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LIBRARY BOOK ROYALTIES : EASING AN AUTHOR'S FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

From H. E. Bates

Sir,—May I ask for the courtesy of your columns in order to add a few words to the letters of Mr. Giles Gordon, of Victor Gollancz Ltd., and Professor M. R. D. Foot (February 17), on the subject of Public Lending Right?

It is all too often forgotten that if there were no authors there would be no publishers; there would also be no printers, no binders, no booksellers, and in case the fact has been overlooked, no librarians. There would also be no newspapers, no magazines, no radio, no actors and, so far as dialogue is concerned, no films or television. We, the authors, pursuing our precarious profession with the aid of nothing but our brains, imagination and the simplest of materials, are the beginning of it all.

It has long been beyond dispute that authors in Britain are, on the whole, treated shabbily. (I wonder how widely it is known, for example, that well within living memory it was the custom of publishers to give a baker's dozen for every 12 copies sold, thus depriving the author of his royalty on every thirteenth copy?)

Our profession carries no pension, no superannuation scheme, no fixed income, no guarantee of employment, no so-called redundancy payment, no security. It has no trade union and I sometimes cannot help wondering what would happen if it had. In other words, as Mr. J. P. Donleavy implies in *The Times Diary* (February 17), we are on our own.

It may well be argued against this that we, after all, chose the profession in which we engage and we must therefore put up with it, for better or worse; all of which is patently true. But when that profession provides a livelihood for many people other than authors themselves we have a right, it seems to me, to a little more consideration.

The greater part of the authors of this country, blessed as it is with the magnificent literature to which Professor Foot refers, would not dream of asking for state aid or subsidy, and Miss Jennie Lee's recent stupid and dangerous excursion into that particular territory has been treated with the contempt it deserves.

But P.L.R. is another matter. It is entirely scandalous that this scheme, already approved by the Arts Council, the Publishers Association and the Society of Authors, as Professor Foot observes, should have been pigeon-holed 18 months somewhere in the dark corridors of what is called, heaven help us, the Department of Education.

As an author who has lived by nothing but his pen for more than 40 years, beginning at the age of 20 on an income of 10 shillings a week, I think I may claim to know more than a little of authorship's trials and tribulations. But when I reflect that the first book I ever published has been in print ever since 1926, together with almost all of the many other books I have written, I cannot help wondering how many times my books have been borrowed from so-called "free Public Libraries" and how greatly the problems of my early married life and of the bringing up and education of a large family might have been alleviated if P.L.R. had been in existence all those years ago. Nor can I help reflecting that its belated introduction, even now, may do something to ease what may well be the even greater problems of later years.

I may add here that I have no complaint against the three publishers, among them Victor Gollancz Ltd., who have published my work over many years. I merely ask for a little justice from the fat and dozing pigeons in their departmental pigeon-holes: not merely for myself but for all other authors who, at the moment, help to keep Public Libraries "free".

I am, Sir, yours faithfully,

H. E. BATES.

Reid's Hotel, Funchal, Madeira, Feb. 18.

Not her fault

From Lord Lloyd of Hampstead

Sir,—The vicious attack on Miss Jennie Lee by Mr. Michael Holroyd in your *Review* last Saturday regarding the Public Lending

Right was utterly misconceived and ill-judged.

The scheme for a Public Lending Right proposed by the Arts Council and supported with all her characteristic energy by Miss Lee involves a straight subsidy from public funds in favour of authors. No doubt this is a deserving group but there are many other deserving groups and causes for which a case for a subsidy can be made out, and in the last resort it is for the Government to determine its priorities.

In this particular instance, despite all her efforts, Miss Lee has not so far persuaded her Treasury colleagues to place this claim high up in the queue. Miss Lee has rendered inestimable services to artists and the arts during her tenure of office and to heap scorn and obloquy upon her, as is done in Mr. Holroyd's article, provides a sad example of spleen and incomprehension on the part of one who should know better. But like Horace, Miss Lee has doubtless learnt to endure that "genus irritabile vatum".

Yours faithfully,

LLOYD OF HAMPSTEAD.

House of Lords, Feb. 18.

Objections met

From Miss Elizabeth Barber

Sir,—Lord Eccles (February 20) misleads your readers in certain vital respects. The points he makes about the P.L.R. scheme which we put before him in 1960 have little or no relevance now, because:—

- (a) following the Public Libraries and Museums Act, 1964, we obediently dropped any idea of charging the borrower or imposing a charge on the rates;
- (b) the "author of a good but not popular book" is expressly catered for, the scheme containing a scale of payments weighted in his favour;
- (c) As there is no charge to collect there will be no extra burden on library staffs of the kind Lord Eccles envisages. All that will be involved is a checking operation on a sample basis.

Lord Eccles hopes Miss Lee will share his views. This really is confusing the issue now that the points to which he refers no longer apply. Miss Lee has categorically stated that Public Libraries must remain free. That is the corner-stone of the present P.L.R. scheme.

Yours faithfully,

M. E. BARBER, General Secretary,
the Society of Authors.

84 Drayton Gardens, S.W.10, Feb. 20.

Relevant question

From Mr. Lennox Phillips

Sir.—In Mr. Ian Norrie's letter (February 18) he asks: "Why should the public subsidize my urge to write a novel if what I write doesn't appeal to them sufficiently for me to make a living from it?" Surely the relevant question is "Why should members of the public not subsidize their urge to read the book which they have chosen from the public library, especially when the subsidy envisaged is in the nature of one penny for each book?"

Yours faithfully,

LENNOX PHILLIPS.

70 Lexham Gardens, W.8, Feb. 18.

If the libraries closed

From Mr. M. N. Worth

Sir.—I feel that Mr. Ian Norrie's letter (February 18) is one of the most sensible opinions expressed yet on the whole question of Public Lending Right, and Sir Alan Herbert and the rest of the P.L.R. campaigners would do well to reflect a little on its content.

The entire question seems to stem from some unspecified remuneration of which the author is being deprived in royalties by the existence of the public library and the way in which it conducts its loaning procedure. What authors should be asking themselves is what would the effect be on their income if the public libraries closed

their doors? How many authors, publishers and booksellers would care to admit that the subsequent loss of library orders could in fact be compensated by additional copies being sold over the counter to the general public?

The idea of the public library being "free" is only true to a certain limit. Quite rightly no charge is made to the reader for the actual loan of a library book, but we must not assume that the public library is a complete charity. It is paid for in the form of rates by the people who use it. They benefit from such a system, and so do, I believe, authors, publishers and booksellers from library orders. The whole idea of any further charge is to be thoroughly discouraged.

Yours truly,

M. N. WORTH.

163 Bramcote Lane, Wollaton, Nottingham, Feb. 18.

Failure of persuasion

From Mr. Robert Skidelsky

Sir,—The most disturbing revelation of Mr. Michael Holroyd's excellent article on library royalties (*Saturday Review*, February 15) is of the complete failure of reasoned argument and persuasion to get results. The unhappy conclusion would seem to be that good argument gets you nowhere; only direct action does.

If such a conclusion were to be generally accepted as valid, then civilized political behaviour as we know it would soon cease to exist. Successive governments have ignored the authors' claims for 20 years. It is high time that they lived up to their own theory of how politics should work.

Yours faithfully,

ROBERT SKIDELSKY.

Flat 1, 166 Cromwell Road, S.W.5,
Feb. 19.

Tremendous difference

From Miss Ethel Mannin

Sir,—Mr. Ian Norrie (February 18) seems to have missed the point. The public are not being asked to "subsidize" authors, but only to make a token payment for services rendered. Whether the author writes purely out of the creative urge, or to make a living through that creative gift, is immaterial; those who avail themselves of the finished product should pay for it, just as they pay for a seat at the cinema, theatre, concert hall, and as they pay (or are supposed to pay), for their television and radio entertainment.

Very few people today could not afford to pay a penny-for-the-author, "Brophy's Penny", each time they borrowed a book; in most cases it would be for the borrower only a penny or tuppence a week, but the scheme would add up to a tremendous difference for the author, particularly for the older established author whose following is mainly "library".

I am, Sir, yours respectfully,

ETHEL MANNIN.

27 Burghley Road, S.W.19, Feb. 18.

Too many books

From Mr. Michael Holroyd

Sir,—Mr. Ian Norrie's red herring on Public Lending Right (February 18) swims with the current of my argument, not against it. It is because of poverty that some authors have to produce pot boilers; it is because of poverty that too much gets written and published in the scramble to make a living. Miss Lee's paralysis may certainly be held to stimulate bad writing of this sort—I would not take it upon myself to deny this. My argument was that she discouraged literature.

Mr. Norrie concedes that there is a place for state patronage for literature. But Public Lending Right is not patronage. It is payment for the actual use of books. What is patronizing is Miss Lee's attitude.

Yours faithfully,

MICHAEL HOLROYD.

8 Stanwick Road, West Kensington, W.14