

‘One of the greatest nuisances of the day’?

The canvassing of British number books over the nineteenth century

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Even in a strictly formal sense, distinguishing between different print formats may not be as simple as it sounds. To take the obvious case of the distinction between serials and books: fascicles are designed from the start to be gathered into volumes, periodicals are often paginated with a subsequent collective binding in mind, while books complete in themselves can be issued within series of all sorts and conditions. And when we go on to differentiate between the various serial formats, the sociological factors emphasized by, among others, Robert Darnton in ‘What is the History of Books?’ need to be introduced if the definitions are to hold. This is undoubtedly the case with the number book, which is the focus of this chapter. Here, I will be only peripherally concerned with the publication of new novels in independent parts, whether as monthly numbers in coloured paper wrappers for the bourgeoisie or coverless weekly penny parts for the proletariat.¹ Rather my concern is with the wares of the ‘numbers trade’, which in the early days consisted in the main of reprints of venerable works of reference, extensive and illustrated, sold on subscription by door-to-door canvassers to common readers in rural communities, though as time went by there were extensions to the generic range of works thus sold as well as the social range of the purchasers in terms of both status and location.

While, as Robert Patten and John Sutherland have shown in some detail, the original novel in parts enjoyed a relatively brief heyday during the first half of the Victorian period, the number book flourished for at least a century and a half, from before 1750 until after 1890. Basing the depiction on the childhood reminiscences of the tailor Thomas Carter recorded in his *Memoirs of a Working Man* (Charles Knight, 1845), A. E. Dobbs paints a rather idyllic canvas of the rural book-trade in the later 1700s: ‘Number-men, or itinerant booksellers, passed from village to village, leaving samples, and erected their stalls wherever a suitable market could be found. Pedlars and fortune-tellers carried odd volumes in their packs to remote parts of the kingdom. Old women, vending sweetmeats, kept a corner of their boards for the Illustrated Bible, the Pilgrim’s Progress, and an assortment of chap-books.’ (Dobbs 98). According to Henry Curwen’s account (363-78), Thomas Kelly (1777-1855) and George Virtue (1794-1868), two country men growing up during the era evoked by Dodds, whose fathers were respectively a shepherd and a carter,

¹ The most familiar examples would be respectively: Dickens’s novels in duck-green covers from Chapman & Hall from 1836 to 1865; and the penny bloods of George Reynolds from John Dicks during the 1840s and 1850s.

were to found the thriving family publishing firms which came to dominate the English numbers trade in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Although it was later to branch out into other forms of publishing, the Glasgow house of John Blackie (1782-1874), who belonged to a similar generation to Kelly and Virtue and whose first job in the publishing trade was as a canvasser and deliverer of number books, seems then to have performed a similar role in Scotland (A. Blackie; W. Blackie). Early popular number books from these three houses included: John Fleetwood's *Life of Christ* and Charles Thompson's *Travels in the Holy Land* (Blackie, both from 1809); William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* and John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (Kelly, from 1809 and 1811 respectively); and Alexander Fletcher's *Guide to Family Devotion* and Beattie's *Switzerland* lavishly illustrated by W.H. Bartlett (Virtue, both from 1836). Though the works issued by Virtue were both new, those from Blackie and Kelly dated from no later than the mid-eighteenth century.² A little later, the perhaps more familiar names of Robert Chambers in Edinburgh and John Cassell in London, while exploiting a wide variety of other modes of publication, from around the mid-century until late in the Victorian era if not beyond were to gradually produce an extensive catalogue of number-books and make use of a small army of number-men to sell them.³ Early and successful examples of their canvassed wares were *Chambers's Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts*, in 177 three-halfpenny parts issued from 1844, and *Cassell's Popular Educator*, complete over two years in weekly numbers from 3 April 1852, with the price rising from a penny to three halfpence for the final semi-annual volume on account of the increased quantity and improved quality of the illustrations. However, as we shall soon see, the nineteenth-century numbers trade was by no means restricted to this handful of major operators, and, indeed, many houses better known for their cheap reprint volumes, such as Routledge or Ward and Lock also issued longer works through the number-men; Routledge, for example, issued Howard Staunton's edition of *The Plays of Shakespeare* with illustrations by John Gilbert in 50 monthly parts at a shilling each from December 1856 (Mumby 74).

Whether we look at detailed primary accounts of publishing practices and practitioners dating from the Victorian period itself, or at secondary works of pioneering British publishing history from the twentieth century, while occasional abuses of the practice are acknowledged, the general approach is to treat the trade in number books as among the various positive contributions to the fostering of a common reading public. Issued towards the beginning of the new reign, Charles Timperley's monumental *Encyclopaedia of Literary and Typographical Anecdote* offered a 'chronological digest' of over two thousand years of literary endeavour with a particularly detailed

² In reverse date order, the initial years of publication were: Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1769); Fleetwood's *Life of Christ* (1767); Thompson's *Travels in the Holy Land* (1744); and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563).

³ For general histories of the two firms, see respectively: William Chambers, *Memoir of Robert Chambers*; and Simon Nowell-Smith, *The House of Cassell*.

focus on the period after the Gutenberg revolution. Among the more than 200 columns given over to the first four decades of the nineteenth century, in recording the death on 25 March 1810 of John Cooke, a pioneer among the ‘publishers of what have been called “Paternoster-row Numbers”’, Timperley added a lengthy note in general praise of the format where he suggested: ‘however it may be customary to kick the ladder down when we find we no longer want it, these sort of publications must be confessed to have greatly contributed to lay the foundation of that literary taste and thirst for knowledge, which now pervades all classes.’ (Timperley 838).

Published three decades later around the middle of the Victorian era, Henry Curwen’s *A History of Booksellers* included sixteen chapters providing brief illustrated lives of nineteenth-century publishers and distributors, representing specific genres such as ‘Belle-Lettres’, ‘Three-Volume Novels’ or ‘Railway Literature’, with a final compendium of ‘Provincial Booksellers’. In a lengthy preliminary chapter surveying ‘The Bookseller of Olden Times’ Cooke himself had been identified as one of ‘the inventors of the “number trade”’ (Curwen 76), itself the subject of a later chapter devoted to ‘Kelly and Virtue’. There, the opening paragraph celebrated number publishers in general as ‘the modern pioneers of literature, since through the practice of door-to-door canvassing a substratum of the public is reached which is entirely out of the stretch of the regular bookselling arm, though, when once a taste for reading has been developed, the regular bookseller cannot fail to benefit, as he will from every onward step in education and progress’ (Curwen 363).

Turning to twentieth-century book historians, the seminal research of Richard D. Altick and Robert L. Patten clearly stands out. In *The English Common Reader* (1957), it is true, Altick is perhaps less than fulsome in his appraisal of the general role of the Victorian number-books in encouraging working-class scholars: ‘Although one finds fewer tributes to these books from readers whom they delighted than to the fondly remembered Bell and Cooke reprints of an earlier decade, they played their part in encouraging an interest in literature among those who could afford neither the more expensive editions of the classics nor the high-priced books of recent seasons.’ (Altick 267). On the other hand, citing evidence given to the House of Commons Select Committee on Manchester and Salford Education, he singles out for the highest praise John Cassell, who, through his works in numbers and most notably the *Popular Educator* (1852-55), was ‘doing more at the present time than any other individual to supply the increasing demand by the operative classes for useful knowledge, and in supplying works peculiarly adapted to their circumstances and condition’.⁴ In his survey of available serial forms in *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (1978), Patten focuses rather earlier in the century than Altick here, and on the

⁴ Evidence from the Manchester real estate agent Joseph Adshead, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers: 1852 (499) Q. 2261; cited in Altick 303.

bibliographic quality of the editions as much as the social class of the readership. While citing R. M. Wiles in acknowledgment that there existed ‘a handful of book pirates on the outer fringes’ of the numbers trade, Patten (48) recognizes that ‘there were also eminently respectable publishers, and fine editions of important works in all sorts of fields, which were made available to a vastly larger and more geographically diversified reading public than would have been discovered had the books been issued only as completed volumes.’

Yet, if we scan over the archives of the nineteenth-century British press, the overall image that emerges—whether of the number-men themselves or the number publishers who depended on their services—appears decidedly negative. To illustrate the nature of the criticisms, I will focus on three particularly concerted and virulent attacks on the canvassing trade, together with the responses that they elicited, in turn from the 1820s, 1870s, and 1890s, which thus together can serve as a panorama of the century as a whole. In addition to helping provide a thicker description of number trading as a social practice, these case studies offer insights into the underlying cultural and ideological conflicts as they evolve over time.

1) Reviews of ‘Number Books’ in 1826

Early in 1825 at his Caxton Press in Clerkenwell on the edge of the City of London, Henry Fisher (d. 1837), the Liverpool-born Whig publisher, issued the first of 115 sixpenny weekly parts of *The Dictionary of Mechanical Science, Arts, Manufactures, and Miscellaneous Knowledge* by the Scottish schoolmaster Alexander Jamieson (1782–1850), who had earlier produced such works of scientific reference as *A Grammar of Universal Geography* (Whittaker, 1820) and *A Celestial Atlas* (Whittaker and Cadell, 1822).⁵ In November the following year, as the work approached 1,000 pages in double columns and its part publication neared completion, Jamieson’s *Dictionary* was the object of a damning notice in the venerable *Monthly Review* (1749-1844), which described the work as entirely plagiarized, as riddled with factual errors, and finally as having very little to do with science, mechanical or otherwise. But more than that, the anonymous reviewer used the occasion to launch an assault on number books as a class, which were characterized as forming ‘the very plague-spot of our literature, whether we consider the materials of which they are composed, the manner in which they are “got up,” or the mode by which they are foisted upon the ignorant and unthinking’ (‘Number Books’ 235). In rather random fashion, these three charges were substantiated as follows: the intellectual materials reflected ‘the deterioration of the scientific literature of this country, which has so decidedly taken place within the last thirty years’ and now resemble the creations of ‘bricklayers’ labourers’ who have abandoned their hods (‘Number

⁵ Generally on number publishing in the 1820s, see Mihai H. Handrea, ‘Books in Parts and the Number Trade’.

Books' 235); the manner of composition was left to 'some literary drudge, who, with a pair of scissors, cuts half a dozen pages from this work, and half a dozen from that, without any other consideration than that they shall make the quantity of printing which is required' ('Number Books' 237); and the mode of distribution was placed in the hands of 'gangs of the most impudent, and by consequence the most unprincipled, adventurers' who forced their wares on the gullible 'by threats', and hid under the dictionaries and encyclopaedias in the 'foul ulcer' of their wallets the most obscene and blasphemous publications ('Number Books' 235-36). Such rantings obviously reflected in an extreme form the conservative reaction to the 'March of Intellect', that is, fostering social progress by means of popular (self-)education.⁶ However, we must recognize the irony that, although only for the eight monthly issues up to December 1826, the publisher responsible for the *Monthly Review* was then Charles Knight, who was about to take on that role for the newly founded Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, with Henry Brougham as its president.⁷

Just a month later there was a sharp response in the form of a counter-review in the December issue of the *Imperial Magazine* (1819-34), a monthly 'Compendium of Religious, Moral, and Philosophical Knowledge' again published by Henry Fisher at the Caxton Press, and edited virtually throughout by the Methodist scholar Samuel Drew (1765-1833), who also supervised the literary side of Fisher's publishing business. The *Imperial* reviewer, who is unlikely to have been Drew himself, since the concluding paragraph acknowledged 'that the writer of this article is neither a printer nor a publisher, and that he is wholly unconnected with the number trade', at the same time concluded that the virulent *Monthly* notice was motivated by 'the low principles of malignant jealousy' emanating from a rival publisher ('Review: Jamieson's Dictionary' col. 1145). Although he noted both that Knight was currently publishing the magazine and that his recent venture into the numbers business, *The Cabinet Historian* offering 'A Series of Summaries of the History of Each Country' for half-a-crown a month, had failed to find a public, the *Imperial* reviewer acknowledged that the *Monthly*'s proprietor was unlikely to have been responsible for such a malicious piece of writing. The *Imperial* reviewer's own approach was much more reasoned and calm, pointing succinctly to a number of obvious contradictions in the argument in the *Monthly Review*: how could a number book be at the same time the handiwork of an ignorant labourer and a plagiarism? how could the wares of the number trade be at once half and double the price of those from 'regular' houses? how could the publishers be responsible in the unlikely event that their number-men were to surreptitiously hawk pornography from other sources? At the same time, he showed carefully that many of the alleged errors in Jamieson's text were in fact no

⁶ The Benthamite Whig politician Henry Brougham (1778–1868) had a particularly important role in promoting this concept; see, in particular, his 'Scientific Education of the People', 99.

⁷ See Knight, *Passages of Working Life*, II, 44-49, though there is no mention there of his brief stint in charge of the *Monthly Review*.

such thing. Yet the *Imperial* reviewer's principal concern was to write a strong and democratic defence of the social utility of the numbers trade in general. He began by describing Jamieson's dictionary as 'one of the many valuable works which the number press has lately presented to the public, and which, from their superior character, have attracted the attention of all classes' ('Review: Jamieson's Dictionary' col. 1139), and finished with an encomium 'in defence of a branch of the bookselling trade, on which certain proud bibliopolists once affected to look down with contempt; but which the writer cannot think to be less respectable than their's...' ⁸ This line of business has the peculiar and superadded feature, that it knocks at the poor man's door, and spreads before him the choicest as well as the most useful literature of the country; which perhaps would never in any other way have come within his reach. ... This view of the subject ... not only ... redeems it from the aspersions of the reviewer, but entitles it to the good wishes of every friend to general improvement.' ('Review: Jamieson's Dictionary' col. 1145-46). Finally, we should perhaps note that Dr Jamieson's *Dictionary of Mechanical Science* in fact proved rather popular: it entered a seventh edition (printing) from Fisher as early as 1832 and was still available when the publisher passed away and the young queen ascended the throne.

2) Articles concerning 'Book Canvassers' in 1871

In 1848, seven years before he was forced by sudden illness to hand over control of the business to his son James Sprent Virtue (1829–92), George Virtue had acquired from Chapman & Hall the struggling *Art-Union*, then a rather staid 'Monthly Journal of the Fine Arts', before it was gradually transformed as the *Art-Journal* into the most elegantly illustrated art periodical of the later Victorian decades. Around 1862 the firm was restructured as Virtue & Co., and thereafter James began to engage in a number of prominent publishing projects, such as the lavishly illustrated edition in forty monthly parts of *The Holy Bible with a Devotional and Practical Commentary* by the Rev. Robert Jamieson (1802-80; no relation). This was before Virtue was to joined forces temporarily with the distinguished novelist-editor Anthony Trollope, as the publisher of both *He Knew He was Right* in fresh monthly numbers and *St. Paul's Magazine*, which Trollope edited and where *Phineas Finn* and *An Editor's Tales* were initially serialized.⁹ Thus, as Eugene Worman suggests, although the core of its publishing operations remained with the numbers trade, well before the death of the founder in late 1868 the firm had acquired a prestigious reputation for upmarket publications.

However, this did not prevent the marketing operations of Virtue & Co. from coming under

⁸ Here, the usage of the term 'bibliopolist' to signify 'someone who wished to maintain the monopoly of the volume format' appears to be a neologistic creation of the reviewer, although the standard meaning of 'bookseller' is attested in the *OED* from the mid-sixteenth century.

⁹ On his connection with James Virtue, see Trollope, *An Autobiography*, II, 120-26.

concerted attack early in 1871. This was in the pages of the *Athenaeum*, still one of the most influential weekly review journals, but then in something of an ideological limbo under temporary editor John Doran (1807-78), before in mid-1871 the editorial reins were placed into the more securely liberal hands of Norman MacColl (1843–1904). Although the journal did not feature a regular column of correspondence from readers, in four issues between 21 January and 25 February 1871 there appeared an occasional series of articles headed ‘Book Canvassers’, devoted to letters of complaint received ‘from all parts of the three kingdoms’, as the editorial commentary linking the letters put it (‘Book Canvassers’, 4 February 1871). The voices recorded there were so shrill that they penetrated to at least one other periodical. The ‘Literary Notes’ column of the *Illustrated Review*, ‘A Fortnightly Journal of Literature, Science and Art’, remarked that the ‘columns of our valued contemporary the *Athenaeum* have been rather over-burthened recently with attacks on the well-known publishers of the *Art-Journal* and numerous works of artistic merit of a high order’ (‘Literary Notes’ 420).¹⁰ Altogether in the issues of the *Athenaeum* in question there appeared: five signed letters from complaining customers plus four others inserted unsigned in summary/extract, two of them assigned by the editor to ‘A Lady’ and ‘Another Lady’; and two impersonal responses from Virtue & Co., plus two signed notes from a grammatically challenged agent of the firm named Rae (‘this don’t look like ordering a part on approval’), one of which mentions the threat of legal action in the case of non-payment of a subscription.¹¹ These last were enclosed by the initiator of the correspondence, a gentleman named Jeston who wrote intemperately from the ‘Arts’ Club’ on behalf of ‘two maiden ladies living in Gloster Crescent, Hyde Park’ to ‘bring the whole disgraceful affair’ to public attention and thus ‘perhaps put unsuspecting ladies on their guard against these touting agents of Virtue & Co.’ (‘Book-Canvassers’, 21 January 1871). Other specific customers wrote in similar vein from: Gloucester Crescent, Regent’s Park; St. Peter’s Vicarage, Oxford; Railway Cottage, Middle Deal; and Wavertree, Liverpool; the publishers’ letters were addressed from City Road, and the agent’s from not so far away in Farringdon Street. (We should note here that it is often necessary to distinguish three levels within the nineteenth-century numbers trade: the publisher, the agent, and the canvasser. These could be entirely independent entities associated only *ad hoc*,¹² but in the case in question here, it seems that the agent (Rae) was formally a long-term employee of the publisher (Virtue), while the canvassers were engaged casually by the agent.)

¹⁰ The opening article of the following issue happened to be ‘The Late Robert Chambers, LL.D’, a fulsome obituary of the Scottish editor-publisher (1802-1871), with a handsome portrait dominating the front page, and a detailed account of his contribution to the improvement of popular literature.

¹¹ See ‘Book-Canvassers’, 21 January 1871, citing a case involving Blackie & Son.

¹² As indicated, for example, in the advertisement ‘Wanted. To the Number Trade’: ‘Messrs. J. & J. Forsyth, 23 St. Enoch Square, Glasow, beg to inform Dealers, Canvassers, and all others connected with the “Number Trade,” that they have been appointed Wholesale Agents for a “New Historical Work,” which will have a very large sale. ...’.

The various customer complaints consisted mainly of allegations of conscious deception by a canvasser, most typically in the form of fraudulently obtaining signatures to the subscription form, but also involving lies concerning the quantity or cost of the parts, or fictitious accounts of the names and numbers of other subscribers. All involved Jamieson's illustrated *Bible*, and the sacred character of this publication obviously added irony to many of the accusations. The key issue was whether the problems reported were exceptions due to rogue canvassers or whether they reflected a consistent policy practiced by the publishers through their agents. Although their claims were challenged in replies from customers, the representatives of Virtue & Co. argued cogently that the subscription form was exemplary in its clarity and that the instructions to their agents in the case of complaint were unambiguous ('... never to countenance in their canvassers anything like misrepresentation or trick in order to obtain signatures to subscription orders', 'Book Canvassers', 4 February 1871). The editorial comments framing the correspondence, in contrast, verged on the sardonic (for example, in a reference to a garrulous canvasser reported from the Kent coast as 'the philosopher who promotes the circulation of the Scriptures in Deal', 'Book Canvassers', 11 February 1871). Thus, despite Virtue & Co. being among the many houses to purchase advertising space regularly in its columns, it was clear that the *Athenaeum* took the position that the publishers were themselves gravely at fault, the implication underlying the title chosen perhaps being that number issue was in itself a shady business. In marked contrast, while admitting that there might be the odd rogue canvasser, the *Illustrated Review* rather pointed the finger of blame at the *Athenaeum*'s 'angry correspondents and their negligent friends', demanding greater 'fairness to a firm which has perhaps done more ... to popularize art by issuing at convenient rates and intervals illustrated works of the highest class ..., and that could not have been produced otherwise than on the [canvassing] system reprehended' ('Literary Notes' 420). If Virtue & Co. appeared sometimes sluggish in responding to accusations of impropriety, the *Athenaeum* itself, perhaps not displeased to receive so much copy from unpaid contributors, seemed inclined to jump to the conclusion that such accusations were always justified. Interestingly, the prejudices regarding gender and class which underlay several of the criticisms levelled at the number-men by the journal correspondents were to re-appear in more explicit form in the following case.

3) Letters to the Editor on the 'Numbers-Trade' in 1893

Dating from around twenty years later, the final case study also concerned the letters of readers to the press concerning book canvassing, though in this case the complaints regarded nuisance more than fraud, the journal in question was the powerful daily newspaper, *The Times* of London,

and the publishing company concerned was Cassell & Co. Ltd.¹³ Shortly after starting up in the book business, in giving evidence before the 1851 Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, John Cassell (1817–65) had stated: ‘I entered more into the publishing trade for the purpose of issuing a series of publications which I believed were calculated to advance the moral and social well-being of the working classes’.¹⁴ Throughout this remained an objective best achieved ‘by issuing his works, whatever their character, in cheap weekly numbers or monthly parts, to be sold up and down the country, from house to house, by colporteurs’ (Nowell-Smith 36). Indeed, as Nowell-Smith also notes (36n1), after the founder’s death from cancer the lengthier and higher-quality works were also generally available in quarterly, semi-annual, and annual instalments, indicating a readership among the higher social echelons also. Moreover, like Virtue & Co., from the late 1860s the house attempted to get a foothold in the more prestigious sectors of the literary market, attracting novelists of the stature of Wilkie Collins to serialize novels in *Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper*;¹⁵ in fact, early in 1870 the novelist was almost persuaded by Cassell & Co. to accept an offer to place his entire backlist of fiction in their hands to be reprinted in illustrated penny parts and distributed by the number-men.¹⁶ During the later Victorian decades, the firm continued to issue new reference works in numbers, such as *Cassell’s New Natural History*, edited by F. Martin Duncan, and *Cassell’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary* ‘with numerous illustrations’, dating respectively from the 1870s and 1880s, both of which remained available into the new century. Indeed, since Chambers’s had largely shifted to volume publication only by the 1890s (*Chambers’s Journal*, which was issued until after World War II, being the notable exception), it is probably fair to suggest that Cassell’s was alone among the major exponents of number publication to continue the practice well after the emergence of a mass reading public, as marked by the creation of publishing landmarks such as George Newnes’s penny *Tit-Bits* in 1881 and Alfred Harmsworth’s halfpenny *Daily Mail* in 1896.

In four issues between 23 and 27 May 1893, with a gap on Thursday 25, a total of six fairly brief items of correspondence appeared under the (initial) heading of ‘Messrs. Cassell and the “Number Trade”’, with a single letter in each of the first three issues and three letters together in the last. The sequence was initiated by the Rev. Alfred Ainger (1837-1904), then Canon

¹³ The affair is introduced briefly in Law and Patten 166-67.

¹⁴ House of Commons Parliamentary Papers: 1851 (558), 210–212.

¹⁵ Collins’s *Man and Wife* (November 1869 to July 1870) and *Poor Miss Finch* (September 1871 to February) both appeared initially there, though the volume editions were carried by other publishers; see Gasson 99-101 and 124-25.

¹⁶ Discussed in the author’s letters to Charles Ward and William F. Tindell of 19 January and 18 May 1870 respectively; see Baker, et al., eds., II, 169–170 and 180-81. A few years earlier George Eliot seems to have considered a similar proposal involving sixpenny monthly numbers, though perhaps not from the house of Cassell; see the letter of John Blackwood to her of 21 December 1866, in Haight, ed., 320-23.

Resident of Bristol, and an authority on Charles Lamb, who wrote in the evening from the Athenaeum Club to 'protest against a new custom in the book trade which threatens to add a new terror to life', provoked by an intrusion during luncheon into his home in Hampstead by 'a fashionably-dressed young lady' selling numbers of a 'new cyclopaedia' (title unspecified) on behalf of Cassell & Co. His specific complaint was that 'the old "number trade" ... was confined to the kitchen entrance of houses, where the unwary housemaid was induced to add her name as subscriber to the works of Josephus ... but, if the practice is to be extended to our drawing-rooms, and they are to be invaded at any hour by book touts in the garb of private visitors, a very unpleasant prospect unfolds itself' ('To the Editor', 23 May 1893). The following two letters were written in defence of the publisher and the canvasser respectively. Promptly on the Wednesday there appeared, addressed from Ludgate Hill, a politely impertinent response from Cassell & Co., which, after pointing out that no canvassers were in fact now employed directly by the firm and that many of its recent publications were far too fine and costly to be offered at 'the kitchen entrance', inquired why in any case the gender of the canvasser should be an issue. It noted approvingly that '[w]omen are now entering on new paths of life, and are to be found in professions and occupations where their presence was unknown a decade since', and ironically that '[m]any ladies ... are now employed [even] by the clergy to canvass for subscriptions for charitable and religious purposes' ('To the Editor', 24 May 1893). This was followed on the Friday, by a reply to Canon Ainger from a friend of the young lady in question above the signature 'LL.D., Cantab.', which detailed the sad personal circumstances (the untimely death of her fiancé) which had led to this 'early essay of her new and not pleasant vocation', when she had had the misfortune to 'disturb a Church dignitary at his lunch' and receive 'a scantily courteous rebuff'. It went on to suggest bitterly that the hypocritical Canon should take as the text for his next Sunday sermon Isaiah 42:3 ('A bruised reed shall he not break ...', AV), where he could 'discourse eloquently ... of the vast difference between practice and preaching' ('To the Editor', 26 May 1893). The three letters printed on the Saturday, however, were all firmly on the side of the offended Church dignitary. First, William Woodward, a fellow resident of Hampstead at Church Row, declared the explanations of both publisher and friend irrelevant to the Canon's complaint which concerned 'gaining admission to houses on false pretences'; after adding his own story of domestic invasion by a "'lady'" trying to 'solicit orders for a certain tea', he predicted that such deceitful canvassing might soon lead to acts of physical robbery ('To the Editor', 27 May 1893). Second came Andrew W. Tuer, since the early 1860s partner with Abraham Field at the Leadenhall Press, proprietors of the *Paper and Printing Trades Journal* which had earlier pronounced that '[o]ne of the greatest nuisances of the day is the canvasser';¹⁷ in his short letter

¹⁷ Cited in *OED*: 'canvasser', c.; the journal was edited by Tuer himself.

to *The Times*, Tuer made virtually the same point, stating that canvassers 'are rapidly developing into a nuisance of the first water' ('To the Editor', 27 May 1893). Finally, an equally brief letter, signed 'Indignant' with no address, offered another tale of intrusion by a Cassell canvasser, this time a man in a hansom cab exhibiting 'a Yankee twang', which led the correspondent to 'fear that we are being invaded by a swarm of those nuisances, so loathed in the United States, the "book-canvassing fiends"' ('To the Editor', 23 May 1893).¹⁸ While the stereotype of the travelling 'con' artist was to become a staple of twentieth-century popular culture in the USA,¹⁹ there is little reason to assume any significant American influence on the British number trade in the late Victorian period.²⁰ If anything it may have been the other way around: Cassell & Co. successfully operated a New York office from just after the Civil War until close to the end of the century, centering their American business on the distribution of Family Bibles and other religious publications in numbers (Nowell-Smith 261-64).²¹ But it is perhaps just as important to note that, if Cassells' marketing methods were then indeed becoming outmoded, the nature and style of the complaints of Ainger and his seconders also seem to hark back to a by-gone social era. This not least because they echo unmistakably the virulent attacks back in the 1860s on female authors of sensation fiction (condemned as 'one of the abominations of the age'), most notably Mary Braddon, who, in centering her novels on bigamous and homicidal wives, was 'making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing room'.²²

¹⁸ I have not been able to locate the specific phrase 'book-canvassing fiends' in use in the contemporary American press; indeed at that time the collocation 'book fiend' seems often to have carried a positive connotation, as, for example, in the periodical title *The Book Fiend*, 'A Medium for the Purchase, Sale and Exchange of New and Second-hand Books' published in Minneapolis during the 1880s and 1890s. However, the phrase 'book-canvassing fiends' itself was then common in the Australasian colonies, where Book Purchasers' Protection Acts were passed. See, for example: a report in the London press concerning New South Wales, 'Our Kith and Kin', which carried this news: 'A NOVEL LEGISLATIVE ENACTMENT. A month or two ago we mentioned that a bill had been introduced into the New South Wales Parliament to check the predatory operations of a host of book-canvassing fiends. These gentry, representing American houses as a rule, dealt in illustrated monthly parts, and hundreds of unsuspecting colonists, who thought they had signed orders for only five or ten shillings' worth of pictorial literature, were staggered by claims for the full amount of the work in all its parts, making an aggregate of ten or twenty guineas. Hence an immense amount of litigation and the introduction of the aforesaid measure, which has passed both Houses under the title of the "Book Purchasers' Protection Act.'"; or, in 'Parliamentary News' from New Zealand, where it is reported: 'The Book Purchasers Protection Bill, introduced by Mr. G. Fisher, is intended to protect people from the designs of book canvassing fiends about whose operations there has been so much talk lately in various parts of the colony.' (5d, within 'Jottings').

¹⁹ Memorably in 'road movies' such as Peter Bogdanovitch's *Paper Moon* (1973), set in the Midwest during the Great Depression, and starring Ryan and Tatum O'Neil as phony bible sellers.

²⁰ Relevant informative contemporary American publications are: 'A Book Agent's Question'; Goldthwaite; and Stanley.

²¹ According to Edwards in *Free Town Libraries*, 'the sale of number-books' was given 'an enormous impulse' by the Civil War (333).

²² By the young Scottish journalist William Fraser Rae, in 'Sensation Novelists', 203-204. Similar protests were made by the future Dean of St. Paul's, Henry Mansel, in 'Sensation Novels'; there, in reviewing two dozen examples headed by Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, the model for the 'female fiends' now a 'stock article with sensation novelists' (503), Mansel suggested that 'the original germ' leading to the current plague emerged from the 'cheap publications which supply sensation for the million in penny and halfpenny numbers' (505).

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The press coverage of these 'number-men' controversies undoubtedly helped to generate and perpetuate the negative stereotype of the door-to-door encyclopaedia seller which, most typically taking on a comic slant, remains a vibrant cultural myth in modern Britain.²³ More significantly for our purposes, the typically loud voices of complaint heard in the columns of the press clearly represent without exception those of the bourgeoisie, while predictably we are offered little or nothing by way of direct access to the opinions of common readers regarding number books – far less indeed than in Altick's account. We should return here to Darnton, who argues that though 'the inner experience of ordinary readers may always elude us ... we should at least be able to reconstruct a good deal of the social context of reading' (79), while the model of the functioning of print media proposed in his 'Communications Circuit' offers a dialectical model of the relationship between the various producers, distributors, and consumers of print publications, so that Book History is able to address both 'each phase of this process and the process as a whole' (67). Our case studies clearly provide insight into the cultural complexities of the processes involved, and the ideological conflicts reflected in them regarding the social utility of fostering a common readership.

²³ For someone of my generation what comes first to mind are two sketches from 1969 and 1975 respectively: first in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (where the canvasser convinces the housewife that he is in fact merely a burglar in order to get through the door), and next in *The Two Ronnies* (where the working-class family members already have at their finger tips the obscurest facts in the tout's encyclopaedia, but cannot calculate its price because they do not know their multiplication tables).

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