The Condition of Authorship in 1820

The profession of authorship in the United States began in the 1820's when Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper discovered that they could turn out regularly books which readers were willing to buy regularly. In England authorship had become a profession earlier, sometime between 1805 and 1820, when a few astute and daring publishers of London and Edinburgh had found that the poetry and fiction of Byron, Scott, and some of their contemporaries constituted valuable commercial property.

In 1805 Longman's of London had paid Scott £600 for the second edition of The Lay of the Last Minstrel; and three years later Constable of Edinburgh had startled the whole literary world by offering him £1,050 for Marmion before it was finished. When Byron's first two cantos of Childe Harold had sold 4,500 copies in six months, John Murray of London had offered him for new works prices that embarrassed him—£1,000 for the Giaour and Abydos, over £2,000 for Childe Harold III, and £1,575 for Don Juan I and II. Poetry had become a national passion with readers, and an El Dorado for poets (John Murray said that in 1817 he rejected 700 poems). By 1830 this commercial boom in poetry had collapsed, never to be equalled again, but meanwhile a bigger and more permanent one had begun in fiction. In Waverley, published in 1814, Scott had evolved a formula for successful fiction which had earned him an average of £10,000 for the next five years (in modern values totaling, possibly, a quarter of a million dollars).
These handsome returns depended, of course, on handsome retail prices. The first regular trade editions of Scott's novels (always issued in three volumes) sold for thirty shillings. Applying the standard formula for finding the modern monetary equivalent, i.e., multiplying thirty shillings by four, one discovers that in our terms, buyers paid thirty dollars a copy for *Rob Roy*; so if the author's share of profits was one-sixth the retail price of the book (as Scott wrote Irving it was in 1819) Scott received five dollars a copy, or $50,000 for the first edition of 10,000 copies, which sold out in three weeks!

Quite suddenly, three factors of literary production coincided to put the occupation of writing on a more profitable basis: (1) authors were writing so divertingly on subjects of broad interest that they broke down the barriers between reader groups and appealed to almost everyone who was literate; (2) readers were able to pay well for books, either by purchase or through circulating libraries; (3) publishers had the vision, the astuteness, and the business experience to bring readers and authors together in a closer relationship. But contingent were two additional factors on which the profession of writing now rests: regularity of production—the ability of a Byron and a Scott to turn out books regularly, thus establishing a taste and a demand for their products—and the respect in which authorship from Byron's time on has been held. Byron's social position helped him; but also it was inevitable that an increasingly pecuniary society should cease to be condescending to men who could grow wealthy by writing poetry and stories. No longer "poor devil" authors, far from being beholden to patrons as in previous ages, those who had the knack of writing were now wooed by publishers and readers. The fact that reader, publisher, and author all profited in England, as we shall see, helped to bring about professionalism in America.

News of the popularity of the new literature reached America quickly. Geared to British reading tastes, the American public
demanded the best-sellers as fast as they became available. Our publishers—or rather, printers—paid no royalties to British authors, of course; but to get the advantage of the first sale of a new canto of *Don Juan* or a Waverley novel, they had to hire agents in Britain to secure early copies, arrange for the fastest possible transportation on the uncertain sailing vessels of that day, meet the vessel at an American port, set a dozen compositors to working day and night, hire coaches to carry editions to nearby towns, and get the work, fresher than the dull morning newspapers of that time, into the bookstores. If, as Mathew Carey of Philadelphia said, the edition had only the advantage of three or four days' priority over the next and perhaps cheaper one by a rival firm, it sold out quickly at seventy-five cents a volume for poetry, and two dollars for a two-volume novel.

On the surface, this phenomenon looked disastrous to American authorship. Who among our writers could get royalties for books when the work of Southey, Holcroft, Campbell, Crabbe, to say nothing of Byron, Scott, and the great British quarterly and monthly magazines, could be bought for the cost of manufacture and distribution? But the question is double-edged. Before Byron and Scott there were no professional American authors who could suffer from the competition; indeed, there were no professional authors until the success of the British writers proved that there was a kind of literature that everybody wanted to read. As soon as that became evident, we began to turn out writers whose works were so saleable that they were promptly appropriated by publishers in England and went into competition with literature there. If the availability of Scott and Dickens in cheap American editions impoverished Poe and Hawthorne, what did the sale of cheap copies of Longfellow do to Tennyson and Browning?

Lack of international copyright, then, worked both ways. Certainly American authors suffered more injury than British authors, but there were two reasons for this. One was that our authors were unable to produce as many works which appealed
to an international middle-class audience; another was the immature condition of our publishing trade. Our authors suffered less from international competition than from competition among our own publishers. But of this, more later. To account for our own literary boom of the 1820's, and to explain why it was much smaller than the British boom of the first two decades, we must look at the American book trade as it functioned in 1820.

On December 19, 1819, Mathew Carey and Son of Philadelphia—publishers, booksellers, and jobbers for half the southern states—wrote to Ebenezer Irving, brother of Washington Irving, who was then writing *The Sketch Book* in England, that they were willing to buy 400 copies of the fifth number of that work, the earlier numbers having taken the country by storm. "Send 150 by Swiftsure State the remainder by Mercantile Line." Number 5 was a slim pamphlet which retailed for 75 cents. Orders for this first American classic had been coming into Carey from bookstores throughout the South and the Middle States, but he had been unwilling to fill them. A rival, Moses Thomas, had had a monopoly on all sales of the book in the Philadelphia area, and Carey had had to pay him 62½ cents (a discount of 1/6) for a book which he himself had to sell for 60 cents to country book-sellers. But because Thomas was close to insolvency, Carey had managed to break his monopoly by appealing to C. S. Van Winkle, the New York printer of the work, who interceded with Henry Brevoort and Ebenezer, Irving's managers. Carey now got the full 25 per cent discount, four-fifths of which he gave up on those copies which he sold to his retailers in the hinterland. It was a small profit for a wholesaler; but he had to supply the demand, for many of his booksellers bought their whole stock of all books from him.
Reconstructing the account from such correspondence as survives, one finds that the score on *Sketch Book No. V* was somewhat as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>26 1/4 cents</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discount</td>
<td>18 3/4 cents</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Retailer 20%, Wholesaler 5%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author’s Profit</td>
<td>30 cents</td>
<td>40%</td>
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These figures tell a story about American literature: why our popular authors flourished in the 1820’s, and why the profession as a whole slid steadily downhill for over fifteen years in the 1830’s and 1840’s.

The bright side first. The set of seven pamphlets which constituted *The Sketch Book* cost the buyer $5.37½—an enormous price in those days. But an estimated 5,000 American readers were willing to pay that price (not without some protest) during the first two years of sale—at a time when Scott’s novels could be bought for $2.00. Obviously, the American people were willing to pay well for American books that they liked. Irving’s profit for this period of two years must have been near $10,000; Cooper’s rate and amount of profit a year or two later was similar. For these two, at least, and for some others in lesser degree, the golden age continued through the twenties and early thirties.

But the facts displayed show also that this prosperity contained the seeds of its own destruction. Irving was his own publisher, invested and risked his own money, had all the work of management (by proxy), which a skilled publisher could have handled better. Carey was probably the only one in the country at that date who could be trusted; but printers and proofs had to be watched carefully; Irving’s agents were in New York, and they could not trust the proof to the mails of those days.
Thomas' near-insolvency was characteristic of the trade. He was one of our first genuine publishers, that is, he was not a printer, but a man who sold and "promoted" books. But like most of his colleagues he worked on a shoestring, financially. It was one of the discouraging facts about American authorship that few of our writers before 1850 escaped loss through the bankruptcy of a publisher.

Worst of all were the conditions of marketing, distribution, and discount. Carey's country booksellers could not order The Sketch Book direct from the publisher because of a regional monopoly system which gave one firm in each major city exclusive rights for an important book for a whole area. This meant a split discount. Now it was becoming a custom at this date to reduce the regular discount of one-third (which had become standard about 1800) on "non-copyright" books, to 25 per cent on native works on which the author received "copyright" or royalty. Thus, the author's returns were taken out of the publisher's and retailer's profits. This in turn meant that many booksellers were unwilling to "push" native works on which they made a smaller than normal profit. This fact bears upon the sale and circulation of almost all American works of the 1820's. Irving and Cooper found that they had to increase their discounts, and when the able Carey took over their business, he found that he had to reduce his own profits drastically to keep his writers in competition with British authors. The problem of the publisher of American literature was, then, as difficult as that of the American author. When Richardson and Lord of Boston went into partnership in 1820, their articles of agreement stated their intention of engaging in "the art, trade, and mystery of bookselling." It was all of that, as the following facts will show.

3. Transportation: Localized Publishing

Publishing in 1820, to a much greater extent than now, was devoted chiefly to "useful" and educational works, but there
was plenty of luxury money for the purchase of "merely literary" books, as Irving called his own. The proof is that by 1820 a half-million volumes of Scott had been reprinted and sold in America. The great problem was to get the works of our authors to the people who had the money. The fact that transportation was by poor roads and unreliable rivers made the delivery of books in quantity difficult, but fewer books had to be transported long distances then than now. Partly because of poor transportation and partly because of the primitive state of business, printing and publishing were localized, though the process of concentration was going on rapidly, as this table will show:

**American Fiction, Plays, and Poems Published in Book Form in the United States**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1801–10</th>
<th>1811–20</th>
<th>1821–30*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other places</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximate per cent of total</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Fiction and plays only.

The proportion of non-American and non-literary works published locally was probably even larger. The small printer of Harrisburg or Poughkeepsie, for example, who could not afford to pay a writer anything, found enough local demand for a British best-seller like *Charlotte Temple* that he turned out over half the American editions of that work; and a teacher like Longfellow at Bowdoin was likely to make up his own textbooks and have them printed at a nearby town like Portland, Maine.

Transportation, therefore, was not so great a problem as it seems on casual inspection. Nevertheless, some publishers in the few large cities tried to reach the country market. The Atlantic coast region was, of course, accessible by sea. Carey’s records
show that his books and stereotype plates reached New York, Boston, Baltimore, Hartford, and Albany by sloop and schooner. But it was so difficult for him and other coastal publishers to exploit inland regions that, until the West was opened up by canal and railroad, the printers and publishers of upper New York state and the Ohio Valley had a decade or two of prosperity. The Phinneys of Cooperstown—publishers, booksellers, and printers—had reached out to the farms with book wagons; and when the Canal opened, they fitted up a book boat with a large stock and kept open even in winter by tying up at a large Erie town. In the West, the store-boats of Cincinnati merchants brought books to remote villages on the tributaries of the Ohio, so that even now rare-book hunters find treasures by following the course these vessels took.

This was all very well for six or eight months of the year, but during the winter most of the waterways froze up, and for part of the summer the rivers were too shallow for navigation. Thus, to the literary man the temperature of the inland waterways was a matter of some importance. Cooper hurried his London publishers so that the sheets of his novel *The Bravo* would get to Carey during the summer of 1831. But the American edition was delayed until November 29, and Carey wrote him the following January, "*The Bravo* has been much liked, but the unfortunate close of our navigation immediately after it was published has prevented it from reaching over half the interior towns and has affected its sale." In 1827 the *Methodist Magazine* increased the size of its first ten numbers and omitted the last two so that the volume could be bound up in October and dispatched to subscribers before the rivers closed. As late as 1843, the Harpers' literary adviser instructed them to bring out Theodore Fay's *Hoboken* "so soon as navigation opens." This explains partly why most first editions, before the era of railroad networks, were brought out between March and October. It also shows that the western reader began to be a cultural influence as soon as he became accessible to eastern publishers.
The organization of the retail book trade in 1820 was not very different from what it had been in the eighteenth century. Of course their number had improved. Things had improved considerably since Dr. William Bentley of Salem recorded in his diary in 1792 that there was not "a proper bookstore this side of New York." What he meant was that there were few shops which specialized in books and whose proprietors knew their stock. In the smaller towns general stores stocked some books along with candles and dried fish; and almost all newspaper offices sold books, as did some postmasters, apothecaries, and milliners. But "proper" bookstores were not long in coming. By 1806 Salem had half a dozen, and by 1820 its firm of Cushing and Appleton was on the list of every large firm on the East coast. By 1820 there were twice as many bookstores in Boston as there had been in 1800; and its lending libraries, which had been static in number for over twenty years, doubled and tripled between 1819 and 1825. These years, it will be noted, were the heyday of Irving and Cooper.

If Salem’s bookstores were representative of those in the East, Cincinnati’s shops were in the vanguard in the West. By 1810 books were available in the newspaper offices and drug stores of the river town, and by 1812 it had its own "proper" bookshop. Culturally, the town must have grown up quickly, for some seventeen years later a friend wrote J. P. Kennedy that on the day of publication fifty copies of his Rob of the Bowl had been sold by one bookseller. Farther north the retail trade was flourishing by the 1820’s. One book and stationery jobber, James D. Bemis, set up a string of fifteen stores along the waterways from Canandaigua to Detroit.

The rich South was the despair of the book trade. There was money there for the luxury trade, and it was a happy hunting ground for peddlers of Carey’s expensive Bibles and atlases, and
for richly bound special editions. But as a staple-crop region, it was hit hard by all depressions, which meant bankrupt booksellers and bad debts. Moreover, its retailers were sluggish; customers might besiege them for a new book, but it required more energy than they had to reorder promptly. "Your booksellers," wrote Carey to Kennedy in 1833, "are the most inert people on earth. They complain that business is bad and take good care that it shall not be otherwise, for they make no sort of exertion."

Nevertheless, for the first third of the century these "infernally lazy" bookmen were the most important resource of the Philadelphia publishers. By 1814 the firms of Carey, Conrad, and Bradford and Inskeep had set up branch offices in Baltimore, Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, and Charleston. In 1827 Carey's balance against its Charleston store was $17,756; and in the same year a canvasser for a Boston firm was being paid $137.50 a month to get subscribers to Jared Sparks's edition of the works of Washington in the lower and middle South.

The man who first recognized the coastal South as rich book territory was Parson Weems of Dumfries, Virginia. Starting as a peddler of Carey's stock in 1794, Weems soon yearned for a middleman's cut on sales to new outlets which he saw everywhere in his territory. By 1796 he was urging Carey to send books to stores that had never sold them before. His plan was for Carey to make up trunks of assorted "school books, little histories, voyages, travels, fine novels," to the value of $150–200 each, and to distribute these in every large neighborhood throughout Maryland and Virginia—a 25 per cent discount to be split between Weems and the stores. The catch, of course, was credit—the perennial problem of the South and of booksellers—and Carey cautiously insisted on exact and specific credit arrangements with these retailers. Such caution was necessary and natural, but Weems's vision paid off for the firm. Though Weems still felt in
1819 that Carey had failed to exploit fully "a Country of such boundless extent and rapidly growing population where the passion for Reading is rising with a flood beyond all former notice of Man," Carey could truthfully argue, in 1822 when he was bargaining for the southern agency of Cooper's *Pioneers*, that he supplied "many places [in the South] to which not a single copy will go unless through us." The popularity of Cooper and Irving in the South must be credited in part to the Parson and his employer.

On the whole, however, peddlers and subscription-book canvassers like Weems had little to do with new literary works, their specialty being "complete works" of Franklin, Washington, and other notables, and useful works in general. By the 1840's the system had fallen into disrepute. The depression of 1837-41 was particularly hard on the South and West, which was the best canvassing territory, and much money was lost to publishers through bad currency, revoked subscriptions, and absconding agents. Lea and Blanchard wrote J. P. Kennedy in 1848 that they had long since given up the system which they had done so much to establish over fifty years earlier, and remarked scornfully that it now required an "organized band of Yankees."

5. The Publishing Economy

In 1820 the relation between the retailer and the printers, publishers, and jobbers was extremely complex. Almost all publishers were retailers; many printers were also publishers and sometimes also retailers; all jobbers were retailers; no jobber could deal profitably in the books of all publishers; and sometimes the bookseller who served as jobber in his territory for a firm in another state advertised the books of that firm for him. Of advertising and "promotion"—one of the chief functions of the modern publisher—there was very little. In 1820 publicity
was a primitive gesture rather than an art. In fact, the whole structure of the book trade was primitive. Perhaps the major cause of the disparity between the fortunes of British and American authors at the time was the contrasting maturity of the British system. The British kept competition under control through "courtesy of the trade" and other more coercive devices; kept retail prices high through collusion, even to the extent of destroying "remainders" rather than dumping them at low prices; had a closely predictable market for every type of book; had good publicity methods (some book publishers owned critical journals); and in general enjoyed all the advantages of a geographically small and homogeneous market.

In America, by contrast, no publisher could reach directly all markets in the country; few firms had sufficient capital to take the whole risk on their titles; and money and credit were so undeveloped that the mere process of paying and getting paid was difficult. The result was a system of distribution so complicated that the publishers were almost as confused as the historian who tries to read their surviving records and correspondence.

The basis of the system was a loose intercity structure of tie-ups between particular booksellers. A large publisher had agreements with one or more firms in every other large city. These firms were called "correspondents" and acted as bankers, post offices, retailers, co-publishers, and sometimes jobbers for their principals. The correspondent was a co-publisher when he co-operated in the issue of a book under the multiple imprint system, whereby a firm split the risk on a book which it had contracted to publish. Suppose, as in the case of *Sketch Book No. I*, a first edition of 2,000 copies was published simultaneously in four cities—New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore. The printer and quasi-publisher, C. S. Van Winkle of New York, arranged with his correspondents in the other three cities to take, say, 500 copies each, at a 25 per cent discount, the names of all four firms appearing on the cover as a multiple imprint.
Each of the correspondents took charge of publicity for the work in his region. Probably no returns of unsold copies were allowed: the correspondents shared the risk. But their risk was mitigated by their monopoly: no copy could be bought in New England, for example, except from the Boston correspondent, who split his discount with retailers who bought from him.

If the work was a book rather than a pamphlet, the publisher usually sent sheets (or folded gatherings) to his correspondents, who had them bound up locally. This explains why so many first editions of the time survive in a number of different bindings. Somewhat later, it happened occasionally that a publisher had one or more extra sets of stereotype plates cast for him. He would sell a set of these to a bookseller, say, in Cincinnati, who would set up a new title page bearing his own imprint and that of the original publisher. This, again, was a way of dividing risk, for extra sets of plates, inexpensively cast from the same forms as the first set, were sold at a considerable profit, or were paid for in the shape of a charge for each copy printed therefrom.

The multiple imprint system was probably at its peak in 1820; certainly, so far as literary works were concerned, it was on the downward path from then on. By 1850 most publishers had enough capital to manufacture their books at their own risk; and distribution had so improved with the spread of railroads that many booksellers in the interior did their buying direct from publishers.

Necessary in its time, the multiple imprint system was doomed. Its vices were regional monopoly and an unprofitable division of discounts. A potential purchaser in Boston might know, through advertisements, that *The Sketch Book* was available in the correspondent's shop; but if he lived on the other side of the town, he might not bother to make the trip. The correspondent was willing to supply, and to split his discount with, a bookseller in Salem; but in Boston he was likely to prefer to monopolize the retail sale and keep the whole discount himself—if he was sure his
whole stock would sell. This was nice for the correspondent, but poor for the purchaser—and for the author.

The same objections applied to the "exchange" system. Periodically, the publisher printed a list of his publications, sent it to his correspondents in other cities, and received their lists in return. Each ordered from the other as many books as he could use. No cash exchanged hands until the end of the year, when the books were balanced and the debtor paid the creditor. In 1822 Carey's correspondent in New York was Wiley and Halstead; in Boston, Wells and Lilly. Apparently (the facts are not entirely clear), in Philadelphia some of Wiley's titles could be bought only at Carey's; and in New York, some of Carey's only at Wiley's. However, the larger publishers sold some books—especially the less popular or the more doubtful ones—to non-correspondents as well. These were either purchased outright on credit or taken "on sale" or "commission," the retailer returning unsold copies at the end of a stated period. About the latter there was constant bickering because sometimes, for example, a Boston book, sent to Louisville on commission, was returned at the end of the year, in shopworn condition, and when the popularity of the work had passed.

For a period in the twenties New York and Philadelphia publishers competed through their correspondents for the first sales of new books in the smaller towns of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Carey complained bitterly about a clever co-operative move among New York booksellers to corner the small-town market for themselves. Apparently, when one of the New York firms published a new and popular British novel, it divided up the whole edition among half a dozen of the booksellers of the city. All these firms then supplied their correspondents in Philadelphia and smaller Pennsylvania towns before they sold in quantity to a large Philadelphia jobber like Carey. When Carey tried to buy a large quantity at a big discount, he was forced to take small lots from six New York firms at small
discounts. "It is the case with almost every book published in New York for a considerable time," he wrote Wiley and Halstead in 1820. The result was that he was squeezed from two directions: he could not get a discount large enough to make jobbing profitable, and he found towns supplied before he could get to them.

Such schemes were profitable for the New Yorkers, but they were not good for the trade—or for authors. Even the allotment of territories to specific booksellers operated unfairly. Ebenezer Irving gave the Charleston rights to The Sketch Book to Mills; when Carey sent Irving an order to ship a number of copies direct to his own correspondent in Charleston, he was refused. Thus Carey, a legitimate jobber with correspondents who depended on him, was unable to supply them with a popular work.

Obviously the techniques of book distribution were inadequate; and certainly publishing did not mix well with jobbing and retailing. The most prosperous, stable, and long-lived publishing houses avoided the confusion. Carey gave up his retail business in 1830, and probably his jobbing for other publishers at the same time. One reason why his rich and powerful neighbor to the north, the house of Harper, became the oldest general publisher in America was that it restricted itself to printing and publishing from its founding in 1817.

But conditions, such as they were, had to be faced, and no one did more to improve them than Mathew Carey. Earlier than anyone else he saw the need for book-trade organization and co-operation. In 1801 he set up the American Company of Booksellers, whose purpose was to regulate the book trade. Following the example of the literary fairs of Leipzig, his company of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston booksellers held a literary fair in New York in 1804 and offered prizes for fine inks, paper, and binding. For some reason, the organization disintegrated in 1806; but meanwhile in 1802, the New York firms had formed an Association of Booksellers to encourage the publication of American
editions of texts and correct editions of the classics. More practically, the Philadelphia booksellers met in 1803 to establish a standard of twelve months' credit and a discount of one-third. On the other hand, there were no good book-trade journals or catalogues until the 1850's.

The early attempts at co-operation probably led, in the 1820's, to the establishment of an important but ill-starred institution for the wholesale distribution of books. This was the trade sale—a meeting of publishers and retailers at which publications were auctioned off in wholesale lots. From their beginning—presumably in 1824—these sales were a cause of bickering and quarreling. Theoretically they were an opportunity to bring publisher and retailer together without benefit of a middleman; and they were in fact useful in promoting contacts between publisher and retailer in the days before the traveling publisher's representative. Actually, however, they very soon turned into occasions for working off sluggish books at cut prices. To authors working with their publishers on the basis of half-profits, the sales were a nuisance. Rarely did books bring as much at auction as they did on regular sale, and writers whose books were thus sold could well suspect that their publishers were trying to unload because of lack of confidence.

Discounts were at the core of the American writer's problem. In 1820, in both England and America, the average discount to the trade was one-third, though the range was from 25 per cent to 40 per cent—even 50 per cent depending on quantity. These rates, however, applied only to books on which little or no royalty was paid. In the twenties works for which American writers were paid rarely discounted for more than 25 per cent, many for less. In 1821–22, 25 per cent was the regular discount for Irving's *The Sketch Book*, Cooper's *The Spy*, Dana's *Idle Man*, and Halleck's *Fanny*. Two documents from the beginning and end of the twenties show what this situation meant in the competition. On May 5, 1820, Moses Thomas wrote Carey, "I
will take 50 [Scott’s] Monastery at 40pc. and pay for them in Salmagundi [Paulding’s second series] at 25pc. The terms on which I get the Sketch Bk. are such that I cannot include that.” (On the latter he offered only 1/6.) In 1829 Carey printed a list of his prices to the trade: Scott’s, Disraeli’s, and Moore’s works were discounted at from 50 per cent to 66 2/3 per cent—Cooper’s oldest works at 50 per cent, a later one at 40 per cent, and two new ones at 25 per cent. In Boston the situation was even worse. A 20 per cent discount on American works was common, and in the early forties Emerson decreed discounts as small as 10 per cent on some of his books. It is small wonder that the reputation of many New England writers before 1850 was local: booksellers outside the area could not make a reasonable profit on their books.

Publishers’ records of the 1820’s are so scarce that it is impossible to make an accurate estimate of manufacturing costs, but probably they were somewhat higher than in England, where, according to Scott, manufacture was one-third of retail price. The cost of Irving’s Columbus (1828) was 36 per cent, and Ticknor’s costs in the 1830’s averaged about the same. There were reasons for higher costs in America. Printers’ wages were probably higher; the better grades of paper had to be imported from England and a tariff paid on them; much printing machinery had to be imported, as well as cloth for binding. A persistent shortage of type ran up costs because, since frequently a whole book could not stand in type at once, books had to be entirely reset for successive editions. As late as 1832 H. C. Carey wrote J. P. Kennedy that

to send you one form [of proofs of Swallow Barn] per day, it is necessary that we should always have six forms in type, and that quantity is about twice as much as an ordinary fount of type will set up. The printers have, most stupidly, so great a variety of [styles] in the type now used that although one of them may have two thousand weight of one size in the office, it will be of three or four different founts, differing from each other so much that they
cannot be used together. Such is exactly the case with the printer of this work.

Obviously printers had not yet started to think in terms of large production and low cost.

This problem was mitigated somewhat by the use of stereotypes. By the early 1820s stereotyping was a branch of the printing industry in Philadelphia, where some Bibles, schoolbooks, and standard works were being printed from plates. Paulding's *Diverting History of John Bull and Brother Jonathan* (1815) was probably the first American "literary" work to be stereotyped, as Cooper, in 1826, was the first "literary" author whose collected works achieved that honor.

In the late twenties case binding (mass production of cloth and board cases as a separate process) was found to be much cheaper than bindings prepared individually for each volume. The general use of power presses in the thirties still further reduced costs: in 1816 it took three men one day to print 4,000 sheets; forty years later three men, plus machines, turned out 56,000 sheets. Kennedy's first novel, in 1831, cost 63½ cents to print; his third, in 1838, cost 44½ cents. But by this date such savings were being passed on to the reader rather than to the author and publisher.

Too small a portion of the cost of publication was advertising, and almost certainly our American authorship suffered for lack of proper publicity. A retailer might announce in the papers that such-and-such books were available at his store, but there was no advertising per se by publishers. The core of the promotion system was the "review" copy, which constituted a large proportion of advertising expense. An editor received a free copy of a new book, and turned out a "notice" of it. If the author or publisher had a friend on the staff of the paper, a more extended notice, called "a puff," was likely to appear as filler. How this system developed into a racket in the thirties and
forties we shall see later on, but in the twenties the “gentleman” author was squeamish even about review copies. Irving refused to allow his English publisher to send copies of *The Sketch Book* to editors because he did not want to seem to be currying favor. Like other authors, he preferred to have his influential friends work quietly behind the lines in newspaper offices.

There were minor types of advertising. Publishers printed up show cards or posters to be displayed in store windows, just as circuses and movies advertise themselves in laundry windows today. But the publisher’s chief concern was publicizing his list to retailers. By the 1830’s the larger firms like Harper and Carey were printing circulars concerning their new works which they dispatched to every retailer they could reach. By the 1840’s these must have evolved into handbills advertising individual books, which were distributed by retailers, for Harpers wrote Prescott in 1847 that the number of circulars on his *Conquest of Peru* was 100,000.

But in the early twenties the modern concept of “promotion” was not yet born. Parson Weems had a glimmering of it, but his publishers’ attitude toward it was probably characteristic of the time. They, Carey and Lea, who were probably more progressive than most firms, wrote John Neal in 1821 that “We have so many books to manage that unless a work will sell itself we can do little about it.”

In the years when Irving and Cooper established the American literary profession, then, the waters of American publishing were not only calm but sluggish. The popularity of *The Sketch Book* and *The Spy* made the more alert firms lift their heads and sniff the wind for commercially desirable literary works. Venturesome small fry like Van Winkle and Wiley and Halstead in New York were literary-minded and popular with authors, but they lacked capital and techniques—and they were slovenly. Year after year they went out of business, or formed new combinations and died again—unable to keep up with the bewildering changes in the
American economy. In 1815, when Bradford and Inskeep, the Philadelphia publishers of Irving's *History of New York*, went bankrupt, dragging Moses Thomas down with them, the author wrote that Thomas was

not to be censured in the affair otherwise than for having conducted his business in the same diffuse, sprawling manner in which all our principal booksellers dash forward into difficulty. These failures I am afraid will sensibly affect the interests of literature and deter all those from the exercise of the pen who would take it up as a means of profit.

Professional authorship, obviously, was ready to begin, but the publishing world was not: the classics that Cooper and Irving produced proved more enduring than the business structure which brought them into the world as printed books.

It is no wonder that in the early twenties our successful authors used publishers only as agents and directed the business of manufacture and distribution themselves. Until the 1850's those of our writers who had the capital took over many of the functions of the publisher in order to protect their profits. This was a load that the contemporary British author did not have to bear.