

JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD

By R. A. O'BRIEN

"A precious few, the heirs of utter godlihead
Who wear the yellow flower of blameless bodlihead."

—OWEN SEAMAN.

THE BEGINNINGS

IT would be difficult to imagine a more improbable success story than the one about the country lad from North Devon who came to London in the middle sixties of the last century, and who, by the beginning of the Nineties appeared to be well submerged as a clerk in the Railway Clearing House only to rise to the exalted 'third slope of Parnassus'—as someone has called it—patron-publisher to most of the gilded youth of the fabulous *Fin de Siecle*. John Lane came to Whistler's London just when youth, inflamed by Baudelaire and Verlaine, began to stir against Victorian smugness and bad taste. *The Bodley Head* became the temple of the Muses under the aegis of this shrewd man of business who happened also to have within him the rare and precious quality of artistic sensitivity.

The old city, as so often in her history, provided the atmosphere and figures needed for the stimulation of latent impulses. John Lane lost his rusticity, gained an education and had his artistic tastes stimulated and excited by such men—brother clerks then—as George Borrow and that Lestocq who became an actor of considerable distinction. Lestocq had lodgings to which he invited a goodly company of poets and writers, among them a red-haired fellow named Algernon Charles Swinburne; and the metropolitan brew was to simmer and distil in its genial vapours more than one artistic *chef-d'oeuvre*.

Lane gradually found his way out of his early extreme poverty and during the eighties began what was to remain with him all his life and to provide much of the intellectual and aesthetic background so apparent in his later career; his mania for collecting *objets d'art*. There gradually grew upon him, also, a desire to enter the book trade, and he tells of this desire and of the beginnings of his business in his reprint of the *Life of Sir Thomas Bodley*. He found a tiny shop in Vigo Street in the West End, and with rare felicity named it after Bodley, "... the most pious of founders"—in reference, of course, to the famous founder of the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

In 1892, with Elkin Mathews, a bookseller of his acquaintance from Exeter, John Lane opened the Vigo Street premises, putting up the sign "Elkin Mathews and John Lane, The Bodley Head." But the association was doomed from the start. Lane's partner was the old-fashioned, retiring type of bookseller, but, as Lewis May puts it ". . . from that date Mathew's peace of mind departed. Henceforth he had to play second fiddle, and he had to play it to a galloping *tempo*. He did his best. For him, his bookshop 'was dukedom large enough.' Not so Lane. He had wider ambitions."¹ The result was that finally Lane moved the sign of the Bodley Head across the street in 1894, and there the firm remained until bombed out during the last war.

The stage was now set for the converging of the amazing artistic forces existing in the London of the Nineties, to centre, gradually, upon John Lane's little shop. Lane the stage manager, with an instinct for what was good (and, amazingly enough, saleable too) and with the taste that has made his name synonymous with uniquely beautiful books, gathered about him his poets, prose writers and artists, his Dowson's, his Beer-bohm's, his Beardsley's, encouraging and fostering them with such skill and devotion that, before many years were out, they had ensured that the star-spread Nineties would not be remembered by posterity without a bow in his direction.

It is not to be thought, however, that Lane was merely a clever opportunist who saw the possibilities of publishing what were clearly, to one so sensitive as he, the results of a new and vibrant attitude to art and life. This indeed he was, but more—much more. In his own right, one could almost insist, he was an artist. An early proof of his taste was his printing of Richard Le Gallienne's collection *Volumes in Folio*. These poems, Le Gallienne's first, were bound in white-panelled, blue-grey boards, well printed on hand-made, untrimmed paper. They were, incidentally, the first published of Le Gallienne's works of any kind. In his *Romantic '90's* La Gallienne states that the friendly interest Lane took in him brought him to London to write. When he later became Lane's reader he was largely responsible for bringing out Francis Thompson's poems, thus making a sort of payment-in-kind for Lane's having ensured that the world would not miss Le Gallienne. *Apropos*, Lane displayed his true bookman's propensities by compiling an

1. May, J. Lewis, *John Lane and the Nineties* (London: John Lane 1936) p. 35.

elaborate bibliography for Le Gallienne's work on Meredith, of which the author said that he considered it the most important part of the book.

With the publication of *Volumes in Folio* in 1889, the play, as Lewis May pursues the metaphor, began. There was recognition in the *St. James' Gazette* which remarked that Messrs. Elkin Mathews and John Lane (they were still associated then) had been able to prove to bookbuyers that a volume could be aesthetically appealing as well as commercially successful. Simplicity and artistry had finally come to publishing; and with what impact, memory of the typical Victorian book of the day will bring home most forcibly! There were upwards of ninety books on *The Bodley Head* list in 1894, all in editions limited to less than six hundred copies, and bearing such names as Grant Allen, Laurence Binyon, Walter Crane, Lionel Johnson, John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde. But, apart from the content of this list, there is the significance of the format of the books themselves.

AUBREY BEARDSLEY AND THE YELLOW BOOK

If any proof were needed that *The Bodley Head* was at the centre of the Nineties movement one need only regard Aubrey Beardsley and *The Yellow Book*, the two most characteristic phenomena of the day. *Fin de Siècle*, *Decadence*, and the descriptive prefix *Yellow* have become synonyms for the Eighteen Nineties. When Oscar Wilde went to his trial (or so the story goes), he did so with a copy of *The Yellow Book* under his arm. He also gave the name "Lane" to a valet in one of his plays. But of course Wilde was never a contributor to *The Yellow Book*—which is significant, perhaps, since he was not by any means the characteristic figure of the period that notoriety and misunderstanding have made him in the popular eye. But Beardsley, who in a sense was *The Yellow Book* (try to imagine it without his decorations!), was indeed the incarnation of all that the Nineties meant—and he was one of Lane's most felicitous discoveries.

Perhaps never before or since has a publication caused such a furor and become so completely the symbol of the esoteric, of disillusion, of 'decadence'. It was a periodical in book form and, of course, in the yellow that has become other-name for Decadence. It was of a "delightful and outrageous modernity," symbolizing as it did all that was bizarre and queer about the

art and life of the day. Among the contributors to the first number which appeared in 1894 were such names as Max Beerbohm, Richard Le Gallienne, Ella D'Arcy, Richard Crackenthorpe, John Davidson, John Oliver Hobbes and George Moore. All of these were, as Holbrook Jackson points out, "... in the vanguard of the new movement..." In addition, such artists as Beardsley himself who designed the cover, Walter Sickert, Joseph Pennell, Laurence Housman and Will Rothenstein were also contributors. The famous Conder fan appeared as an illustration in Volume IV, and Volume V contained an article by G. S. Street, the first English essay on Anatole France by the Hon. Maurice Baring, as well as the first article by Anatole France himself to be published in England.

Of a piece with the consideration of Aubrey Beardsley and John Lane, is the recognition of the fact that the Nineties was a period of intense revival in the art of illustration. Beardsley was certainly the most noticeable, if not the most notable example of the employment, during this period, of the artist in illustration through the use of the line-block. It is impossible to discover the Nineties without at the same time discovering Beardsley, the consumptive boy who died at twenty-six after "... imposing a new convention of draughtsmanship upon the world" to quote A. J. A. Symons again. Beardsley's significance lies in the fact that he was the illustrator *par excellence*. He worked for the publisher—for John Lane during his most fruitful period, though not for him exclusively. One thinks of that famous series, called the "Keynotes" after the title of the first, for each of which Beardsley designed the title-page. The three cited by Mr. Symons as being typical are Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*; Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*; and George Egerton's *Keynotes*. In spite of their good format and fine paper and printing they cost about three shillings and were thus typical of the quality and availability of *The Bodley Head* books.

But long chapters could be (and have been) devoted to Beardsley and the host of other artists who were gathered about *The Bodley Head*. The only way to assess them is to go to their works and to the books they illustrated. The point to be made is simply that John Lane attracted outstanding artists who became, as Morris, Rossetti and Millais had never become, artists who worked mainly for the publisher. It is difficult nowadays for us to appreciate the impulse that caused Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's *Salome* and *The Yellow Book* to be

greeted by outbursts like that of one newspaper which in all seriousness asked for ". . . an act of parliament to make this sort of thing illegal."

From the standpoint of typography, *The Yellow Book* alone affords a good example of what a revolution was taking place in bookmaking. It is printed in Caslon old-face. The text begins not at the top of the page, but a quarter the way down, and the headlines are always in capitals and lower case, never in capitals alone. The headings are not centred, but set to the left with the author's name immediately below them. With catch-words, fly-titles and its yellow covers it represented a complete revolution in book production.

That the vision responsible for this new and exciting way of producing books was in tune with the Nineties spirit has been affirmed by that specialist of the period A. J. A. Symons in a specialist organ, *The Fleuron*:

" . . . 'the Eighteen-Nineties' was the demonstration by a group of writers and artists of a belief in art, and not religion or truth, as the special consolation of the human spirit. They prized, and cultivated in themselves, the utmost sensitiveness of reaction both to the external world and to internal emotion; and so perceived or thought they perceived, beauty in the common objects of the modern world, in things and thoughts commonly called wrong or ugly . . . It was in this assertion of the beauty of the Real that the 'nineties' men differed most from William Morris and his followers; for whereas Morris sought to 'forget six counties over-hung with smoke' (by making, in the nineteenth century, books in the manner of the fifteenth), the new 'aesthetes', as they were derisively called, sought rather to discover whether a county overhung with smoke might not actually possess a special, unperceived beauty."²

Symons goes on to point out that this disputed view ". . . left a legacy of beautiful books, books which by their difference from those that went before or came after, as well by their intrinsic merits, deserve the analysis and admiration of printing specialists as well as book collectors."

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JOHN LANE AND HIS POETS

John Lane's proudest boast could be, with complete justification, that he was responsible for the sponsorship of the most distinguished poets of the Nineties period. In the words of

² Symons, A. J. A. "An unacknowledged movement in fine printing." *The Fleuron*, VII (1930) p. 85.

Richard Le Gallienne, he was "one who scans Parnassus' Hill with a searchlight of sympathetic discovery, one who is at once the father and brother of all modern poets, and who, it may be said, holds them all in the hollow of his hand."³ It is certainly no exaggeration to say, with John Davidson, another of the Lane poets, that to have achieved a paying demand for minor and other poetry, especially in that day, was to have established a record. (One inclines to the view, however, that it would be much more of a record to-day!). It is true that *les jeunes écrivains* made ephemeral attempts to achieve solidarity, such as The Rhymers' Club at the Chesire Cheese, but their true nucleus and bastion against the surrounding swirl of materialism was in Vigo Street.

That these poets had a wide influence is plain from the rise of the Birch Bark School in Canada, the works of certain poets in Australia as well as of the young American, William Theodore Peters who actually became one of the men of the Nineties in London. And at home, "Publishers and sinners" as Nevinson calls them, were not afraid to look at verse which was also given room in the reviewing publications. In our age of synthetic and machine-fostered enthusiasms, it is difficult to imagine that there have been times when there were young people fired with such enthusiasm for art and life that they willingly gave up the pleasures of the city to strive for expression in their chosen muse. But such were present in abundance in the Nineties, and it is posterity's good luck that there was a John Lane for so many of them.

There was Earnest Dowson, for example, with his cry for 'madder music and for stronger wine.' Beardsley drew an unforgettable curving line for the cover of Dowson's *Collected Poems*, which can be seen reproduced on the cover of Osbert Burdett's *The Beardsley Period*, published in 1925 by John Lane. John Davidson must also be recognized as one of Lane's happy finds. The publisher was sensitive enough to speak enthusiastically of Davidson's works, and to appreciate genuinely ballads such as *Fleet Street Eclogues*, as well as shrewd enough to publish them. His natural taste for poetry can be given as the reason, apart from his business sense, for associating with men such as these and so many others like George Moore, W. B. Yeats and Henry Harland.

3. Quoted by J. Lewis May in *John Lane and the Nineties*, op. cit., p. 89.

LATER FORTUNES

As the price of fame, of course, John Lane caught the attention of the lampooners, and one of them wrote a satire which appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, the opening verse of which ran thus:

“ ‘There’s a genius every morning?’ wept the people of the
 town,
 And the children look and wonder as they run him
 up and down
 ‘Is it Bodley
 Doth thus oddly?’
 Said the people of the town . . .”

This and much more like it was accepted blandly by the publisher who gathered these gratuitous, if good-natured, insults together and issued them as *Accepted Addresses* in a typically excellent John Lane edition, on hand-made paper with a fine reproduction of the head of Sir Thomas Bodley on the wrapper!

It was about this time—in 1896 when the American branch was opened—that the firm was able to claim what was probably the unique distinction of having had every one of their books published followed by an American edition. Names such as Max Beerbohm, Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, Laurence Hope, Rupert Brooke and Lascelles Abercrombie appeared on the list in that year with such overseas additions as Leacock, Anderson and Dreiser. But a high American tariff wall forced Lane to close the American branch in 1921 and in that year he also turned his business into a private company.

As Lewis May puts it, “He was putting off his heavy armour.” A life full of active, and even avid living, in which artistic sensitivity mingled with a truly Epicurean regard for refined pleasures, the society of women (“Petticoat Lane” they called him with no slanderous connotations), pleasant and brilliant little parties graced by the notables of the land—all the multifarious pleasures of the collector and *bon vivant*—was drawing to a close. To the last he was active, kept so, no doubt, by his love for his business and his way of life.

In January 1925, after attending a public dinner, he caught a chill, and, refusing to rest in bed, finally succumbed to pneumonia. Headlines informed the world of the “Death of a Famous Publisher”, such press attention being general all over the world.

The Nineties was unique in that it closed precisely, as a literary and artistic period, at its chronological termination, with the deaths of the greater number of its famous figures in

the arts. But it ended only in the physical sense. The influence of the man who was, as I have tried to show, uniquely at the centre of the Nineties, lingered on and carried the spirit and the works of that age to the present day. The fact that his original firm is still carrying on his tradition (with the necessary qualification to be remembered always—the difference between the artistic products of that day and this) is, I am persuaded, a matter for rejoicing in this, our present age of easy and meretricious literary enthusiasms.

There is an interesting corollary to this brief glance at the life of a great artist-publisher. In the Spring of 1919 the sixteen-year-old nephew of John Lane, Allen Lane, joined his uncle at the Bodley Head. In a letter to me Allen Lane states: "On the literary side, by the time I came into the business its character had changed . . . considerably from that which it had assumed in its hey-day . . ." But it would appear that this young man caught something of the magic for, of course, he is now renowned as the founder and, with his brother Richard, the present director of Penguin Books Limited. The vision and taste that have brought these little books to their present enviable acceptance carry on a shining tradition in English publishing.