

Publishing as Criticism

Michael Black, *Learning to be a Publisher: Cambridge University Press 1951–1987 Personal Reminiscences* 978 1 107 40180 8 paperback 250 pp.

Successful publishers (so this is not about ourselves) are important in the common pursuit of true judgement. Publishing is in fact a form of criticism. Think of the role of Edward Garnett in getting D. H. Lawrence known! Even agents have a role. Without Pinker it is doubtful whether Conrad could have done his work. On the other hand a really stupid publishing establishment inhibits criticism and with it, literature: think of the relation of the Man Booker Prize to the health of the contemporary English novel!

Michael Black graduated in English at Cambridge (at Jesus, not Downing) when Leavis was at his zenith, and “It became my settled conviction that he was the greatest critic in the language and the greatest living Englishman.” (p. 177) A publisher with this judgement of the importance of criticism, as well as of the particular example, can have an effect on the literature. This judgement made possible for instance the reprint of the complete run of *Scrutiny*, though not the original publication of Leavis’s works in his lifetime. That was left to the commercial publisher whose judgement made his list a sort of sketch bibliography of Cambridge criticism, including Knights and Empson as well as both the Leavises—Ian Parsons at Chatto & Windus. (It was an earlier Chatto man, Charles Prentice, who was a conviction publisher of T. F. Powys.) The editorial policy of the Cambridge edition of D. H. Lawrence is challengeable in some respects, but what a remarkable fact it is that the edition was made! (Black himself has some claim to being the best published critic of Lawrence after Leavis.)

There have been a number of histories of Cambridge University Press, most recently the three volumes of McKitterick, before which Michael Black had published a one-volume history himself. The new book is as the subtitle says, personal reminiscences, and as such closer to the critical moment-by-moment judgements that are the publisher’s contribution to literature.

These are the reminiscences of a critic, and so more than anecdotes—though there are plenty of vividly recounted stories. (A pity the six blank pages at the end were not used for an index.) Black’s remarks are rarely bland and he is capable of making adverse judgements as well as discovering merits he at first could not see. The revised ideas about some of the gentlemanly writers of the Q generation are very interesting. The book is in fact a work of criticism.

Therefore, readers will not agree with everything. The move towards organising the Press, pro-actively (as they now say) identifying needs/opportunities and commissioning works accordingly, was a real achievement, and commercially successful. If C.U.P. had been an ordinary commercial concern Black would be very rich. Whether the development and expansion improved the standard of work published, in comparison with the old system (if that’s the word) of waiting for work to come in, usually from dons who took it for granted the Press would want them, could be discussed. Black is naturally inclined to award “star” status (his word) to his authors if they sell more than expected, but I wonder for instance whether the work of Professor David Crystal, and with him the whole influx of linguistics from the 1960s onwards, should be so straightforwardly celebrated. Let it be said though that without Black influential at the Press, English criticism, and with it the literature, would have been in a much worse state than it was in the third quarter of the twentieth century. If there were any sense in the honours system the achievement narrated quite modestly in this book would have earned a knighthood.

To buy a copy you will have to go in person or send an emissary to the Cambridge University Press Bookshop on the corner of Trinity Street and St Mary Street, where, produced to the usual Cambridge standards, it puts to shame many C.U.P. books by being on sale at the very reasonable price of £12.99.

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