

# WILLIAM PICKERING AND THE BOOK TRADE IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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The career of William Pickering in the book trade conveniently spans the first half of the nineteenth century. Born in 1796, he was at the age of fourteen apprenticed to John and Arthur Arch, the Quaker booksellers and publishers of Cornhill. In 1818 he left for a short period with Longmans and in 1820, with the aid of a gift of £1000, he set up as a bookseller on his own account. As such he built up during his lifetime a considerable stock of antiquarian books. In the same year he launched out into publishing. Thirty-three years later, in 1853, he went bankrupt and he died the following year.

According to Arthur Warren<sup>2</sup>, Pickering's father was a book-loving earl, and his mother a lady of title, and his name came from a tailor with whose wife he was put out to nurse. However, the connection with his noble parents was not broken, and it seems probable that his father arranged the apprenticeship and provided the money to set him up in business in the book trade. It is known that financial assistance was also provided by a John Joseph Thornthwaite, of whom more will be said later. There are a number of pointers to the assumption that his father was in fact the second Earl Spencer. Amongst his earliest publications in 1820 were a number of the miniature books known as the *Diamond Classics* which have on their title-pages the coat of arms of the Earl, followed by a dedication to him. In December 1822 an advertisement on a wrapper of the *Gentleman's Magazine* even referred to them as "*The Spencer Classics*".<sup>3</sup> Certainly he was well acquainted with Earl Spencer's librarian, Dibdin. In 1828, he

<sup>1</sup> An expanded version of a paper read at a meeting of the Manchester Bibliographical Society on Monday, 23 May 1983 in the John Rylands University Library.

<sup>2</sup> A. Warren, *The Charles Whittinghams, printers* (hereafter Warren) (New York, 1896), p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> Sir G. Keynes, *William Pickering, publisher: a memoir and check-list of his publications*. Revised edn. (hereafter Keynes) (London, 1969), p. 13.

published, with John Major, Dibdin's edition of Thomas À Kempis's *Of the imitation of Jesus Christ*. In a letter to Pickering dated 12 October 1827 Dibdin writes "How do you do Mr. Pickering?—and how is your good wife? How are all the Bijoux—and how goes on a certain 'Bijou' ... when does it glitter before the public eye? I wish I could get a peep at it here, especially to take to Lord and Lady Spencer next week, where I do duty for one Sunday at the Spencer's Church, and stop a week".<sup>4</sup> The *Bijou* referred to is the small literary annual published in 1828, and it is of interest, and probably significant, that amongst the bound-in advertisement pages of many copies is listed Dibdin's *Aedes Althorpianae*, containing an account of the Spencer library. This work was published in 1822 by Payne & Foss and others, including, it is worth noting, J. and A. Arch, to whom Pickering was apprenticed in 1810. Pickering must have acquired a share in the publication of the work. The Archs were also co-publishers of the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana* in 1814 during Pickering's apprenticeship. In the preface to *Aedes Althorpianae*, Dibdin mentions the Spencer Aldine collection, and remarks that it was judged expedient to preserve it in London and not at Althorp.<sup>5</sup> Whether Pickering actually saw the collection is not known, but he must have been aware of its existence as part of his father's library, and, furthermore, it was also in 1828 that he started to use the famous Dolphin and Anchor device, a close copy of the one used by Aldus Manutius, with the added motto "Aldi Discip. Anglus". J.W. Brown's *Life of Leonarda da Vinci* was possibly the first book in which it appears on the title-page.<sup>6</sup> These aristocratic origins and early influences were not without importance in Pickering's management of his publishing and bookselling interests in later years.

<sup>4</sup> Photocopy of letter in the Rylands Library. From the Greenwood Correspondence in Manchester Central Library.

<sup>5</sup> T. F. Dibdin, *Aedes Althorpianae* (London, 1822), p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> This imitation of Aldus did not escape criticism at the time. When Panizzi had his edition of Ariosto and Bojardo published by Pickering in 1830, he presented a copy to the Italian scholar W. S. Rose, who wrote back "If Pickering be not squeezed to death in his own press, his nose at least ought to be rubbed in his own frontispieces (I mean title-pages) while the ink is still wet ... as an appropriate punishment. I do not blame him for his imitation, but for his bad imitation of Aldus. Anglus is not an adjective, and why have we Arabic instead of Roman numerals? which would have harmonized with the rest of the letterpress" (L. A. Fagan, *The life of Sir Anthony Panizzi* (London, 1880), ii. 82-3).

Before considering Pickering's activities in the book trade, it is important, indeed essential, to bear in mind the difficult economic conditions and the background of social and political ferment, particularly during the second quarter of the century. In 1825 occurred the financial crisis which ruined Scott and the Ballantynes. In 1830 there were revolutions in Europe, and at home the agitation leading to the Reform Bill of 1832. Economic uncertainty persisted throughout the 1830s, with another financial crisis from 1836 to 1842. These were also the years of the Chartist agitation, and the controversy over Free Trade which culminated in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The year 1848 witnessed more revolutions in Europe and more Chartist activity at home. Considering these events, it was not a comfortable period in which to be in business, and certainly not in the book trade, where conditions, as in other spheres, were changing rapidly. Before this period established publishers, such as John Murray, tended to adopt an attitude of patronage towards the author, and considered themselves as arbiters of all that was best in literature. In a letter to Murray, William Blackwood, his agent in Edinburgh, remarked in 1816 "In your connections with literary men, when I consider the books you have published and are to publish, you have the happiness of making it a liberal profession, and not a mere business of the pence. This I consider one of the greatest privileges we have in our business".<sup>7</sup> However, during this period "business of the pence" was to become a matter of overriding importance. Between 1825 and 1850 the average price of books fell from approximately 16 shillings to 8 shillings a volume,<sup>8</sup> and as Barnes, in his study of the nineteenth-century book trade remarked, bookselling was renowned as a trade involving risks which could exceed those in many other occupations.<sup>9</sup>

In 1832 was published Dibdin's *Bibliophobia: remarks on the present languid and depressed state of literature and the book trade*, which he attributed to the fear of Reform and of the cholera,<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> S. Smiles, *A publisher and his friends: memoir and correspondence of the late John Murray* (London, 1891), ii. 456.

<sup>8</sup> R.J.L. Kingsford, *The Publishers' Association, 1896-1946* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> J. J. Barnes, *Free trade in books: a study of the London book trade since 1800* (hereafter Barnes) (Oxford, 1964), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> T. F. Dibdin, *Bibliophobia: remarks on the present languid and depressed state of literature and the book trade* (London, 1832), p. 6.

both, apparently, equally obnoxious. He describes a visit to Thorpe's bookshop where the proprietor grumbles that "Everything lingers, everything stands still. The dust on yonder set of *Acta Sanctorum* will soon produce me a good crop of carrots. Literature is perishing. The country is undone"<sup>11</sup>. In particular, poetry sold slowly, and in 1842 Edward Moxon, noted as a publisher of poetry, wrote to Wordsworth on the depressed state of the trade, blaming the influence of cheap weekly and monthly publications.<sup>12</sup> The financial conditions of the late 1830s and early 1840s caused a great slackening of publishing output and during this period the number of titles brought out by Moxon was halved and did not subsequently recover.<sup>13</sup> The effect of the political turbulence of 1848 is noted by Lord Campbell in his journal: "If the world should ever again be quiet, and men have curiosity to look back upon the past, I have rather good hopes of my *Lives of the Chief Justices*. But as yet no one can read anything except the newspapers, and if Macauley's long expected *History of England* were to come out, it would cause little sensation. We seem to have arrived at an entirely new era in the annals of the human race. The religious movement at the time of the Reformation was nothing to the political movement which we now behold. The cement which held society together is suddenly dissolved, and it seems about to become a confused heap of ruins."<sup>14</sup> In addition there was the burden of taxation. First and foremost was the tax on paper. Charles Knight claimed in 1850 that he could have reduced the price of his Penny Cyclopaedia if there had been no tax. On a circulation of between 20,000 and 100,000 copies a year, out of an overall cost of £42,000 between 1833 and 1846, no less than £16,500 was accounted for by the excise duty on paper.<sup>15</sup> The circulation of popular works of fiction and travel was held up because of this imposition, and in 1852 John Chapman said it was more profitable to sell fewer copies in three volumes to the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-5.

<sup>12</sup> H. G. Merriam, *Edward Moxon: publisher of poets* (hereafter Merriam) (New York, 1939), p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-2.

<sup>14</sup> *Life of John, Lord Campbell. Consisting of a selection from his autobiography, diary and letters*. Edited by his daughter, Mrs. (M.S.) Hardcastle (London, 1881), ii. 247.

<sup>15</sup> C. Knight, *Passages of a working life during half a century* (London, 1864), ii. 331-6.

wealthy and to the circulating libraries than larger numbers more cheaply.<sup>16</sup> This tax was not abolished until 1861. Secondly, there was the tax on advertisements in newspapers and periodicals, 3s. 6d. regardless of size. This was reduced to 1s. 6d. in 1834 but not abandoned until 1853.<sup>17</sup> Publishers and booksellers were heavily dependent on advertising, and since sales depended on reaching scattered readers, serious literary works with limited appeal were most affected. Finally, there was still the problem of the lack of an Anglo-American agreement on copyright, and it was not until 1853 that a treaty was eventually signed—and 1891 before the Chase Act was passed by Congress, first permitting the extension of American copyright to foreigners on conditions of reciprocity.<sup>18</sup> All these factors were inhibiting, and it was not until the 1860s that the really phenomenal expansion of the book trade took place.

To survive in this climate, one needed considerable business ability. As Merriam puts it in his study of Edward Moxon: “To keep the business of printing and marketing poetry solvent and increasing during the prolonged financial crisis, the political unrest, the turbulence of social thought and action of the 1830s, 40s and 50s required acumen and enterprise”.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the method of publishing a book—and the expenses could be shouldered by the author alone, or shared between author and publisher, or the publisher could purchase the copyright<sup>20</sup> (there were no royalty agreements in England in this period)—whatever the method, the circumstance which needs emphasising is that the publisher usually had all the expenses of printing, binding and advertising, and took all the risks. Even in cases where there were subscription lists, the subscriptions still had to be collected, and in the meantime, the printer had to be paid. One had to be hard-headed, and some in the book trade were very hard-headed indeed. In his memoirs William Chambers of Edinburgh recalls: “At the outset, we laid down three rules—one, never to take credit but pay for all the great elements of trade in ready money—two,

<sup>16</sup> *Westminster Review* (April 1852), p. 519.

<sup>17</sup> Barnes, p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> J. J. Barnes, *Authors, publishers and politicians: the quest for an Anglo-American copyright agreement, 1815-1854* (Columbus, Ohio, 1974), p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> Merriam, p. 188.

<sup>20</sup> Saunders and Otley, *The authors' printing and publishing assistant* (London, 1839), pp. 58-9.

never to give a bill and never to discount one, and—three, never to undertake any enterprise for which means were not prepared”. Referring to his brother Robert, he says “He thought of Scott and the Ballantynes and how, by an extreme and misplaced confidence arising from kindness of heart, a man may be irretrievably ruined”.<sup>21</sup> It was the Ballantynes who had initiated Scott into the system of bill-discounting which started the fatal process of the automatic accumulation of debt, by renewing bills of exchange as they became due. Describing with great disapproval the business methods in certain sections of the publishing profession in London, he goes on: “There are two prevailing methods of ruination—extravagance in living and trading beyond means—substituting sanguine expectations, along with borrowed money, for capital. So frightful is the hurry, that means are not suffered to accumulate in order to allow of ready-money payments. The whole transactions subside into a system of bills—bills to wholesale stationers, bills to printers, bills to artists, bills to writers, bills to everybody. In the same wild way bills that are received are hurried off for discount. The chief difficulty is how to effect discounts. Hours are spent daily in the effort. Commercially there is a struggle between life and death every four-and-twenty hours. Who would covet existence on such terms”.<sup>22</sup>

When we turn to Pickering’s activities, it is noteworthy that early in his publishing career he became involved in a conflict which was to divide the book trade throughout most of this period. Although Warren was of the opinion that bookselling was his major interest, it is in connection with his publishing that the two significant developments took place. Firstly, he was responsible for the introduction of the cloth-bound book, that is, the use of dyed cotton cloth, instead of flimsy paper, to cover the boards, together with a printed paper label on the spine. It seems now generally accepted that the first book to be so treated was an edition of Baxter’s *Poetical fragments*, published by Pickering in 1821.<sup>23</sup> This was rapidly followed by the similar treatment

<sup>21</sup> W. Chambers, *Memoir of William and Robert Chambers*. 5th edn. (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 314.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>23</sup> Keynes, p. 13. For a full review of the evidence for the introduction of cloth binding, see M. T. H. Sadleir, *The evolution of publishers’ binding styles, 1770-1900* (London, 1930); J. Carter, *Publishers’ cloth: an outline history of publishers’ binding in England, 1820-1900* (New York, 1935); *Binding variants in English*

of his *Diamond Classics*, and he was soon imitated by other publishers.<sup>24</sup> The result was that for the first time a cheap but serviceable standardised publisher's binding, selling at a fixed retail price, was available at most bookshops. In some instances, such as Coleridge's *Poetical works* and the *Aldine Poets* series, Pickering also produced a standard publisher's leather binding as an alternative, selling at 10s. 6d. a volume compared with 5s. a volume for the cloth version. This development of the cloth-covered book, together with the growth of advertising, gave publicity to the retail price of new books, and opened up the possibility of some booksellers offering bargains by under-cutting the publisher's retail price for a standard article. This, of course, is what inevitably happened. One can quote the 1829 edition of Scott's *Waverley Novels*, where the wholesale price was 3s. 7d. a volume and which were offered at some shops for 4s. instead of 5s retail.<sup>25</sup> The second significant development was his publication of rival editions of standard works, or trade books, as they were called. These were well-established, steady selling, standard works in which copyright had usually expired, where several members of the trade established in practice, if not in law, a claim to sole rights. The various parties, under the management of the major shareholder, agreed on and fixed the wholesale and retail prices, with, of course, a special price for partners.<sup>26</sup> The trade edition of a set of Gibbon, incorrectly printed on poor paper, sold at £4.4s. Pickering's greatly superior edition in the *Oxford English Classics Series*, published in partnership with Talboys and Wheeler of Oxford, retailed at £3.4s., making the trade edition unsaleable.<sup>27</sup> There were as many as fifty-six shareholders in the trade edition of

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*publishing, 1820-1900*, (London, 1932); *More binding variants* (London, 1938); R. McLean, *Victorian publishers' book-bindings in cloth and leather* (London, 1974).

<sup>24</sup> Although Pickering was responsible for the innovation of cloth binding, he did not develop the idea as other publishers soon did, with elaborate gold-blocked decoration; but, with few exceptions, continued with the plain cloth with printed paper label (R. McLean, *Victorian publishers' book-bindings in cloth and leather* (London, 1974), p. 13).

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Bookseller* (5 May 1951), p. 1109.

<sup>27</sup> Keynes, p. 33.

Gibbon, so Pickering could well have antagonised quite a number of the publishing fraternity.<sup>28</sup>

In 1828 rules governing the issue of trade books had already been drawn up, and in 1829 another meeting of the London Book Trade formally approved the control of retail prices. The Booksellers' Association appointed a committee and regulations were agreed. The period between the adoption of these regulations and the arbitration judgement of Lord Campbell in 1852 (when they were declared contrary to the freedom of trade) was characterised by a conflict between the generally older and more conservative publishers and booksellers who supported them, and their opponents who were in favour of free trade. Pickering became involved on the side of the undersellers, as they were called, at an early stage. In 1832 he issued two pamphlets: one was a four-page manifesto entitled *Booksellers' Monopoly*, the other a pamphlet called *Cases showing the arbitrary and oppressive conduct of the Committee of Booksellers*. These are very rare items, but the cases are quoted by Edward Portwine in the *Retail Booksellers' and Bookbuyers' Advocate*, a journal noted for its somewhat colourful language, which appeared in three numbers only, from 1836 to 1837, and which had to be distributed surreptitiously owing to its criticism of the Committee and the Association. Pickering disclosed the names of the ten firms represented on the Committee, which included such names as J. Murray, Longman & Co., J.G. & F. Rivington, Simpkin, Marshall & Co., and his old employers during his apprenticeship, J. & A. Arch.<sup>29</sup> He attacked the methods adopted to enforce retail prices; and accused them of usurping authority from the trade in general and of acting upon pure suspicion without proof. They had labelled him an underseller, he alleged, in retaliation for publishing rival editions to the established trade books.

The methods adopted by the Committee were quite drastic. Lists were drawn up and those not on them were not admitted to the privileges of the trade. There was a denial of credit and a refusal to sell to undersellers at wholesale prices. There were unfair practices which at times amounted to downright skulduggery: Pickering's publications were deliberately listed as 'out of print' or

<sup>28</sup> *Bookseller*, (5 May 1951), p. 1109.

<sup>29</sup> W. Pickering, *Booksellers' Monopoly* (London, 1832), pp. 3-4. Quoted in Barnes, p. 7.



'sold out' by Association booksellers, and there was even a spy system of which Pickering was a victim. As Edward Portwine describes it: "Two wretched creatures, dressed as mechanics, were placed at the top and bottom of the street in which our publisher resides, and the same number before the shops of Mr. Cox, of Red Lion Street, and Mr. Pickering of Chancery Lane, with instructions to follow the inmates of these several houses, both male and female, wherever their occupation might lead them".<sup>30</sup> Pickering's cases included tragedies such as that of one David Freeman of Paternoster Row, a bookseller ruined by the practices of the Committee. This man was tricked into giving a twenty per cent discount for a Hebrew Grammar by an agent pretending to be a member of the trade. His credit was stopped and even his cash refused for whatever books he wished to purchase for his retail customers. Some time subsequent to his exclusion from the trade he is said to have left his large family starving in the morning "and had arrived as far as Holborn in search of employment, when he fell upon the pathway from exhaustion and utter wretchedness".<sup>31</sup> Such cases illustrate attempts by the Committee not merely to enforce retail prices, but to drive some newly-established booksellers out of the trade by fair means or foul, thereby reducing their numbers, destroying their competition, and advancing the interests of the established members of the Association. Portwine had had frequent interviews with Pickering at his residence, where, he said, he "breathed nothing but revenge against the junta". But in 1834, according to Portwine, he "crawled back to their den" and became one of their number. It is alleged that the Association were tempted by his publication of the famous *Bridgewater Treatises* and the profits to be derived from them by booksellers, and accepted him back into the trade. "Mr. Pickering had formerly the strength of a Samson", remarked Portwine, "but he is now in the lap of Delilah".<sup>32</sup>

Sir Geoffrey Keynes, in his memoir, speculates as to what extent Pickering's business may have been damaged by the conflict with the Booksellers' Committee round about 1830, but certainly the conflict went on intermittently until 1852, throughout most of his career in the trade.<sup>33</sup> It is possible that the attitude of superiority

<sup>30</sup> *Retail Booksellers' and Bookbuyers' Advocate* (January 1837), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19, 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Keynes, p. 39.

which he adopted in the publishing side of his business may have antagonised other publishers. "Mr. Pickering commences his statement", remarks Portwine, in reviewing the 'Cases', "by puffing his own publications, comparing his works with the trade books, and contrasting their prices, assuring the public how very superior his works are to the rubbish published by the trade. He then goes on to state that the trade met and agreed that they should oppose his rival editions".<sup>34</sup>

It is perhaps in the field of typography and book design that Pickering is best known and remembered, especially from 1830 onwards when he began his long association with Charles Whittingham the Younger. In this unusually close partnership between publisher and printer, it is said that it was Pickering who supplied the originality and Whittingham the technical knowledge. He was ahead of his time in his devotion to the production of moderately-priced books of a high standard, and Keynes says of him: "His standard of book production was unusually high for a man whose aims were, after all, primarily commercial".<sup>35</sup> However, sometimes a virtue can become a fault if it leads to excessive preoccupation, which in turn can undermine commercial viability. Moreover, Pickering tended to look to the past for most of his inspiration. This is illustrated by the re-introduction of Caslon old-face type in the 1840s, which, according to Whittingham, was at Pickering's suggestion. It should be made clear exactly what is meant and implied by this reintroduction—it was not a reinterpretation, but the use of the actual matrices of the first William Caslon of 1740. Henry Caslon II was sceptical about the project. The Caslons had introduced new types in 1805 and had ceased to display the old face in catalogues after that date, but agreed to supply what was wanted. Whittingham claimed that other London printers had followed suit, but few books were set in Caslon old-face at this period except at the Chiswick Press, and they were in very limited categories. There was a fashion in the 1850s for such books intended as Christmas presents, bound in embossed covers, a good Pickering example being Sir Arthur Helps' *Essays written in the intervals of business*, published in 1848. Pickering and Whittingham went to great trouble and expence, and there were

<sup>34</sup> *Retail Booksellers' and Bookbuyers' Advocate* (January 1837), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Keynes, p. 36.

difficulties and long delays to produce what formed, after all, a small proportion of publishing output, confined chiefly to devotional books, volumes of verse and ephemeral essays. There were, it is true, some very attractive editions produced in this type: the 1846 Pickering edition of Herrick's *Hesperides* is a beautiful example of book production, but one glance at the text reveals why it was, nevertheless, an anachronism—Caslon old-face retained the long 's'. This had been generally abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century, a reform usually credited to John Bell, and Bell's modern face was to be the model for the nineteenth century. Any books retaining the long 's' were regarded as hang-overs and it did linger on until as late as 1824 at the Oxford University Press.<sup>36</sup> Caslon old-face was not the type chosen for mass-circulation books, or three-decker novels. Admittedly, it was said to have been admired by the Prince Consort, who suggested that the catalogue of the Great Exhibition be set in it, but this encountered the insurmountable objection of the Victorians—it was uneconomic.

The Caslon revival was not the only major reversion to the past by Pickering in the 1840s. In 1844 reproductions of the six folio Prayer Books, from the First Book of Edward VI of 1549 to Charles II's book of 1662, were published, with title-pages and ornaments in facsimile of the original editions, the text in black letter printed on thick hand-made paper, and all bound in parchment gilt at 18 guineas the set. Whittingham lavished his best work on them, but Pickering, as publisher, had to pay for the printing. Sir Geoffrey Keynes remarks of them that "they represent what could be achieved by good taste and craftsmanship in the ordinary way of business before the self-conscious products of the private presses had obscured the issue by suggesting that commerce and fine printing were incompatible".<sup>37</sup> But it could be argued that books like these were, in fact, divorced from commerce. In the sales catalogues of Pickering's publishing stock, sold off after his bankruptcy, there were no fewer than 214 complete sets to be auctioned, representing over £4000 of stock for this one item alone.<sup>38</sup> Whittingham and Pickering even

<sup>36</sup> T. B. Reed, *A history of old English letter foundries*. New edn., rev. by A. F. Johnson (London, 1953), pp. 247-50 and 47 n.; K. Day, *Book typography, 1815-1965* (London, 1966), pp. 146-7.

<sup>37</sup> Keynes, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> *Catalogue of the ... important stock of modern books published by Mr.*

decided to complete a number of imperfect copies of Caxton's books and devoted much time and money in attempting an exact reproduction of Caxton types.<sup>39</sup> Activities like these must have proved very expensive.

The two critical comments of imitation and expense could also be made about the ornaments engraved by Mary Byfield, which decorated many of Pickering's later publications. Pickering and Whittingham studied and copied from books obtained from the library of the Duke of Sussex, which had been sold off in 1843. Pickering's books with these ornaments are often very attractive, but were expensive to produce—as Warren puts it—a labour of love rather than profit. "Whittingham gave to it an amount of time, care and risk out of all proportion", he says, "It was gratifying, no doubt, to be praised for the best printing, but it could not be gratifying to know that the expense of woodcut work always equalled and sometimes exceeded its market value".<sup>40</sup> And, of course, Pickering, as the publisher, had to pay the printer. Moreover, Pickering's concern with ornament at this time was also reflected in a departure from the simple title-pages of his earlier period, and his use of rather ponderous monumental frames to enclose the titles. This can be seen in his later editions of George Herbert's *Remains*, and Bacon's *Advancement of learning*; and the heavy, elaborate quarto library edition of Cowper's *Poetical works* of 1853 is very different from the elegant simplicity of the Cowper in the *Aldine Poets* series. Excessive attention to book design could also lead to exasperating delays. Panizzi's edition of the *Divina Commedia* was to have been published in 1848 by Pickering, but Panizzi complained to Lord Vernon, who was sponsoring the work, that there was much correspondence but no progress, and Lord Vernon was discouraged. "The Book-seller", he said, "had not taken up the matter in so spirited a manner as anticipated".<sup>41</sup> It was eventually published in 1858, by Thomas and William Boone, printed by Whittingham in Caslon old-face type with decorative initial letters.

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*William Pickering of Piccadilly ... sold by Mr. L. A. Lewis 11 April 1854-15 October 1856.* Seven main parts bound with some later supplementary sales, annotated with prices by W. Craven. Photocopy of the only known complete set in Trinity College Library, Cambridge, kindly supplied by Dr. A. N. L. Munby.

<sup>39</sup> Warren, p. 220.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>41</sup> Fagan, *op. cit.*, ii. 297.

By this time, in the late 1840s, Pickering was less in harmony with the nineteenth century than he had been in the 1820s and 1830s. His developments in book design tended to be backward looking, his revivals did not reflect the general trend, and above all, from the commercial point of view, he took no account of rapid advances in mechanisation. These characteristics seem to be reflected in his exhibits in the Great Exhibition of 1851. In the reports of the juries for Class 17 (*Paper, Stationery, Printing and Bookbinding*) it was regretted that almost no printers have exhibited from England because of instructions given to local Commissioners that printed books as such were inadmissible, but some fine specimens seem to have crept in by "mere chance".<sup>42</sup> It is of interest to note that Whittingham was one of the jurors for this section, but the exhibits appear under "Pickering, William—Producer". There are four items: a folio *Book of Common Prayer* adapted to the present reign, in black and red old English type in imitation of the early editions, with ornaments, and on hand-made paper; the *Book of Common Prayer* with musical notes by John Merbecke printed in facsimile of the original edition of 1550; a curious edition of Euclid in which coloured diagrams and symbols are used instead of letters—a not very successful attempt at educational publishing; and, finally, specimens from one of the sumptuous works of Henry Shaw, *Dresses and decorations of the Middle Ages*, with coloured plates heightened with gold.<sup>43</sup> It does appear to be rather an odd collection to exhibit in such a context. Pickering's connection with the Great Exhibition is also shown by his publication, for private circulation, of a book by Henry Stevens of Vermont, the American book agent, entitled *An account of a dinner given by Mr. Peabody to the Americans connected with Great Exhibition*; obviously a gift book and an expensive production, its content not justifying its format.

Enough has been said to show that Pickering's tastes were largely antiquarian and theological. He was interested in poetry, but mainly the early poets; in theology, to some extent in current matters like the Oxford Movement, but more in the early Divines, particularly of the seventeenth century. To this can be added an interest in the nobility and a few other special interests, notably

<sup>42</sup> Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, London, 1851. *Reports of the juries* (London, 1852), ii. 882.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, *Official descriptive and illustrated catalogue* (London, 1851-2), ii. 545.

angling. He indulged these tastes in both the bookselling and publishing sides of his business, and there is a strong parallel between the stock of his bookshop and the content of his publishing. He was certainly regarded as one of the principal antiquarian booksellers in London. When Henry Stevens first arrived in England in 1845, he visited the four most important bookshops, one of which was Pickering's, the others belonging to Rodd, Thorpe and Rich,<sup>44</sup> His stock was said to have been prodigious. An obituary rated him as a leading bibliophile of the metropolis because of his knowledge of rare and precious books, a skill, it says, now greatly in decline amongst London booksellers.<sup>45</sup> Henry Stevens was one of the chief buyers at the sale of this stock by Sotheby and Wilkinson in 1854-5. It included what he described as "two whole cartloads" of Bibles. Stevens certainly secured many bargains on behalf of Lenox, the American collector, including a copy of the Bay Psalm Book, the first book to be printed in the United States, in 1640, for which he paid 19 shillings. In acquiring and dealing with this stock, there is more than a suspicion that Pickering tended to please himself rather than his customers. There is an anecdote related by Dibdin, when, in visiting Pickering's bookshop in 1832, he observed on the shelves large paper copies of his own works: *Bibliomania*, *Tour*, *Decameron* and *Classics*. Pickering remarked that "nothing short of a good round sum would tempt him to part with them, should they even linger there till Domesday".<sup>46</sup>

At the start of his publishing activities, Pickering was said to have had "patrons in high places with long purses"<sup>47</sup> and found it expedient to please them with elegant reprints of the best literature. His love of old books produced a corresponding taste for reprinting them, and although he published a distinctive list, the market he was aiming at was limited. When one looks at his various series this limitation is evident. The most famous one, the *Aldine Poets*, comprised only twenty-three names, all pre-nineteenth century; in the 1840s only two new names were added, those of Chaucer and Churchill. In the *Diamond Classics* there

<sup>44</sup> W. W. Parker, *Henry Stevens of Vermont: American rare book dealer in London, 1845-1886* (Amsterdam, 1963), p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Willis's *Current Notes* (May 1854), p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> T. F. Dibdin, *Bibliophobia: remarks on the present languid and depressed state of literature and the book trade* (London, 1832), pp. 22-3.

<sup>47</sup> Warren, pp. 133-4.

were fourteen items, and in the *Bridgewater Treatises*, eight. This last series, his nearest approach to science, had nevertheless a strong theological bias. The *Small Books on Great Subjects* series, mostly by one author, Caroline Frances Cornwallis, with twenty-two items, also had a theological element, and the *Christian Classics*, with eighteen items, although published cheaply in printed paper wrappers at 1s.6d. each, was confined to the seventeenth-century English Divines. There was nothing on the scale, for example, of *Bentley's Standard Novels*, in which one hundred and twenty seven titles were published between 1834 and 1854, or the *Parlour Library* of Sims and McIntyre, begun in 1847, which eventually ran to two hundred and seventy-six items. He also published much minor verse, often in as elaborate a format as more weighty literature; Fletcher's *Tryphena*, for example, complete with Caslon old-face type and ornaments, or Fitchett's *King Alfred*, an enormous work in six large volumes which took the author a lifetime to write and which can only have been published as an act of charity.

All this illustrates that Pickering was apparently uninterested in publishing for the mass market, as other houses were beginning to do. Instead of moving with the times, he seemed to become preoccupied with elaborate extravagant books such as Henry Drummond's *Histories of noble British Families*, or the works of Henry Shaw. The content of his publishing lacked the more popular material which would have brought in a reliable and steady income to balance his indulgences. It is interesting, in this respect, to compare him with Edward Moxon whose major interest was the publication of poetry, but who managed to survive and died solvent in 1858. Moxon's background was very different. His father was a cropper in the textile trade in Wakefield, and he had "a Yorkshire head which didn't lose itself in the clouds".<sup>48</sup> He ensured that there were real money-spinners, like the travel books of Basil Hall and Haydn's *Dictionary of Dates*, to balance the uncertainties of publishing poetry.

In the sales catalogues of Pickering's publishing stock, sold off between 1854 and 1856, one is impressed by the sheer volume of the material to be disposed of.<sup>49</sup> There were vast quantities, so

<sup>48</sup> Merriam, p. 44.

<sup>49</sup> A. N. L. Munby, "The sales of William Pickering publications", *Book Collector*, 21/1 (1972), pp. 33-4.

enormous in some cases, that one wonders whether he seriously overestimated the market. To take the *Christian Classics* as an example, there were no less than 50,000 copies; or, in a different category, the heraldic works of Thomas Willement, over 700 copies. As already mentioned, there were two hundred and fourteen complete sets of the six folio Books of Common Prayer, and on each occasion quantities of these were auctioned, they were accompanied by a special advertisement claiming that "it is remarkable that in no public, private or collegiate library can the whole of these books be found together". There were large quantities of the *Diamond Classics* listed at every sale, the copies of this edition of Horace amounting to a total of nearly 9,000.<sup>50</sup>

This brings us to the final episode in Pickering's career, his bankruptcy. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, in his memoir, comments that his record was one of unbroken success and content until almost the close of his life.<sup>51</sup> However, there is evidence to show that this was far from being the case. An obituary provides the reason for his final downfall: one was the giving of bills of exchange to raise money himself and discounting the bills of others; the other was becoming involved in long and expensive litigation. "The want of capital induced an appliance to the means of raising it that in the end floors all men", the writer comments, "Involved in litigation, much of which he might have avoided, bankruptcy followed".<sup>52</sup> That he was in financial difficulty by the late 1840s is evident. In a letter to Whittingham dated 8 August 1849, he says he owes him £230 and that there were other debts worrying him. He goes on "I was desirous of proposing bills at 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 months which I think I can pay, certainly the major part—I mean beyond my usual payments to you which I always endeavour to keep right".<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> In some ways these sales catalogues are ironic documents, being beautifully printed at the Chiswick Press, in Caslon old-face type with ornamented initial letters, the whole sale being managed by L. A. Lewis, a fellow apprentice of Pickering with J. and A. Arch.

<sup>51</sup> Keynes, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> Willis's *Current Notes* (May 1854), p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> Reproduced in Warren, pp. 123-4. Financial pressure may have been responsible for his conflict with the Coleridge family over the terms of the publication of the works of S. T. Coleridge. In the 1840s Pickering refused to modify the terms agreed as long ago as 1828 in spite of increased sales, and Sara Coleridge was greatly upset by what she described as "this man's grasping, narrow, unhandsome ways". He fell seriously behind with payments and attempted to shift the burden of printing costs by overcharging the Coleridges for



Whatever happened, Whittingham the printer was always to be paid. By contrast, Whittingham himself had a much stricter approach to business, as is shown when, later, he admitted John Wilkins into partnership in 1860. "John", he wrote, "in all my business life, I have never given a bill". He was proud of the fact that at no time in his career had bills bearing his name been in circulation. On one occasion he was in debt to Caslon, who asked him to give bills to discharge a debt of several hundred pounds. "No sir", he replied, "I have never given a bill, and I never will, not even if my creditors threaten to sell me up".<sup>54</sup> Caslon was made to wait.

On turning to the bankruptcy proceedings between July 1853 and September 1854, one is concerned not with his relationship with Whittingham, but with one John Joseph Thornthwaite, described as "of Holloway, Gentleman". This man had provided financial help to Pickering at the outset of his career and apparently acted as Pickering's clerk and discount agent for many years. The total scale of the transactions was large, amounting, in the twenty years between 1825 and 1845, to £835,000.<sup>55</sup> In October 1845, he started an action against Pickering to recover nearly £18,000, being the balance of an account current from 1825, twenty years earlier. The case was put to arbitration and, after litigation lasting from 1847 to 1853, an award was made for £11,345. Because of this debt, and others, Pickering went bankrupt.<sup>56</sup> In the course of the proceedings, Pickering claimed that he had received many bills of exchange from Thornthwaite which he had undertaken to meet, but which were then dishonoured, since no trace of the persons whose names were attached to the bills was found. Thornthwaite, in the witness box, refused to state whether he knew any of them. He also had the effrontery to request the court to appoint him one of the assignees, since he was one of the principal creditors. But since the other creditors objected, and also because errors of over £6000 had been found in his accounts, the court refused.<sup>57</sup> The man does seem to

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these expenses (E. L. Griggs, *Coleridge fille: a biography of Sara Coleridge* (London, 1940), p. 225).

<sup>54</sup> Warren, p. 221.

<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 5 December 1845, p. 8; 21 July 1853, p. 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1854, p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 July 1853, p. 7.

have been something of a scoundrel. Pickering for his part declared that he did not owe Thornthwaite more than £2000. But his attorney revealed that various checks and vouchers relating to the period between 1825 and 1833, which would have provided proof of a set-off against the debt, had been "put aside by him as 'immaterial' and had been lost". The court decided that Pickering ought to have filed an injunction until the discovery of the checks as evidence, and that any further enquiry would merely result in fruitless expenditure from the bankrupt's estate.<sup>58</sup> The whole affair reveals the most extraordinary laxity by Pickering in business matters, employing and discounting bills for a man who was not to be trusted, and failing to keep proper accounts.<sup>59</sup> As Warren remarks, "His end was particularly sad. All the fruits of his life's labour were swept away from him by bankruptcy".<sup>60</sup> And it does seem particularly ironic that after the sale of both his antiquarian and publishing stock, his estate did, in the end, pay twenty shillings in the pound.

In considering Pickering's career against the economic and political background of the early nineteenth century, one cannot avoid the conclusion that from the strictly commercial point of view he did not altogether fulfil the requirements for success, either in the character and content of his publishing, or in the way he conducted his business. His attention to book design, admirable at the outset of his publishing activities, later became too enthusiastic and obsessive to ensure continuing commercial success. Some of his productions remind one more than anything else of those of the private presses at the turn of the century, but the times were not conducive to such indulgences. The content of his publishing remained to the end overwhelmingly biased towards the older literature, reflecting his early interest in the antiquarian, the theological and the aristocratic. It for the most part ignored the rapidly changing world about him. In terms of

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1854, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Pickering was not alone in having difficulty in managing the details of the financial side of his business. John Chapman revealed in 1851 that he did not use double-entry bookkeeping. "I am going on in a painful state of uncertainty as to the actual value and profit of the business, and know not whether I am gaining or losing because I cannot get a balance sheet, and I feel that many very important business details are neglected" (Barnes, p. 41).

<sup>60</sup> Warren, p. 211.

publishing output, he was not to be compared with Murray, Bentley and similar large houses. This is not to say that a smaller publisher with an interest in a particular field could not enjoy commercial success, as Moxon did. But to do so required careful attention to the details of business and a solid base of popular books to subsidise the rest; and, above all, it required the avoidance of open conflict with the trade, involvement in long and expensive litigation, and the accumulation of debt by giving bills of exchange.

Revealing Pickering's weaknesses, however, is in no way to detract from his great achievements. In spite of commercial bankruptcy, commercial book production owes more to his enterprise than to most other publishers. The cloth-covered book is still the dominant form in this country today, despite the paperback revolution. He did more than any other publisher of the time to raise the standard of book production in all its details. Not only was his attention to design meticulous, but in editorial matters he was equally exacting. By securing John Mitford, Alexander Dyce and Sir Harris Nicholas as editors in his most famous series, the *Aldine Poets*, he made sure that textually they were of a high standard. In the production of these inexpensive and conveniently-sized books he made himself a worthy follower of Aldus. He published excellent editions of many neglected authors, and was the publisher of the first edition of Lowndes' *Bibliographer's Manual*, which, in its second edition, is still a useful bibliographical tool. Panizzi thought highly of him, both as a publisher and as a bookseller and the regard of Henry Stevens for the excellence of his editions of standard works of English literature is demonstrated by the catalogue of his own library, which included a considerable number of them. All the Pickering series are represented in full, together with his editions of the early dramatists, Greene, Webster and Peele; the works of Chaucer, Milton and Bacon; the religious works of Taylor and Fuller; the early English poetry; the folio Prayer Books and many other items. The list is described as "a few thousand volumes of the best editions of the principal standard English authors", designed to assist in the selection of an American gentleman's private library.<sup>61</sup> There is

<sup>61</sup> H. Stevens, *Catalogue of my English library, collected and described by Henry Stevens*. Printed by C. Whittingham for private distribution (London, 1853), pp. v-vi.

no doubt that had it not been for Pickering's career in the book trade in the first half of the nineteenth century, scholarship, book design, libraries, bibliographers and book collectors would have been very much the poorer.

After his death in 1854, Henry Stevens sent James Lenox an appeal being privately circulated amongst Pickering's friends for the relief of his daughters. "I hope you will allow me to put your name down", he wrote, "as he was a benefactor of the New World as well as the Old".<sup>62</sup> He later gave a fitting epitaph when he read a paper at the Cambridge Conference of the Library Association in 1882, entitled *Who spoils our new English books?* In it, he drew attention to the deteriorating standards as the century progressed, and, as a touchstone, cited William Pickering and his partnership with Charles Whittingham, "all of whose books, cheap and dear, were constructed on lines of truth and beauty".<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.