
How Influential Was Joseph Dent's Everyman's Library?

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Abstract

Changes in population growth in the nineteenth century brought about a new mass reading public. In turn, printing, publishing, and bookselling became an industry which started to cater to the masses. Joseph Dent became a successful publisher of affordable classics and his most successful series, the Everyman's Library was founded in 1906. Dent's mission was to make beautifully bound and designed works of classic literature available to all. Everyman's Library became hugely successful with 152 volumes in print in the first year alone (Feather, 160) and was undeniably influential in creating a series which the 'every man' could afford. However, there were huge setbacks, such as the Great War which halted the series and its producing ideals. Yet, Dent managed to turn book borrowers into buyers and helped shaped a nation of classics readers, ultimately becoming a mass-market publisher. This article will examine the role of the Everyman's Library from its inception to present day, arguing its vast influence and that it was a stepping stone in revolutionary publishing ideas.

Key Words

Joseph Dent, Everyman's Library, Classics, Temple Press, J.M.Dent & Sons, War.

Introduction

Joseph Dent, founder of the Everyman's Library, rose from the working classes, starting out as a bookbinder's apprentice and becoming a self-educated man. Dent was a classic Victorian autodidact, moving to London in the 1860s with just half-a-crown and a passion for literature (Gross, 207). Whilst this may be a romantic vision of him, it is clear that literature became a second religion to Dent, and his move from book-binder to publisher was due to hard work and his commitment to making literature available to all. Dent was enterprising as he began by buying second-hand books and rebinding them (Wandor, 23). He set up his own shop in Hoxton (London) in 1872, and in 1881 he moved to larger premises at 69 Great Eastern Street. The following year J. M. Dent & Co. ventured into publishing and Dent embarked on a crusade to raise the standards of book production (DNB). His advance to publishing started with the Temple Library; Dent generally picked out of copyright books and worked on various translations. The books were well produced and the firm's first commercial success was the Temple Shakespeare. Due to his success with Shakespeare, Dent became more ambitious and ranged further afield, creating work such as the Medieval Towns series. Without the success of these early projects it is doubtful that the Everyman's Library would have come into being. Dent's mission was to take the literary arts and make them widely accessible, and although he wasn't the first to do a classic series, the scale of the Everyman's Library was unprecedented. Dent produced beautifully bound classics, which in 1906 at just one shilling, was an affordable amount for the general reader. Yet, Dent's real success with Everyman's Library in this period was mainly due to social changes at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Rise of the Everyman's Library

Changes in printing, publishing and bookselling at the turn of the nineteenth century meant that lending libraries patronised by the already reading-classes, were able to share the same texts (Wandor, 23). This created a reading equality between the higher and lower classes,

which was heightened by the educational legislation of the last decades of the nineteenth century, a move that enforced universal elementary education (Carey, 05). The Education Act of 1870, which made universal elementary literacy possible, ensured that the general public had at least a start in education. The increase in demand for books was boosted by publishing companies, such as Dent, who produced the classics (in English) for this new market (Wandor, 23). A reading revolution had begun and it was that of mass reading culture. Indeed, Carey argues that the difference between the nineteenth-century mob and the twentieth-century mass was literacy levels (Carey, 05). With most working class people having a hunger for further knowledge in this period, the self-educating market was large enough to make Dent's series work; and what made the Everyman Library series successful was its range of titles. Dent was a product of the self-taught culture that thrived among self-improving Victorian artisans and he recognised an enormous potential demand for cheap classics among these self-educated readers.

Everyman's Library became the "largest, most handsome, and most coherently edited series of cheap classics, though it was certainly not the first" (Rose, 131). Indeed, many classic reprints had been published before, but not on the scale or to the quality of the Everyman's Library. The series adopted the rather conservative canon which the working-class mutual improvers and self-educators had embraced (Feather, 110). Although the series reflected Dent's own tastes and preferences, he wasn't producing titles solely for the working class; his titles had interesting introductions and beautiful designs that appealed to the elite and literary, alongside the masses. Carey argues that in this period a power struggle occurred between the elite and the working class, claiming that intellectuals feared the effect that this new, mass reading public would have on culture. Yet the great success of the Everyman's Library was that it dissolved the boundary between the high literary classes and the common reader, with both appreciating the fine quality of the series and the price. Dent realised early on that "great books were an engine for equality, a body of knowledge that anyone could acquire, given basic literacy and cheap editions" (Rose, 131). A Liberal nonconformist, Dent was inspired by a moral mission to bring culture to the masses.

The success of the early Everyman's Library was partly dependent on luck. For example, the fact that many great Victorian writers were beginning to come into the public domain under the terms of the 1842 Copyright Act (Feather, 161) allowed Dent to publish them. Indeed, Dent claims, "it seemed that the most propitious time for such a venture had arrived, for the copyrights of nearly all the great Victorians were falling in" (Dent, 124). Moreover, the Copyright Act of 1911, which extended protection to life and fifty years after the author's death, held up the publication of *Middlemarch* until 1930 and Browning until 1940 (Rose, 134). Dent was luckier still with his editor Earnest Rhys. Rhys was a mining engineer by training, who had given up his profession in order to devote himself to writing. Like Dent, Rhys had some experience in bringing literature to the masses, as an apprentice he had set up a small library for his fellow colliers (Rose, 133). Rhys was a good poet and prose writer, editing Everyman's Library from its inception until his death.

The typical Everyman's Library book produced during 1906-1928 was characterized by a plain paper dust jacket, covering a rather extravagantly bound and detailed book (Anderson). The books in this period were beautifully decorated, with the ornate title page being one of the most distinctive elements of early Everyman's titles. The endpapers too, designed by Reginald L. Knowles, were beautifully illustrated and used on Everyman books until 1935 (Anderson). Every title in the series carried the motto "Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, In thy most need to go by thy side", taken from the medieval morality play *Everyman*, where the main character also called 'Everyman' is comforted by the character named 'Knowledge'. The Everyman's Library motto epitomised Dent's mission: to make knowledge accessible to all. He claimed that an Everyman title could take one on a journey of self-discovery. By the end of 1906, it was clear that Everyman's Library had been a major triumph. Dent claimed that three million volumes were sold in the first eighteen months after publication began (Feather, 160). The series was so successful that it became the main publisher of classic reprints and drove its competitors out of the market. Other reprint publishers "merely published reprints; Everyman's Library was an institution, a benign presence, a crusade, an act of faith" (Gross, 207).

Impact of the Great War

Drawing on the initial success of his series, in 1912 Dent launched *Everyman*, a penny weekly literary magazine. Belgian academic and publicist Charles Sarolea was the editor from 1912 until 1917, but after initial good following, the magazine failed, as its focus was on the past and classics instead of new material (Seymour, 14). In many ways the failure of the *Everyman* weekly is due to the very nature of the fact that J.M.Dent and Co. wasn't an avant-garde house; it was devoted to work of the past. Other failures were due to disputes between Sarolea and Dent, and the coming of the war. The First World War slowed the publication of new *Everyman's Library* volumes to a near standstill, and wartime inflation forced the series to raise its prices and economise on its original lavish ornamentation. Securing an able workforce and materials such as leather for binding was increasingly difficult during this period (Potter, 13). It is clear through Dent's memoirs that war had brought about a real fear that he may have to close his eponymous firm just 19 years after opening. Indeed he writes "we cannot get the material to do our work with-either paper or leather, and of course what we can get is very expensive [...] I am hoping still that the war will be over before we have to shut down" (Dent, 211). From 1906 to 1914, 700 volumes of the projected 1,000 had been published, but the final volume was not published until 1956 (Potter, 13). The quality of paper suffered in the war and although it improved shortly after the war, inflation made this extremely difficult. The company simply could not afford the same level of quality of the pre war years, "war had literally taken the glitter from the *Everyman's Library*, just as it had tarnished everything else" (Potter, 13).

The war not only brought about business sacrifices but personal ones too. Dent calls 1914 a tragic year as he had just taken his eldest sons Paxton and Austen, into the business, yet "they were both of them in the army before the end of August" (Dent, 179). Dent was further devastated by their deaths during conflict. After the war, inflation and shortages worsened for a brief while. Yet, a post-war *Everyman's Library* did survive, due to the fact that "publishers and readers had invested an enormous liberal faith in the cheap classics, which somehow might abolish classes and establish universal peace" (Rose, 136). Dent

responded to his setback by expanding book sales to international markets. He extended distribution to North America by setting up a Canadian subsidiary and allowing E. P. Dutton to distribute Everyman titles throughout the United States. Indeed, Everyman's Library was a beneficiary of American willingness to invest in British publishing; as E.P. Dutton and Co. had a contractual obligation as Dent's partners to take 2,000 copies of every title issued (Feather, 169). In addition, agents were hired to sell Everyman titles in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and most of continental Europe (Smith, 1994).

The succession of J.M. Dent and Sons

J. M. Dent's sons Hugh and Jack Dent all assumed managerial roles in the family firm, as Joseph Dent retired in 1924, and then died of heart failure at his home in South Croydon on the 9th May 1926. Everyman's Library did not reach volume 1000 until 1956, but Dent had lived to see total sales exceed an astonishing 20 million (DNB). The Library still thrived after Dent's death, with his sons Hugh and Jack constituting the Board of Directors, with Hugh acting as editor and Jack supervising the Temple Press (Smith, 1994). In the 1920s it was one of the largest and most successful firms in Britain, and by the firm's 50th anniversary in 1956, it was said that Everyman's Library had sold over 50 million books. Yet, the firm would suffer another World War from 1939, and publishers feared that the Second World War would destroy business, just as the First had done. It is true that the destruction of buildings and books brought many publishers during this period to a standstill, yet the activity as a whole continued. As in 1914 but to an even greater extent, the demand for reading matter grew enormously. Thus, Everyman's Library and its vision survived another conflict, and in 1940 "Earnest Rhys was still convinced that if the Nazis had only read Plato's Republic [...] there would have been no war" (Rose, 136).

At this point a huge shift in the market was taking place. The emergence of the mass market modern paperback, made successful by Allen Lane's Penguin (founded in 1935), proved readers were still looking for cheap books. However, the introduction of the mass market paperback meant that the general reading public were more likely to purchase affordable paperbacks than the beautifully bound classics J.M. Dent & Sons were still producing. It

could be said that Penguin surpassed Everyman (although the Everyman series lasted from 1906 until the 1970s and the Classics kept going for as long as the firm did). Gradually, however, the mottoes and decorations were shorn away until the series developed into the useful but relatively featureless affair that it is today (Gross, 210). From 1935-1952, the books' binding was changed to a woven cloth material with a simplified spine and no decoration, and the dust jackets were redesigned to look more contemporary with an abstract woodcut image (Anderson). Indeed, by the 1940s the "foliage and the precious life blood had gone for good" (Gross, 210). To some extent the firm did not adapt to the changing times in this era and although it remained relatively successful in years to come, the passionate mission with which Everyman had started, did not continue long after Dent's death. This was due mainly to societal changes and a shift in the reading public's attitude, as there was a lesser need for cheap editions of the classics.

The Everyman Library today

Time slowed Everyman's progress, as the paperback revolution made classics available in a cheaper form. The Library weakened throughout the 1970s, publishing few volumes. Yet, by 1975 more than 60 million copies of 1,239 Everyman volumes had been sold worldwide (Rose, 134). J.M. Dent & Sons was purchased by Weidenfeld and Nicholson in January 1988, and Dent's staff was moved to Weidenfeld's offices in London. Present day, Everyman is a general trade publisher. In 1992 the company launched a series of children's classics; this was followed by the popular Everyman's Library Pocket Poets series. Furthermore, in 1993 they launched the ambitious Everyman Guides which were highly illustrated and hugely informative art and architectural guides. Everyman's Library is now an imprint of Alfred A. Knopf with more than 600 titles in print (Campbell). Between 1998 and 2006 the company donated a complete set of the main Everyman series to every state secondary school in the UK, as well as schools in 77 countries of the developing world (Campbell). Everyman still publishes the classics and at a low price and they still adhere to the same production values, keeping the strong introductions. However, today they do not have the same mission as they did in 1906; being a general trade publisher.

Conclusion

At its foundation the Everyman's Library was hugely influential as a series which allowed the general reader to afford their own classics books, and to create their own libraries. Joseph Dent was inspirational in his mission to bring culture to the masses, by producing beautiful books at such an affordable price. Everyman promised to appeal to every kind of reader, the worker, student, cultured man, child, man and woman. Dent's influence was huge in allowing many readers at the turn of the twentieth century to become book owners instead of book borrowers. The company was able to bring the so-called great works of classical literature to a much wider audience than before. Following Dent's death, this mission began to change as Everyman's evolved into the general trade publisher that it is today. The idea of merging high production and design with affordability was not succeeded until Penguin. Yet, for over more than a century, Everyman Classics have been influential to the student, the teacher, the collector and the general reader. Indeed, the sheer scope of the Library but more importantly, the special Everyman aura, is still seen today.

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