

SUPER-SELLERS: BARTON, ERSKINE, HALLIBURTON

By MARSHA STEPHENS

ONE OF THE PERIODS of greatest prosperity and influence at Bobbs-Merrill came in the late twenties. Even a superficial glance at best-seller lists shows the happy fortunes of the firm during the half-dozen years before the Great Depression. The boom began in 1926, when trade receipts doubled and profits tripled. Of Mott's seven all-time best- and better-sellers which appeared in 1925, three bore the Bobbs-Merrill imprint: *The Man Nobody Knows* by Bruce Barton, *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* by John Erskine, and *The Royal Road to Romance* by Richard Halliburton. Study of these three books sheds light not only on the history of the Bobbs-Merrill Company, but also on the publishing business and reading tastes of the twenties, and on the art of best-sellerism in general.

None of the three writers had published with Bobbs-Merrill before. Though only Halliburton was writing his first book, none was quite a writer by profession: Barton was an advertising executive, Erskine an English professor at Columbia, and Halliburton a twenty-five-year-old adventurer. Each book brought fame and wealth to its author almost overnight, and each writer went on to produce for Bobbs-Merrill a series of books similar in conception and almost equal in popularity to his first. The interesting question is: why did these books sell as they did?

The production of best-sellers is one of the trickiest businesses imaginable. Happily, among critics, only pub-

lishers' editors need to predict, and explanation after the fact is rather less perilous. It is not so difficult to say what a best-seller must *not* be: it must not, for instance, be "difficult" or experimental, or suppose a command of the Locarno Pact. For any given period, the list can be slightly extended; in 1925, apparently, a best-seller could not be long or printed in small type—if it could be read in one thrilling session, so much the better.

No one was more surprised at the enormous success of the three books in question than their authors, though Bobbs-Merrill, except perhaps in the case of the Barton book, was hardly less so. *Helen* had been dressed out in a lavish \$2.50 suit calculated to beguile the eye of the moneyed sophisticate. A few months before its publication, D. L. Chambers wrote Erskine that it might "take a little longer to reach its public than a flashy novel," and Erskine replied, agreeing to the \$2.50 price tag, "Let's hope she justifies herself at any price!" (letters of August 20, 24, 1925).

The Halliburton book seemed less promising. Halliburton was later to exult in tracing its wanderings from publisher to publisher—it was rejected, he said, by no less than eight. But a Bobbs-Merrill editor heard him lecture one night and asked him if he did not have a manuscript. When Bobbs-Merrill readers read *The Royal Road to Romance*, they agreed that it was in pretty bad condition but could be shaped up. Not only Halliburton but apparently almost everybody in the Bobbs-Merrill office shared in the revision.

The Man Nobody Knows had a different history. Barton's father, W. E. Barton, had long been a Bobbs-Merrill author, and Barton first gave his manuscript privately to Hewitt H. Howland for his opinion of it. How-

land read the book over a weekend and immediately cabled Barton acceptance. Barton replied that he had promised two other publishers a reading and intended to take the best offer. It is known that one at least, Scribner's, then turned it down. Howland, meanwhile, wasted no words. "I must publish that book," he wrote Barton:

What others can give you I don't know, but I do know that it is not greater understanding, enterprise or enthusiasm. There is not another publisher who could center the force of his drive on one title—your title—as could we; the very length and importance of his non-fiction list would make it impossible (April 7, 1924).

The effort to sell itself to an author was not one Bobbs-Merrill often felt called upon to make.

I

What Howland felt about this view of Christ, portraying him as "the father of modern business," was to be shared by thousands upon thousands of readers. Again to Barton he wrote: "I was enthralled by it and tremendously moved. You have done more for the cause of righteousness than all the pulpits in the country have done in a generation. You have taken Jesus out of the stained glass window and made him a man" (January 18, 1924). It is impossible to be sure with publishers, whose eulogies of their investments are fluent and all but automatic, but it seems from his letters that Howland *was* moved by the book and at the same time was excited by the possibilities of its exploitation. "If properly presented," he wrote, "I believe that even the world's best Babbitt can be induced to read your book, and when he has read it he will be as strong for Jesus as he is now for his local Rotary" (January 18, 1924). The

"Blue-Sky" book continues to be a familiar phenomenon in publishing, as these lines published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1954 for Albert Van Nostrand attest:

The attainment of Salvation through material success is the particular pursuit of happiness that Americans have always been anxious to read about.

Books that gratify this gross inspiration are known in the publishing industry as "Blue-Sky" books, and they succeed commercially whenever the authors themselves believe in it. The knack in commercial publishing, of course, is to exploit—and to establish if need be—the coincidence of a writer's personal beliefs with the reigning public attitude. And if the publisher believes in it too, so much the better. His belief will affect the promotion of the book and probably its contents (*The Denatured Novel*, p. 25).

It requires a feat of the imagination for the modern reader, bearing in mind that *The Man Nobody Knows* was written by an aggressive Manhattan advertising executive, to realize that it was not cynically produced for financial gain. Can a man of Barton's intelligence not have known, for instance, that he was making an amusingly perverse play on words in quoting in the frontispiece the line "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" with the word *business* italicized? In his introduction Barton said that he had envisioned a book which every businessman would read and pass on to his partners and salesmen. Each of the famous events of Jesus' life is made to illustrate a "great principle of executive management." Here, for instance, is Christ's "calling" of Matthew: "*And as Jesus passed by, he called Matthew.*"

Amazing. No argument; no pleading. A smaller leader would have been compelled to set up the advantages of the opportunity. "Of course you are doing well where you are

and making money," he might have said. "I can't offer you as much as you are getting; in fact you may have some difficulty in making ends meet. But I think we are going to have an interesting time and shall probably accomplish a big work." Such a conversation would have been met with Matthew's reply that he would "have to think it over," and the world would never have heard his name.

There was no such trifling with Jesus. *As he passed by*, he called Matthew. No executive in the world can read that sentence without acknowledging that here indeed is the Master (page 25).

Yet it is clear from Barton's correspondence with Bobbs-Merrill and from his other writings and activities that he wrote his religious books from a deep, if confused, necessity within his own mind. He held great affection and respect for his remarkable preacher-father with his old-fashioned Christian ideals (for some years after his father's death, Barton was almost wholly occupied in supervising the publication of his posthumous works). But the exploitation of his own talents had led him into quite a different walk of life, and perhaps he felt a desperate need to show that the two could be reconciled. Happily for his books, a like need was felt by many thousands of his contemporaries.

One can see similarities between *The Man Nobody Knows* and *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, but the over-all appeal of the two was of course quite different. Both were "modern" in that they introduced sanctions for relatively modern tendencies—to intense competitiveness in business, and to freedom in relations between the sexes—and both were distortions of ancient myth. Erskine's distortion was, however, frank, deliberate and meant to amuse; his modernity was far more liberal. It is hard to envision a reader at once sincerely moved by Barton and frankly amused by Erskine. Helen was related, at least, to that

"new woman" the periodicals of the day were always prattling about—in her general independence of spirit and her audacious conviction that a woman's spiritual well-being might not be measurably enhanced by a life-long and make-believe devotion to a dull husband. Erskine loved ironies and delighted in creating an adulterous Helen who was, nevertheless, the only moral person on the scene. A necessary foil to Helen's liberality was provided in Hermione, her proper daughter. Erskine's text is almost entirely dialogue; the lines are nearly always funny, sometimes impossible, often perceptive.

Almost any page exemplifies Erskine's humor of ironic understatement. Here is the beginning of Helen's first "good long talk" with her daughter after her return to Sparta:

'Hermione, I find certain scandalous rumors circulating about me here in Sparta. Perhaps you can explain them.'

'Which do you refer to, Mother?'

'So, you have heard of them. Scandal is always annoying, and usually it is unnecessary.'

'At times, mother, it is inevitable.'

'Never,' said Helen. 'I've met people who thought so, but I don't take their view. In any case, the question hardly concerns us. I wish to get at the bottom of these stories in which I figure rather discredibly. When did they first come to your attention?'

...
'There's a legend,' said Hermione, 'that you deserted your husband and ran away with Paris to Troy. I first heard of it right after you went away.'

'But that's not scandal,' said Helen, 'that's the truth.'

'If that's not scandal, I don't know what it is.'

'I see you don't,' said her mother. 'In scandal there's always some falsehood, something malicious and defamatory. Scandal, to my mind, is such a story as I heard yesterday from Charitas. She says I never was at Troy at all. Paris carried

me off, against my will, and some valuable furniture too, for good measure. The winds blew us to Egypt—you know the absurd tale? Well, that's what I call scandal. What should I be doing in Egypt? And would I have gone off with Paris if he had been a thief? . . . Paris didn't steal me. . . . But if he had stolen me, I'd prefer to think he would have had no margin of interest left for the furniture' (page 32).

"Is this the face," cracked the *Chicago News*, "that launched a thousand quips?"

If the successes of Barton and Erskine illustrate the public's desire to explore and justify the realities of life, *The Royal Road to Romance* illustrates the conflicting desire to forget all about them and go climb the Matterhorn instead.

When Halliburton graduated from Princeton in 1921, he and a classmate, heeding a raucous little voice which kept urging "Realize your youth while you have it," signed on a cargo boat for Hamburg. Adventures were hard to come by at first, but Halliburton learned to produce them with regularity. He sent home to his parents in Memphis sketches of his exploits in those blinding colors which were to make him famous, and his father passed them along to the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. During state-side sojourns, Halliburton then commenced giving brilliant lectures and peddling manuscripts to publishers. They all must have been, as Bobbs-Merrill remained, somewhat baffled by him. "He's a fool in some ways and needs watching," wrote Chambers to an assistant after Halliburton's attempt to circulate reports of his own death (undated memo of Chambers—probably addressed to an assistant, Anne Ross, sometime during July, 1926). Was his stuff, they must have asked themselves, mere undergraduate poppycock, or was it—just possibly—the very stuff of romance the tired school-

marm and housewife yearned for? Here is Halliburton's description in *Royal Road* of his famous swim in the "alabaster pool of the Taj Mahal":

Higher rose the moon; fairer gleamed the Taj, a harmonious pile of masonry in the sunshine of the morning, a specter underneath the stars, now transfigured to a gleaming gossamer, an airy bubble that might evaporate into ether while one looked upon it. . . .

No one was awake to see me creep forth into the balmy night, or to watch my shadow as it left the marble platform and moved again across the moon-blanchèd park. . . .

Only an insomniac owl watched me remove my clothes, or heard the faint ripple as I dropped into the alabaster pool. This was a page from the *Arabian Nights*, a reversion to the fabled luxury of ancient emperors,—this, at last, was Romance (page 25).

Some of the things Halliburton saw in his travels are interesting in themselves (the polyandrous household he visited in Andorra, for instance), but exactly as in those promotional posters where the Matterhorn is just a tuft rising from his well-oiled head, Richard himself tends to get in the way of a full view. Halliburton wanted readers to interest themselves in Halliburton (alias Romance! Youth! Adventure! and what-not) rather than the Taj Mahal, but they persisted in being interested in the Taj Mahal, and this fact depressed him.

II

The Man Nobody Knows appeared in the spring of 1925 and the Erskine and Halliburton books in the fall. All attained their greatest sales in 1926, and with three best-sellers in the stalls, Bobbs-Merrill's fortunes rose accordingly. The Company's total trade receipts in 1926 were close

to \$700,000. Though it is not possible to reckon the total number of books sold, it is interesting to note that the sales of the three specified titles, approaching, as they did, 190,000 for that one year, must have brought in, at the very least, a third of the total gross trade income and approximately half of the Company's trade profits.

Barton's book sold the longest (it was still a popular reprint in 1930) and made the greatest over-all sales record: close to 300,000 copies sold (exclusive of modern paperbacks), at a profit to Barton—on royalties alone—of about \$65,000; in 1926 he took in over \$30,000 on the one book. *Helen's* total was more modest, 200,000 copies sold; *The Royal Road to Romance* did not much exceed 150,000.

To what extent, one might ask, did Bobbs-Merrill's promotion account for the success of these books? It is impossible, of course, to say for sure, because, for one thing, all three authors were active promoters of their own books. On the evidence of promotional files, it seems that though *The Man Nobody Knows*, certainly, and to a lesser degree, *Helen*, were given whooping send-offs, real advertising money did not begin to flow until the books had demonstrated sales potential. Bobbs-Merrill was spending, during these years, slightly more than the average 10 per cent of gross income usually devoted by publishers to advertising.

The trade department had been built up by two extremely energetic editors, Chambers and Howland (Howland was to leave in the fall of 1925 to become editor of *Century*), and their general perspicacity and knowledge of the trade must have been remarkable. Chambers was to continue to be the moving spirit of the Company for the next two decades—he became president in 1937. No one who reads his correspondence (he seems to have written

literally hundreds of letters every week, often two in one day to the same author) can have any doubt that he ran a strenuously efficient operation. No detail seems to have escaped him, no possibility to sell books to have gone unexplored; he handled authors with seemingly effortless tact and shrewdness and almost unfailing good cheer. The office as a whole had every bit its share of the twenties' pep and high spirits—and well-oiled tongues. Everything and everybody was the "bulliest," the "snappiest," the "keenest." "We all know, every man-jack of us," goes the patter, "your next book'll knock 'em dead!" "Keep those chapters pourin' in, old man, we're gettin' thrilled and thrilled!" Chambers wrote to Halliburton in 1927:

And if we've done anything for you, why surely it's been a joy to work with you. We've never had an author who gave us such wonderful cooperation, to whose interest we could feel more personal devotion, to whom we felt more closely bound. You have made a royal road into our hearts, my dear fellow, and all our contact with you has been a glorious adventure (May 31, 1927).

"One of the trials of life," wrote Chambers in an inter-office memo, "is the necessity of constantly showing an accommodating spirit to the authors" (to H. S. Baker in the New York office, May 27, 1926).

One thing that *is* known about the best-seller audience is that it is not one but several, and it must be the publisher's aim to bring a book to the attention of its "natural" public. Bobbs-Merrill courted the "religious" readership by sending free copies of books to ministers over the country asking for their endorsements. In the case of the Barton book, these endorsements came pouring back with profuse congratulations and promises to commend the book from the pulpit. The promotional files contain countless church

programs announcing talks, reviews—indeed Sunday sermons—on the book in churches from coast to coast and of all denominations. The “business” group was likewise courted. Endorsements came back on letterheads of such firms as the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Company; the Standard Conveyor Company of St. Paul, Minnesota; and the Hickok Belts, Buckles and Beltograms of Rochester, New York. Erskine’s appeal was thought to be primarily to the “cultivated,” as Chambers put it. Particularly prized endorsements of *Helen* came from other sophisticated novelists and critics, presidents of universities, and chairmen of English departments.

It is impossible to estimate the real value of such machinations—because no one knows who actually bought the books. Perhaps a more important factor was the Company’s carefully cultivated relations with bookstores, upon whose good will publishers in the twenties depended. Indeed, Halliburton’s success seems to have been closely related to his personal popularity in bookstores and the publicity derived from his incessant book teas and autograph parties.

With regard to the vaunted magazine influence on book sales through serialization and the consequent subsidizing of the industry they are thought to have provided, it appears that it was not the aim of every publisher to get every book serialized. Chambers felt, as he explained to Erskine and other authors, that though serialization was always desirable for authors who had not yet gained a large following, it was of dubious benefit for those whose books were going to be bought anyway—in fact, it probably cut into their sales. Of course authors realized large profits from serialization, and Bobbs-Merrill often had to promote

it to satisfy them. Additional side-money came from the movies, which were beginning to exert their own influence and effect publishers' decisions on what books to publish or try to get written. Erskine sold three of his books, including *Helen*, to film producers for a total of \$24,000, the publisher's share of which was something more than one third.

III

The good fortune of each of these writers had, indeed, just begun with their first big sellers. Advance sales alone of each of Erskine's next two books exceeded 30,000 copies. He was to publish thirteen books with Bobbs-Merrill during the dozen years after *Helen*, but with such steadily decreasing sales that in 1937, the depression having dealt him a mortal blow, and feeling "pretty sore" about what he felt was a diminishing interest in his books among the sales force, he left the Company and took his books elsewhere. D. L. Chambers had from the beginning a profound respect for John Erskine, and the two had become close friends. He and Erskine both felt that Erskine's books were going to survive over time far better than they have. Indeed, Erskine, foreseeing a day when first editions of his books would be extremely valuable, prompted Chambers to "brand" the first printings as a service to collectors.

But Erskine's activity was by no means confined to novel writing. He is better known today as a great teacher-innovator (as, for instance, the initiator of the overseas university program after World War I and the pioneer at Columbia of the Great Books program). He was also a poet, critic, and a respected concert pianist—a man, as Fannie Hurst put it, of "parts and parts and parts." *Helen*

is still eminently readable, though oddly and casually constructed of long conversations among the principal characters. There is at least a possibility that had not Erskine become attuned so suddenly and almost accidentally to a popular demand in fiction, his novels would have eventually taken a more important form. But he was a man, as he himself said, who loved to be applauded. He wanted to continue to please his huge following and at the same time to write great books, and he fortified himself with the conviction that he could best find his voice by singing a succession of slightly different tunes into the public ear and noting its reaction. In 1935 he wrote Chambers:

The report of your reader as well as your good opinion confirm me in the conclusion that what the world wants from me is my original type of story and not a modern novel. *Sincerity*, *Unfinished Business*, and *Forget If You Can* contain from my point of view a good deal of the best of me, but apparently I register best as a satirist, or at least as a reviser of the past (March 13, 1935).

That Chambers did not practice on Erskine the art, as it is called, of "creative publishing" (in which the editors help to plan and even to write their authors' books) appears, considering the jobs he performed on Halliburton and other writers, to indicate the respect he felt for Erskine's powers.

Barton, too, he felt had better be let alone; in his case the problem was just to keep him writing. The theory was that a big seller had better be followed up by a new book every eighteen months or the capital built up for the writer would go to waste. Barton was sincerely committed to his writings and was not inclined to spout them off the top of his head. His objection to Bobbs-Merrill's advertising, for instance, was not that it would not sell his books but

that it would sell them for the wrong reasons. In 1932, after submitting *He Upset the World*, the story of Paul, and the fifth and last book Barton wrote, he wrote Chambers:

My reluctance about the piece of copy you sent us is not based on any criticism of it as an advertisement. I feel it gives the impression, however, that I have written a sensational book, and I do not regard this book as sensational. Perhaps I flatter myself, but I really feel it is the best and most interesting book that has been written about Paul.

In other words it would please me very much if Bobbs-Merrill or some reviewer would say, "This is the best and most interesting little book ever written about Paul." But the piece of copy you sent gives me the feeling that the book isn't much good and therefore has to be treated with a certain amount of ballyhoo (Feb. 9, 1932).

Halliburton, on the other hand, was one whose gifts were ruthlessly subjected to financial wizardry. The Halliburton files provide a view of "creative publishing" at its boldest: "I'm shifting rapidly," wrote Chambers, "toward Richard Coeur-de-Lion for the subject of your next book, and I have it much on my mind as to when that book will appear" (June 6, 1927). To Halliburton's objection that he did not like the "lilt" of a sentence Chambers had rewritten, Chambers replied, in a rare lapse of the "accommodating spirit": "My lilt is just as good as your lilt" (January 8, 1927). After establishing his name in the trade with his first two books, Halliburton took stock and decided that he wanted to produce something more substantial. He wrote Chambers that he thought he could do a good job of a Rupert Brooke biography which would show the world that he could write something of real value. Chambers replied—alas—that he would not oppose the

project if Halliburton was set on it, but that he need not be defensive about his travel books:

There is nothing about *Glorious Adventure* or *Royal Road to Romance* that needs apology or counteraction with the public. You will find the public eager for more travel things from you of the same sort and 90% of the authors in America envy you. Do not be affected by the words of a few supercilious critics (August 15, 1927).

Of the three, Halliburton proved to be the Company's most valuable property over the years. In 1939, when Barton had quit writing and Erskine had worn out his popularity and was trying with small success to get himself rejuvenated by another firm, Halliburton's fortunes were very much alive. In the fall of that year he went down in the Pacific in a Chinese junk which he was sailing from Hong Kong to San Francisco in hopes of making a sensational appearance at the World's Fair. Not even the depression had greatly affected the sales of his books.

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