extras’, followed by thirty-six separate reprints the next year. Regular subscribers were charged $1.00 or $2.00 in addition to the normal subscription fee for these supplements and were reminded that a typical novel occupied the space of two or three sheets. In major cities including New York, a single number would usually cost 12½¢; a double number 18½¢ or 25¢. Prices in the country would be proportionally higher. To interest agents, special rates were offered for quantity orders.

What was most remarkable about these special supplements was the size of their sales. The New World’s edition of Bulwer’s Zanoni had sold 26,000 copies within a few weeks of its appearance, while some months
later *Brother Jonathan* reported 33,000 for its edition. The usual number of copies for a first printing was 10,000, as in the case of G. P. R. James’s *Jacquerie* and *Morley Ernestin*, but during 1842–3 there was always the firm expectation that further printings would be called for. Even a volume of Bulwer’s poems, *Eva*, provided *Brother Jonathan* with a sale of 16,500, at a time when most poetry was thought to be a drug on the market. Another *Jonathan* extra, *Gasper the Pirate*, totalled 28,500; *Father Connell* reached 21,000; and *The Butchers of Ghent*, 25,000. Dickens’s *American Notes* brought the *New World* over 50,000 customers, while a similar number was confidently anticipated for Bulwer’s *Last of the Barons*. With James’s *Morley Ernestin*, the *New World* outdid itself. Winchester’s presses took only sixty hours to turn out the entire American edition of 10,000, notwithstanding its use of 600,000 ‘ems’ and 320 tokens.

Popular French novels in translation were also a favourite target for reprinting. Sometimes, when no convenient translation was available, a special American one might be commissioned. In the case of Borgaerts’s *The Butchers of Ghent*, the translator turned out to be the Editor of *Brother Jonathan* himself.

Occasionally, in a burst of literary nationalism or by way of countering criticism against piratical publishers, the weeklies sponsored an original American work. Such was *Jonathan*’s edition of *Puffer Hopkins* by Cornelius Mathews, and no opportunity was lost to point out that the copyright had been purchased by the journal. Another was Walt Whitman’s *Franklin Evans, Or the Inebriate*, which the *New World* published in the autumn of 1842.

For a time these supplements became so spectacularly successful that their publishers began to curtail the weeklies in order to concentrate on book-length extras. At the beginning of 1843 the *New World* decided to discontinue serialized stories in its weekly issues. It had already stopped publishing the daily *Signal* and the monthly *Evergreen*. Now the weekly was to be cut back in the interest of selling complete works at low prices, and the publisher claimed that this would not injure the quality of the weekly but would only enhance the supplements.

For the next few years supplements were all the rage. As a contemporary observer noted, there were distinct advantages to any publisher who could carry on this kind of cheap mass-circulation competition.

*The change in the mode of publishing has brought about this result. Formerly, when the production of a book required capital and credit, there was a natural*
limit in the resources of the trade. Many books went through some of the regular forms of announcement, printing, binding, circulating from city to city, a tithe of the best English publications supplied the market. Correspondents and agencies had to be created, and credit had to be given.

The coming of paper-covered unbound reprints changed all this. Printer-publishers like Winchester and Wilson did not extend credit but accepted cash over the counter or from advance subscriptions. New outlets were created which placed no obligation upon the publisher. 'One of the most flourishing... in Broadway is a candy shop!' wrote a correspondent in New York to the Athenaeum in London. He went on:

> Where there is no copyright charge, no binders' charge, where one sheet of paper does the work of four, where there are no losses by credit, where there is no store-hire chargeable, where there are no old shopkeepers on hand, the edition being at once disposed of for ready money - books may well be cheap, and cheap they are.

With the resources of a large newspaper establishment and the need to keep labour and machinery constantly employed, the cheap weeklies paid no attention to publishing seasons or other considerations of traditional book production and distribution. Any competitor would be forced to slash prices and narrow profit margins. Few orthodox book-publishers were inclined to risk this, especially in view of the protracted trade depression.

As long as large impressions were sold, profits could be made. The correspondent for the Athenaeum estimated that the break-even point came at about 2,000 copies sold. After that, from $40.00 to $50.00 clear profit could be made on every thousand copies. Thus a sale of 20,000 copies would return a handsome profit of $1,000.

What was particularly significant to the Athenaeum's observer was the wide range of cheap republication in America. The class of works is very far from being limited to the fashionable novels. The republications of this week in New York alone are O'Connell's 'Memoir of Ireland,' (25 cents); Dr Arnold's 'Lectures on History,' (25 cents); Mrs Ellis's 'Wives of England,' (25 cents); the last number of the Edinburgh Review, (25 cents); and 'The Roué,' (12½ cents), an old novel now published as Bulwer's on the faith and recommendation of some former advertisements in the Times. There have been four cheap editions of Borrow's 'Bible in Spain' by two publishers, and three of the 'Zincali;' at least 35,000 copies in all. The translation of
D'Aubigne's 'History of the Reformation' has been widely circulated. Alison's 'History of Europe' will be soon entirely published for four dollars, with some additions by the author. Taylor's 'Edwin the Fair' was published for 6½ cents. The whole twenty parts of 'Martin Chuzzlewit' will be published by the Messrs Harpers, with fourteen well executed plates, for forty-four cents, less than the cost of two numbers in England, and the edition is as good as that of Ballantyne's 'British Novelists,' in double columns. Of Bulwer's 'Last of the Barons,' at least 50,000 were circulated. Bulwer's 'Eva, and other Poems' attained a large edition at sixpence — in the old form it would have remained on the shelves. Brande's 'Encyclopaedia' may be had complete for three dollars. 'The Pictorial History of England' will soon be republished. What think you of Liebig's works and old Froissart in this popular form? Several editions of the former have been published, and the latter is in hand. So you will see that the Commissioners of Customs will have full employment for at least one sub-official in keeping the list of contraband books.

Many contemporary Americans criticized the cheap weeklies and their supplements not only because of the shoddy appearance and eye-straining type but also because of the impact they had on traditional modes of authorship and publishing. The weeklies were not slow to justify themselves. In fact one might say they even anticipated such charges. In the second issue of the New World for 2 November 1839 they set down their credo.

The 'New World' will be found to be worthy of its name from its full summary of all the important events that may transpire between Behring's Strait and Cape Horn!... The whole World of letters, Old and New, will be ransacked for the best and richest stores. Every book and every periodical of merit, whether published in Great Britain or the United States, will be received at this office, and faithful selections made from them all. Our chief aim will be to be entertaining.

From the beginning the weeklies emphasized their unique contributions to American literary life in order to set themselves apart from the other eclectic journals. As often as possible they avoided printing extracts and instead reprinted the whole of foreign articles, plays, and poems. In this way the New World could claim that it had introduced to the American reading public some thirty-five complete works in the space of one year. Any two of these would have cost subscribers more in London than they paid for their year's subscription.
It was argued that the cheap weeklies were a particular boon to the country subscriber. No longer need he wait endlessly for journals and books to arrive at the nearest bookseller's shop. Now he could receive the latest in American and foreign literature carried as quickly as possible by the post. Furthermore, whether subscribers and readers lived in country or town they were all victims of hard times. In these circumstances, cheapness was a virtue.\textsuperscript{27}

The community . . . owes us a debt of gratitude for reducing the prices of works of light literature to the means of the poorest classes. We have begun a great literary revolution, which will result in enlightening the understanding of the masses. It is truly democratic – utterly subversive of that intellectual aristocracy which has hitherto controlled the energies of the nation.

To those cynics who accused the weeklies of debasing taste and corrupting morals, the \textit{New World} had its own self-righteous answer.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{This influence of the press is a powerful auxiliary to the great temperance movement. Joined with them, it is fast robbing the rum-palace of its victims; it renders the neglected home pleasant; restores to the dejected inebriate a true sense of his own real worth; and is, in fact, the very essence of civilization. The seed thus unwittingly scattered by the way-side, will bring forth a thousand fold, and the harvest will be – the human mind redeemed, regenerated, disenthralled.}

And to the chorus of voices raised within the book trade in protest against the ruinous competition which cheap reprints had brought, the \textit{New World} charged: was it not these same critics who consistently opposed an international copyright agreement in the name of cheap literature for America? All that the mammoths were doing was to extend low prices to their logical conclusion. Well might the American reading public wonder why the book trade had not long since followed \textit{Brother Jonathan} and the \textit{New World}.\textsuperscript{29} In fact, the \textit{New World} had nothing but scorn for one of the older eclectic journals, the \textit{Albion}, and baited it by asking whether it was not content with its share of literary piracy: ‘Born stealing, has lived by stealing, and will die stealing!’\textsuperscript{30} Besides, the \textit{Albion} contained a third less reading at twice the price.

The \textit{New World}'s challenge to the book trade did not long go unheeded. In 1842 the largest American book publishers, Harper & Bros of New York, decided to do battle. Perhaps this eminent firm on Cliff Street might never have entered the conflict had they not felt provoked. A fire
broke out in their bindery on the first of June and it seemed to be the work of an arsonist. The Harpers became convinced that Winchester’s *New World* was connected with the fire in an effort to steal a copy of James’s *Morley Ernstein*, which Harpers were soon to publish. Despite the fire Harpers issued a cheap edition of *Morley Ernstein* and began to cut prices on its other English reprints. The *New World* was not impressed. The Editor informed his readers that he would ‘keep cool’ and would gladly give Harper notice ‘the moment we are in a fair way of “being done for”’. By the end of the year Harpers had issued twelve cheap reprints, most of them by Bulwer, and made it clear that this was only the beginning. It reduced the price of its popular Family Library from 45¢ to 25¢. This series, begun in the early 1830s, had reached about 150 titles by the end of 1842. Though most of the works had long been in print, they were now available at very tempting prices. A note of concern combined with combativeness crept into the *New World*’s rhetoric by late autumn. Surely, they [Harpers] make money enough in their District School Library and other works of a similar character to leave production of a transitory interest to others. About twenty-five hours after our edition of Dickens’ *American Notes* was out... they came lagging along with a shilling [12½¢] edition, without doubt, with the intention of injuring our sales. If we see more of this, we will... republish all the most valuable books in their list, at a cost barely sufficient to cover the smallest expenses – viz: compositors’ wages, paper, ink, and presswork. We rather think we could give most of their dollar books for sixpence a piece.

Now it was the Harpers’ turn to scoff. They knew that they vastly exceeded Winchester and the others in assets and publishing capacity. They also did their own printing and were not dependent, as the cheap reprinters were, on only one kind of market. They could well afford to take a loss on their Library of Select Novels and a number of other publications and still make up for it on school books. Due to general trade conditions 1842 had not been a good year for them and they had little to lose by cut-throat competition. They might even be able to beat the pirates at their own game. Their resolution was no doubt quickened when an early copy of Bulwer’s *The Last of the Barons* was stolen from their premises on Christmas Day.

Competition became more reckless during 1843. The pages of the *New World* were sprinkled with caustic comments about Harpers’ publications. Readers were especially warned to avoid the inferior Harper editions of
Alison's *History of Europe* and Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* in favour of the superior Winchester versions. In the case of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, they met the *New World* on its home ground by sending newsboys into the streets selling part-issues for 6¢ each and stretching the work over seventeen instalments.  

Increasingly during 1843 and 1844 it became apparent that Harpers would withstand the competition and that the *New World* might not. *Brother Jonathan* succumbed at the end of 1843 and was acquired formally by Winchester in January 1844. By the summer of 1844 the strain on the *New World* was clearly apparent. Competitors arose on all sides. As Prescott put it: the 'bigger sharks' were beginning to complain now that 'the smaller ones are running away with the game'. The predicament for the *New World* revolved around their having paid Sue 15,000 francs in order to receive advance sheets of his *Wandering Jew*. It was their intention to issue the work in instalments as it appeared in Paris. Before long it became apparent that few others in America were prepared to respect Winchester's priority of claim on the work. Two other versions in French appeared in America plus English translations based on a London edition. How ironic it was for the *New World* to condemn the latter as a 'pirated edition'.

There were others who were less successful than the Harpers in weathering the competition with the *New World*. One such was Horace Greeley. During 1839 and 1840 his energies were absorbed in journalistic support of Henry Clay and in the literary fortunes of a periodical, the *New Yorker*. Writing to Griswold in early 1841, Greeley lamented the impact which the mammoths had. 'The great beasts murder me in the way of circulation.' Soon thereafter the *New Yorker* folded and Greeley in effect adopted the motto: if you can't beat them, join them. He saw all too clearly what had to be done to survive in that time of trade depression and rampant price-cutting. Somewhat reminiscent of Winchester in 1839, he began a daily newspaper in April 1841. His *Tribune* was to have a weekly version as well; one that could be posted to subscribers in the country. The pattern was repeating itself and Greeley showed that Wilson's and Winchester's formula was a good one if strictly adhered to. By 1860 the *Weekly Tribune* had reached the unprecedented circulation of 200,000.

Another apparent casualty of these years was the literary magazine, the *New York Mirror*. As a weekly it had been in existence since 1823 and survived the hardships of 1837–9 only to founder in 1842. Its proprietor,
Gen. George Pope Morris, managed to revive it for a while in 1843–4 but finally gave up and launched a daily newspaper, the *Evening Mirror*, and the natural corollary, a *Weekly Mirror*. As such, the two publications continued for some years.39

Keen competition was not the only threat facing the cheap weeklies in the years 1842–3. Ominous rumblings began to come from the United States Post Office. This was unexpected since special low rates of postage for newspapers had been a long-standing concession from the American Congress. According to the Act of 1825, which was still in force in the early 1840s, newspapers were charged only $1 for distances under one hundred miles and $1.50 for greater distances. Although the mammoths came out weekly, they were only one printing sheet and easily qualified for this low postage. Another problem arose in defining just where a newspaper left off and a magazine began. This was especially true for the quarto editions of the *New World* and *Brother Jonathan*, folded like magazines and containing sixteen or thirty-two pages. However, since they were unstitched, they avoided paying the higher magazine rates of $1.50 or $2.40.40

The extras which the *New World* and *Brother Jonathan* began to issue defied definition. Their publishers saw no reason why these supplements in one, two, or three sheets should not go through the post at newspaper rates. Since they were not published on a regular basis they could hardly be regarded as magazines and were thus not subject to the somewhat higher postage for periodicals. But Section 30 of the Act of 1825 also made provision for magazines or pamphlets which appeared sporadically. Four cents was to be charged for shorter distances and 6¢ for longer ones. At that rate a two-sheet supplement would cost *New World* subscribers 8¢ instead of 2, or 12¢ instead of 3, depending upon distance. In fact this is what eventually happened with *Brother Jonathan*'s edition of Bulwer's *Zanoni*. The Post Office ruled that it was a three-sheet pamphlet and subject to 12 or 18¢ postage.41

The question was strictly one of interpretation, and it was up to the Postmaster General, Charles A. Wickliffe, to construe the Act of 1825. On the surface it looks as though he had decided to undermine the cheap weeklies. One might reasonably suspect that influence was brought to bear upon him from the more traditionally-minded members of the book trade. However, there is nothing in the surviving Post Office records to suggest this. What is evident is that the Post Office was plagued by a whole class of irregularly published materials which needed definition.
Wickliffe decided to seek the opinion of H. S. Legaré, the United States Attorney-General, and in a letter of 12 March 1842 he set forth the problem. There was no mention of Brother Jonathan nor the New World in it. Instead, he was preoccupied with Shipping and Commercial List and New York Prices Current, New Orleans Prices Current, Savannah Prices Current, Charleston Prices Current, and other similar commercial publications. On 18 March Legaré duly rendered an official opinion which sought to clarify the ambiguities.

On the whole, the only requisites of a newspaper which I think must be judicially held indispensable are —

1st That it be bona fide published, that is, for everybody's use. For example, the Price Currents, &c., printed at stated intervals, and sent by great Banking and Commercial houses to their customers, are not newspapers: they are not pro bono publico, but for private use.

2nd That they be published in numbers, not perhaps with exact regularity, but something approaching to it. Occasional sheets, placards, &c., are not newspapers.

3rd That they convey news, not mere dissertations and discussions, or literary and poetical miscellanies.

4th That they be in sheets, and in rather a cheap form.

But cases will be perpetually arising in which the Chief of the Post Office Department or the Stamp Bureau would be at a loss what to do without express legislative instructions. If you think them required by the service, I have no doubt they are called for by the state of the law.

With this opinion in hand, Wickliffe informed the New York Postmaster that Brother Jonathan's supplement of Zanoni was liable to pamphlet postage because it was not in sheets but stitched and in a paper cover. The New World, however, successfully made out a case to exempt its edition of Zanoni on the grounds that it had no cover and was not stitched. Needless to say, Brother Jonathan did not make the same mistake twice, and for another year both reprint publishers enjoyed the usual newspaper rates of postage.

Then came a sudden reversal of policy. As the New World described it, the New York Post Office received instructions to charge pamphlet rates 'on all the cheap publications of the day, issued as extras'. This time it really seemed as if the Postmaster General was out to get the cheap weeklies. And little wonder. The weeklies had grown progressively abusive in their criticism of Post Office procedures and inefficiencies.
Why was it, they had rhetorically asked the previous year, that a barrel of flour could be shipped from New York to Boston, Massachusetts, or Portland, Maine, for only 10¢ or 12½¢, while the letter postage to these cities cost 18¢? In 1841 the editor of the New World wondered when Postmaster General Granger would resign from the Tyler cabinet, and pointed out that mail service had grown worse in the past four months than during the previous ten years. 'Mr. Granger may be a very good intriguing politician, a first-rate abolitionist, and a great Minister of State, but he is a miserable manager of the Post. The deputies, whom he has appointed, are constantly making the most vexatious blunders; and it is high time that the newspaper press should expose them.'

Obviously there was no love lost between the weeklies and the Post Office. This in itself might have been sufficient provocation to bring about some form of Post Office retaliation. However, the New World detected another source of grievance: the Postmaster General wished to penalize publishers for employing private express companies rather than the United States mail.

Prior to 1825 the problem of private versus public conveyors of the mail had not loomed large. Both modes were allowed by law. Then by the nineteenth section of the Act of 1825 the Post Office was given a near monopoly. Any stagecoach, vehicle, or boat travelling on legally designated Post Roads or waterways was forbidden to carry letters, newspapers, and magazines. Only agents and contractors employed by the Post Office were permitted to do so. Two years later Congress tried to tighten the restriction by excluding private mail carriers on foot or on horseback. Yet private express companies multiplied and continued to compete with the United States Post Office. They did so by one of several ways. Though the more direct Post Roads were closed to them, they could use any other route from city to city. Furthermore, the law made no provision for railway conveyance, and this became increasingly important despite its relatively high cost. Finally, in some areas the Post Office subcontracted its business to private agents, which meant that under certain circumstances they could be given permission by the Postmaster General to carry private consignments of newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets over and above those items officially allocated to the Federal mail. The Post Office's consignment came first, but if there was still room, other things could be conveyed as well.

The problem of private expresses became Wickliffe's prime concern during the Tyler Administration. Especially after Britain reduced her rates
of postage in 1840, the American Post Office came under considerable fire from many quarters demanding it do likewise. Wickliffe was willing to contemplate a rate reduction if he could secure a monopoly to the Post Office. Thus it was that he began to marshal evidence against the express companies. In his annual report to Congress for 1843, he assigned two main reasons for a fall in postal revenues. He admitted that the poor trade conditions of the time might have had some influence, but by far the greater loss was ascribed to the competition from the expresses. He called for stricter enforcement of existing laws and a strengthening of the Post Office's rights by new legislation. He also referred to a letter which he sent out to subcontractors on 1 September 1843. In this he reminded them that their right to carry newspapers and magazines in bulk apart from the regular mail was contingent on formal approval by the Postmaster General. Many contractors had not obtained such permission or were operating under the misapprehension that cheap newspapers might go in bulk on Post Roads whereas more expensive papers and periodicals had to pay postal rates. He also asked the Attorney-General if an express company such as Adams & Co. of New York and Boston could be prosecuted. It was known to have illegally carried some mail amounting to $3.00. Needless to say, the amount was trivial but Wickliffe felt that a matter of principle was at issue. He seemed to be on firm ground, gaining support for his position from the Attorney-General.

Congress was slow in tightening the laws against express companies, and in the meantime relations worsened between the cheap reprint trade and the Post Office. Upon learning in May 1843 that their supplements could no longer travel at newspaper rates, the New World assumed a stance of defiance. Henceforth they would send everything they could by private express: 'we will not send even a letter by mail, if we can get it carried in any other way'. It was high time the Post Office was disbanded and private enterprise allowed to prevail.

The columns of the New World provide a commentary on the running battle with the Post Office. They urged the Postmaster General to emulate Britain's low postal rates, and condemned his forbidding local postmasters from serving as publishers' agents or using their franking privilege to forward subscriptions. In 1844 they protested against proposed legislation that would substantially increase the postage on pamphlets and magazines, and they viewed any legislative effort to limit the overall dimensions of newspapers as an overt attack upon the mammoths. There was also personal abuse. In their eyes the Postmaster General was: 'a stupid, fat
man, with no more "go-aheadness" in him, than a somniferous mud-turtle'.

The cheap periodicals had one very powerful weapon in their arsenal. Private express rates were generally cheaper than Post Office rates. The *New World* recommended one of the private carriers to the attention of the public. It disclosed that the American Mail Letter Co. was prepared to offer attractive rates to specified cities, implying that publishers might supply their customers with bulk mailings via private express. A few weeks later it noted: 'Soon a line of [private] mails will be established, extending from Bangor to New Orleans, and letters will be sent to those places for 5 or 10 cents'. At about the same time another reprint publisher, E. Littell, recalled how he 'had offers to carry [his journal] at one quarter the government price', admitting that 'this would not have been available for the scattered residences of very distant subscribers – but it would have taken away most of what is profitable to the Post Office'.

In the struggle between the Post Office and the mammoth press, Postmaster General Wickliffe had the satisfaction of witnessing the downfall of both Wilson and Winchester. Wilson sold *Brother Jonathan* to Winchester in early 1844, but later that year Winchester himself went bankrupt. When Congress finally passed the new Post Office bill a few months later, Wickliffe achieved some of his aims. Newspapers were to be limited in size to 1,900 square inches, a significant reduction from the Leviathans of recent memory. Trains as well as coaches and boats were now designated as official conveyors of the post, but they could only carry magazines and pamphlets in bulk when intended for retail outlets rather than individual subscribers.

The competition between private and public carriers was by no means over. Before the Act of 1845 the *New World* observed: 'The prosecutions of the Post Master General seem to have little or no effect, for the ablest judges in the land have decided against the Department.' Following the passage of the 1845 Act, the new Postmaster General, Cave Johnson, was not much more successful in curbing extra-governmental mail carriers. Private expresses were still depriving the Post Office of revenue, and it was very difficult to enforce the law against them. It was a pyrrhic victory for the reprinter, however, many of whom ceased to ply their trade during those frantic early years of the decade.

Why this decline or demise of the mammoths and their book-length supplements? The question has preoccupied many observers then and since. F. L. Mott, who has done more than anyone else to further our
knowledge of nineteenth-century periodicals, has two key explanations to offer. First, the mammoths were badly hurt when the Post Office imposed higher rates on the supplements in the spring of 1843, and second, the Act of 1845 lowered book rates thus allowing other publishers to compete more effectively with the cheap reprinters through the post. In the first instance there is no doubt that the change in postage hurt the reprinters, but as we have already seen they were not slow to react. By shifting as much of their mail-order business as possible to private expresses they may even have saved sufficient money to offset the higher official charges on country subscriptions. As for Mott's second point, it is difficult to know what to make of it. The Act of 1845, as with previous acts, forbade the sending of bound books through the United States mail, and since serious weight limitations were placed on parcels of printed matter, it is difficult to imagine publishers dispatching large quantities of unbound books. It is true that the Act of 1845 significantly reduced the rate on pamphlets, which in turn would apply to single copies of cheap reprints. Had Brother Jonathan or the New World continued their book-length extras, they could have availed themselves of these reductions. Other firms exploited these cheap rates with pamphlet-like reprints. Thus it would seem that reduced pamphlet rates fostered what remained of the cheap reprint trade rather than gave any new advantage to the more traditional book publishers. If book publishers were to win out in their struggle against the cheap weeklies, they would have to do so on their own ground of retail outlets, not through the post.

Competition was certainly an important ingredient in Wilson's and Winchester's decline. More threatening than the Harpers, however, may have been the appearance of numerous smaller firms or 'little sharks'. Individually none of them was a match for Brother Jonathan or the New World, but collectively they made deep inroads into the reprint market. Editions of twenty or twenty-five thousand were becoming rare; the correspondent for the Athenaeum estimated that the average had dropped to five thousand. Even if this figure is conservative, the mammoths could not long sustain a narrowing of their profit margins resulting from a host of imitators.

Under ideal trade conditions the mammoths might have been able to withstand such competition, but they were victims as well as exploiters of the economic depression. They were continually over-extended and under-capitalized. The shoe-string nature of their business is seen in Benjamin's apology to Longfellow for not being able to publish his poems.
THE DEPRESSION OF 1837-43

since I saw you in Cambridge, we [New World] have entered into so costly an arrangement for a foreign correspondent in England, on the Continent of Europe and in South America that the publisher [Winchester] fairly [?] declared his inability to pay the proper price [for the poems].

By the spring of 1844 Benjamin saw the writing on the wall and resigned as Editor of the New World.59

I think Winchester an unsafe man - I do not mean dishonest but rash and imprudent. Before I left the New World establishment, he had managed to get himself considerably into debt by his careless and venturesome way of transacting business.

So I managed to get out of the concern by absolutely giving away my interest, so as to obtain a full release from the creditors and ample security for money lent by my brother to the finance-ring; a mortgage on the whole establishment, which cost $40,000 and would sell at auction at $15,000 to secure $8,000. This mortgage expires in a couple of months and will be foreclosed, unless $4,000 is paid - which I am confident cannot be. Winchester has been greatly assisted by Letsfield [?] but that bubble has burst - and, unless something as lucky turns up, he must be wound up.

Ironically, when times began to improve in late 1843, the weeklies sustained a further setback. What economists call a shift in the income elasticity of demand took place: people began to find more employment, to feel they had more disposable income, and to prefer better looking books and magazines to the cheapest editions possible. In this respect, prosperity proved to be their final undoing. Like prehistoric mammals, the mammoths had become over-specialized and unable to adapt to new circumstances. Beginning as daily and weekly newspapers and then monthly periodicals, they gradually sloughed off the dailies and monthlies and reduced the value of the weeklies by depriving them of serialized stories. This inevitably put the emphasis on cheap book production. But book production, even in the form of cheap supplements through the post, was too complex an enterprise to develop and stabilize in a few hectic years. By falling into this trap, the mammoths unwittingly courted the competition of the major book publishers as well as the newspaper and magazine proprietors. Given more time and tranquillity, they might well have made a success of it, as Greeley's New York Tribune was to do. But these were volatile times. Traders and merchants of all sorts were in and out of business, bankruptcies abounded, and it is small wonder that the reprinters went under.
The commercial disruption of 1837-43 ultimately took its toll among those who most profited from it. The biographer of Park Benjamin states: ‘the greatness of his editorial career with the New World never returned; he was to have a hand in many editorial ventures, but only as an associate more or less recognized at the time, and most frequently as a hack writer and special contributor’. This fate was much less apparent in 1844, however, especially when Benjamin withdrew as editor of the New World. Towards the end of 1845 he arranged to edit a new weekly folio financed by some printers in Baltimore. This necessitated moving from his familiar New York, and in January 1846 the first issue of the Western Continent was published. It was patterned on the New World as it had been in its earlier and more successful days. The experiment was short-lived. Within six months Benjamin sold his interest in the venture and left Baltimore.

Another year passed with nothing very promising in the offing. Then in October 1847, in conjunction with a printer, Ross Wilkinson, Benjamin resuscitated the New World. It was presented in its early folio garb, trying desperately to recapture its former glory at a time when the nation’s economy was sluggish but not heavily depressed. Unfortunately it collapsed in the spring of 1848, this time for good. Benjamin never found anything to take its place.

Jonas Winchester fared no better. Six months after Benjamin quit as editor of the New World Winchester declared bankruptcy. His son and another partner took over, but by May 1845 Ebenezer Winchester was forced to sell the New World to Ward & Co. who merged it with their Saturday Emporium. Once the Winchesters sold their interest in the New World they had no further use for the extensive printing facilities at 30 Ann Street. They moved into smaller premises at 44 Ann Street and in time published a masonic periodical known as the Golden Rule and Family Companion. A few years later a contemporary observed that Jonas Winchester was still poor, and by the early 1850s both father and son had disappeared from New York City. From a modest beginning as a junior partner in Horace Greeley’s printing firm, Jonas Winchester rose to considerable heights in the early 1840s, only to subside into oblivion with equal dispatch.

The man who took over as editor of the New World from Benjamin in 1844 was Henry Champion Deming (1815–72). A graduate of Yale College and Harvard Law School, Deming came to New York to practise law. For a while he shared a residence with Park Benjamin, and it was probably the latter who suggested that he occupy his leisure moments
translating Eugène Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris* from French into English. This sort of sensational novel endeared itself to the readers of the cheap weeklies, and as noted earlier, the *New World* had made special arrangements in the summer of 1844 to secure advance sheets of Sue’s *Wandering Jew*. Deming presumably translated these sheets upon arrival in order to publish them simultaneously with the Paris edition. But Deming’s editorial career was cut short by Winchester’s bankruptcy, and he returned to the law. By 1847 he was an attorney in Hartford, Connecticut, and shortly thereafter entered the lower house of the Connecticut legislature. His brief encounter with cheap journalism only diverted his career, and unlike Benjamin and Winchester, he had a good alternative to fall back on.62

James Gregg Wilson, the proprietor of *Brother Jonathan*, seems to have continued in other printing and publishing ventures after disposing of the weekly to the *New World* in late 1843. He sold cheap publications through the post facilitated by the Act of 1845, and by 1848 claimed to be one of the leading mail-order firms in the United States. In the mid-1840s he also published special annual or semi-annual issues of *Brother Jonathan*. From premises at 15 Spruce Street, New York, he advertised teach-yourself foreign language books for 25¢; a reprint of an English work on sheep by William Youatt for 50¢; plus old-time favourites like G. C. Knowlson’s *Horse Doctor* and *Cow Doctor*. Even more reminiscent of the past was Henry William Herbert’s *The Maiden’s Rescue* for 12½¢ and Lucy Neal, *a Romance of Negro Life* for 12½¢ or ten copies for a dollar. All these cheap editions could be sent to any part of the United States for as little as 2 to 5¢ postage.

In 1848 Wilson resumed regular publication of *Brother Jonathan* at about the same time that Park Benjamin revived the *New World*. Unlike its erstwhile competitor, *Brother Jonathan* did not appear weekly but only monthly. Wilson also published another cheap monthly, the *Dispatch*, whose circulation of 70,000 exceeded *Brother Jonathan’s* by 40,000. Size was still at a premium, and the *Dispatch* was reputed to be the largest paper appearing regularly in America. *Brother Jonathan* continued to put out special issues at Christmas and 4 July. In its number celebrating Independence Day 1848, it featured the largest wood engraving ever published: 22 by 44 inches; seven square feet depicting the storming of the castle of Chapultepec! There was even some of the old fervour for the blessings of cheapness: ‘The business of forwarding books, prints, etc. by mail, commenced by us many years ago, has been exerting a great and salutary influence, in the spread of popular intelligence – the only safeguard of the Republic.’63 Wilson relinquished his business to his partner,
Benjamin H. Day, in 1851 and what became of him thereafter is uncertain but it seems that he developed an interest in the invention of a knitting machine about 1857–8 and purchased a partnership in the enterprise, spending the Civil War years trying to defend his patent. He apparently did not return to the book trade.64

Although it was not realized at the time, Benjamin H. Day was probably the financial mainstay of *Brother Jonathan* and Wilson & Co. as early as 1841. In that year Park Benjamin gloated in the columns of the *New World* how poor struggling *Jonathan* was secretly up for sale, and how he had been obliquely approached to buy it. At this time Benjamin would not deign to consider such a marriage of convenience when the *New World*’s fortunes were riding so high. Sometime during 1841 Day stepped in with enough financial aid to rescue *Brother Jonathan* and later to sustain Wilson & Co.’s other activities.

Day had made his reputation as a printer and editor in the 1830s by inaugurating the *Sun*, the first successful penny daily newspaper in America. When the depression of 1837 struck, he sold out and took his losses rather than hold on tenaciously like Greeley. He was later to regret parting with such a potentially profitable newspaper, but in so doing he kept his assets liquid for a few years and eventually invested them in Wilson’s printing and publishing enterprise. When Wilson finally sold out in the early 1850s Day assumed the firm entirely in his own name. He continued publishing the *Jonathan* and, if anything, enlarged the mail-order business and the distribution of cheap publications. Ironically, *Brother Jonathan* had the satisfaction of seeing the revived *New World* of 1848 fall by the wayside while it kept going for another decade.65

The editing of *Brother Jonathan* was primarily in the hands of Horatio Hastings Weld (1811–88). Before joining *Brother Jonathan* he had acquired editorial experience with several Massachusetts newspapers as well as having been employed as a printer. It may be recalled that Benjamin and Griswold were the first editors of the *Jonathan* and the *Tattler*, remaining only briefly in this capacity. After their departure Weld took over the editorial duties and remained with the enterprise until sometime in 1843. Upon his departure he seems to have remained in newspaper editing for several more years, and then entered the ministry of the Protestant Episcopal Church, where he combined the life of a parish priest with that of author and editor of religious works. Like Deming of the *New World* Weld’s experience with the cheap weeklies had been only an interlude in his life.
Attached to *Brother Jonathan* as a regular contributor from May 1840 to September 1841 was Nathaniel Parker Willis. Nominally one of its editors, Willis was still at the height of his popularity and one of the best paid journalists of the day. As he became more closely associated with *Brother Jonathan* he diverted more and more of his energies to editing rather than to writing. He helped revive the *New York Mirror* in 1842 and a few years later took on the editorship of the *Family Journal* which he retained till his death. Having originally cast his fortunes with the cheap press, Willis was one of the few who survived the many upheavals and carried on more or less in the tradition.  

By the late 1840s and early 1850s there was scarcely a trace of the cheap weeklies and their supplements. With the exception of B. H. Day and *Brother Jonathan*, all else from that era of rampant price-cutting had receded into obscurity. Even the men who exploited the times most successfully seemed to have disappeared. Yet a closer examination reveals the profound impact which the depression of 1837-43 had upon the American book trade. There is a tendency among some literary historians to ignore these years of trade upheaval and to concentrate almost exclusively on the broad themes of American intellectual development such as romanticism, transcendentalism and the frontier. Yet the lives of virtually every American author and publisher were deeply touched by the economic dislocations of this depression and the drastic decline in book prices.  

On the other hand, there is the opposite tendency to equate American literary development with the cheap literature which characterized these years of economic panic. Contemporary British observers were most prone to assume that American book production before, during and after 1837-43 was epitomized by *Brother Jonathan* and the *New World*. Charles Dickens was particularly susceptible to this fallacy. His trip to America in 1842 coincided with the deepest years of distress and he tended to generalize thereafter on the basis of his limited exposure. Typical of his attitude for some years to come was a circular letter which he sent to various British periodicals shortly after his return. He urged his fellow writers not to sell advance sheets of their forthcoming works to American editors and publishers who:

> can gain a very comfortable living out of the brains of other men, while they would find it very difficult to earn bread by the exercise of their own. . . . They are, for the most part, men of very low attainment and of more than indifferent reputation; and I have frequently seen them, in the same sheet in which they
boast of the rapid sale of many thousand copies of an English reprint, coarsely and insolently attacking the author of that very book, and heaping scurrility and slander upon his head.

He admitted that some American publishers were respectable but the general tone was set by the opportunists. Brother Jonathan's reply was caustic.

If Mr. Dickens prefers dollars and cents to literary fame — selfish, sordid gratification to a position of commanding respect — and a flash waistcoat to a laurel wreath, it is his own misfortune — the result of traits inseparable from his character... Mr. D. has not strength of character and mind enough to prove the European axiom that a parvenu must betray himself by his vulgarity.

And the New World concluded that Dickens was 'either a fool or a knave'; 'insolent and malignant'; a 'low-bred vulgar man'.

By the early 1850s the American book trade was a very different scene from what Dickens and others in Britain thought. It had become far more stable; prices of most new books had risen; cut-throat competition had given way to more gentlemanly agreements within the trade; and various amicable arrangements had been made with British authors and publishers. This new equilibrium would eventually be shattered by another major depression, but in the meantime the book trade enjoyed its image of prosperity and respectability.