

## DAVID LAURANCE CHAMBERS AS I KNEW HIM

By THOMAS D. CLARK

**I**N THE LATE 1920's I read the sprightly biographies of Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson by Marquis James, Robert Selph Henry's story of reconstruction, and several other titles which had been published by the Bobbs-Merrill Company. When I first joined the University of Kentucky staff, I was especially impressed by a rather handsome book the Company published for William H. Townsend of Lexington, Kentucky. Everybody in Lexington was praising *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town*. Mr. Townsend was a master storyteller, and his book did not slight the challenge of describing life in ante bellum Lexington at a time when the Lincolns came from Springfield, Illinois, to visit with the haughty Todd family.

I came to know William H. Townsend intimately. Many times I talked with him about his experiences with Bobbs-Merrill. In 1937-39 I was engaged in research and writing a book on frontier humor. By the spring of 1939 I had the manuscript completed and was ready to approach a publisher. Mr. Townsend offered to write a letter on my behalf to Mr. Laurance Chambers, but one night at a dinner party I met an old Bobbs-Merrill salesman who said he would go with me to Indianapolis to see Mr. Chambers.

In the meantime I wrote Mr. Chambers describing my manuscript, and asked if I might bring the manuscript in for him to examine. I will never forget the excitement with which I received his reply, written on his famous fawn-

colored stationery and enclosed in a slender executive-type envelope. The letter was brief and pointed: he would look at my manuscript, but he made no commitment in advance about publication. I looked at his almost feminine signature many times trying to guess what kind of man he was. Neither Mr. Townsend nor Virgil Steed had really given me a description of him. Virgil and I left Lexington at four o'clock in the morning for Indianapolis, and I am certain we arrived there before Mr. Chambers came to his office.

The Bobbs-Merrill Company was located on North Meridian Street in a narrow "shotgun" building. The facade of the building, with its muted classic columns, was as impressive as the Company's stationery. On display at either side of the entry were recent Bobbs-Merrill books. Though I gazed at these hoping hungrily that not too far in the future my own book would be there, I was never to know whether it ever was.

Associate editor of the house at that time was Mrs. Jessica Mannion, wife of an Indianapolis attorney. Jessica gave my manuscript a hurried perusal, and then said Mr. Chambers was ready to see me. I know now that if she had not seen promise in the manuscript she would have turned me back at that point. I have never been more anxious to make a good impression than at the moment I crossed the threshold of Mr. Chambers' office. I was not, however, prepared for what I saw. Mr. Chambers was a fairly tall, stooped, grey-haired man. He gave me the impression of having stepped fresh out of a Dickens novel. His shirt tail was out, his hair was rumpled, and he looked at me over pince-nez glasses as if I had brought a dead fish into the parlor. He made me sit down across the broad, tousled desk before him and talked in such a low voice that only

by the grace of God could I tell what he was saying. The main points I got were that the book business was bad and that he had not worked his shirt tail out in anxiety to publish my book.

He asked me to unwrap the manuscript and hand it to him. When I handed him the manuscript, I slipped off a rubber band. In a nervous fidget, I cocked my pencil on the band, forgot about the pencil, and let go. My missile sailed over Mr. Chambers' head in a perfect arc, just missing him. I do not think he ever noticed what happened. No doubt I came within inches of shooting myself out of a publisher.

A short time after I returned to Lexington I received a contract. It was clear Mr. Chambers did not consider me another Marquis James, but he would publish the book. I worked closely with Jessica Mannion, and two or three times in the process of readying the book for release I talked with Mr. Chambers, always in half-whispered conversations. Once a question arose over whether they would allow me to publish a comic story about a backwoods incident involving a slight matter of miscegenation. Mr. Chambers vetoed the story. It was Jessica who grabbed me by the coat lapels and said, "You can't publish that story!" It was harmless, and today would not be questioned.

A young author could have worked with no finer people than the staff at Bobbs-Merrill. They were not, however, so sentimental about books as their authors were. I was most anxious to see what the *Rampaging Frontier* would look like in final form. So far as I knew, Bobbs-Merrill had closed its doors after I sent the page proofs back to them. One day I was walking across the campus of the University of Kentucky when I met a student with a new book under his arm.



I asked to see it, and to my utter amazement it was my book. When I asked Mr. Chambers about this he said he thought it more important to get books on dealers' shelves than into authors' hands.

At this time the Bobbs-Merrill Company was under rather severe pressure. Jessica Mannion told me that the house had advanced \$50,000 to Edith Bolling Wilson for her book, *My Memoir*. As a matter of fact, Bobbs-Merrill stationery carried a line of advertising for this book on the flap of the envelope. I think I am correct in saying that *My Memoir* was a disappointment. Mrs. Wilson seemed to me to say little in her book that had real substance.

After the appearance of the *Rampaging Frontier*, which received rather good reviews, I signed a contract for a second book, this time on the role of the country store in modern southern history. Before I had the manuscript of this book ready, Rosemary York became associate editor. I traveled over the South gathering tons of dusty store records as sources for my book. In Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I was told that an old classmate, Bell I. Wiley, was there working in the great Southern collection of the University. He and his wife were living in an old board-and-batten student shack, and I drove around to see them. When I drove into the yard, Bell was standing at a front window stripped to his waist. He yelled for me to come in—I was the very fellow he wanted to see. He told me that Bobbs-Merrill was publishing his *Johnny Reb* and that he was having trouble with Mr. Chambers, Rosemary York, and his wife. He had collected several letters which spelled out in purplish prose the more relaxed phases of soldiering in the Confederate Army. They did not support the image which the Daughters of the Confederacy cherished of the

South's brave soldiers. Mr. Chambers and Rosemary would not let Bell publish the letters, and his wife said he should not publish them. A week or two later I was in Indianapolis and asked Rosemary about Bell's letters. She told me they were locked up in the Company's vault, where they were going to stay.

When I delivered my store book manuscript I had no title for it. Mr. Chambers said he liked the manuscript but he could not publish a nameless book. I had exhausted my feeble imagination trying to produce a title, and I showed him a rather long list of suggestions, but none suited him. In sheer desperation I suggested *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows*. He accepted it immediately. This was a fortunate title. The book became the point of an argument with the Book-of-the-Month Club Committee. I was told the reason it was not selected was because Amy Loveman did not believe life could be so hard for people. I had trouble with city girls over this book. One day an assistant editor said to me that I talked a lot about grass. "Was grass a problem with southern farmers?" This almost caused me to go into shock.

I never could persuade Mr. Chambers to take advantage of certain potential sales outlets for *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows*, and I still believe these would have proved worth while. Sales had become the Achilles heel of the Bobbs-Merrill Company. Mr. Chambers, no doubt, was hard on his sales managers and promotion people. Too, the depression years were hard on the book business generally. I felt, as perhaps every author has felt from the beginning of time, that the Company did not always push books as effectively as it might have done.

About the time I published my second book, the Company had hard luck in the death of an author. Lew Sub-

lette, a member of the famous old Kentucky pioneer and Rocky Mountain family, died just before he had completed a manuscript. I read this manuscript and made suggestions as to how I thought it might be completed. Mr. Chambers asked Harrison Kroll to finish the book, and it was published under the title *Rogues' Company*. This was an interesting account of flatboat life on the Western rivers.

I am sure that this Midwestern publishing company had difficult financial sledding. I felt that it was a real asset to this region, and was happy indeed to be one of its authors. When I delivered the manuscript for the *Southern Country Editor*, and after the manuscript had been edited by Harry Platt, Rosemary York asked me one day to come into a back office for a private conversation. I had no idea what we were to talk about, but when we were in the office she said the Company felt it necessary to ask its authors to renegotiate their contracts at lower royalty rates. I agreed to this, even though there ran through my mind some debate on this matter. I could legally stand on my original contract and incur the wrath of some very warm friends, or renegotiate and perhaps help the Company; I did not feel the income from my book would be tremendously important either way. Later I learned that one or two authors proved unruly indeed. I remember one of them afterwards refused to write Mr. Chambers a letter of congratulation on the occasion, I believe, of his eightieth birthday. An appeal had gone out from his friends asking authors to do this.

Rosemary York came to Lexington to visit at the time we were in the midst of publishing the *Country Editor*. My neighbor of many years, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., had long planned to write a book about the opening of the Rocky Mountain



West. Bud was born in Indiana but grew up on the Gallatin Fork of the Missouri at Choteau, Montana. He had written four chapters and brought them over for Rosemary to read. She told him he had the beginning of a fine story but that it was a rugged beginning. I have often wondered what might have happened if Bobbs-Merrill had shown enough interest in the manuscript to give Bud a contract. His *Big Sky* proved to be valuable literary property indeed.

One of the parts of Townsend's book which Mr. Chambers most enjoyed was its account of the original Cassius Marcellus Clay. Clay was the son of a wealthy old pioneer land and slave owner who went to Yale University and fell under the influence of early abolitionists. Back in Kentucky he published the *True American*, a mild abolitionist journal which aroused the slaveholders of the Bluegrass to the point where they destroyed the paper. Later Clay became notorious for his ready use of the Bowie knife on opponents. Mr. Chambers asked me in later years if I would not do a biography of Cassius M. Clay, and to this day I have been glad I turned down the invitation.

In his later years I had several pleasant visits with, and letters from, Mr. Chambers. Upon occasion when I was in Indianapolis, I stopped by the Bobbs-Merrill office to visit him. He was in retirement but still came to the office. The last time I saw him he asked me to come around the desk and sit by his side. We had a long conversation about authors and books, and when I got up to go he put his arm around my neck and gave me a fatherly pat. I could not help recalling how different that meeting was from that first nervous moment when I came within inches of shooting myself out of a publisher.

THOMAS D. CLARK is Professor of History at the University of Kentucky.