



## the yellow nineties online

edited by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra

### **CHARLES ELKIN MATHEWS (1851-1921)**

Charles Elkin Mathews was born at Gravesend, Kent, on the last day of August, to Thomas George and Frances Mathews (née Elkin). Mathews had two brothers and six sisters. When he was young, the family moved to the village of Codford St. Mary, Wiltshire, where he developed his passion for collecting old books, no doubt with the encouragement of his bibliophilic parents. In his mid-twenties, Mathews moved to London, working for Charles John Stewart of King William Street, the Strand, "the last of the learned old booksellers" (qtd. in Nelson, *Elkin Mathews* 5). Subsequently, he managed R. E. Peach's circulating library in Bath and worked for Henry Southern and Co., antiquarian booksellers, Piccadilly. In 1884, Mathews set up shop as a bookseller in Exeter, specializing in rare and local publications, and offering services such as bookbinding and the cataloguing of libraries. In 1887, with four other booksellers (from Exeter, Plymouth, and London), Mathews was listed as a publisher of Maria Susannah Gibbons's *We Donkeys on the Devon Coast*, although James G. Nelson suggests that the book may have been self-published, with the booksellers simply acting as agents (*Early Nineties* 3). In the summer of that year, Mathews closed his business in Exeter and returned to London. Here he published three more titles under his name, all antiquarian historical works focussed on Devon.

In London, Mathews first lived with his elder brother, Thomas George, Jr., and his family. In 1893 he established a home in Bedford Park with five of his sisters, living next door to the painter John Butler Yeats (father of William) and his family. The Mathews were active in the social life of the community, which included Bodley Head authors John Todhunter and Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper). Mathews's domestic situation, combined with his increasing conflict with business partner John Lane, earned him a reputation for ill temper, but this dissipated upon his breakup with

Lane, marriage to Edith Calvert on 16 July 1896, and subsequent relocation of his sisters. A daughter, Nest, was born in July 1897. The family moved to the village of Chorleywood, Hertfordshire in 1903. Mathews died here of pneumonia on 10 November 1921.

Mathews certainly made a more happy choice in his domestic partnership than he had in his early business partnership with John Lane. While their mutual interest in old, rare, and curious books may have caused them to cross paths earlier (and indeed it was this shared interest that brought them into partnership), it is likely that Mathews and Lane were introduced by Mathews's elder brother. Thomas was Lane's supervisor at the Railway Clearing House in London, where Lane had been a clerk since the late 1860s (and in which situation he was to remain until 1892). As early as May 1887, Lane was working to implement a bookselling partnership with Mathews which involved bringing together their stocks of old books within suitable London premises under Mathews's name, with Lane as a silent partner. Judging from the correspondence, Lane was the driving force behind Mathews's move to the city, overriding all the latter's reservations. Thanks to Lane's location scouting, a quaint little shop at 6B Vigo Street was leased, and Mathews opened for business under his name on 10 October 1887 (Nelson, *Elkin Mathews* 6). When starting as a bookseller in Exeter, Mathews had drafted a fancy title page for his proposed first catalogue, "The Bodley Library Catalogue," inspired by an Exeter native: the famous book collector and founder of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Sir Thomas Bodley. A shared reverence for Bodley, and the coincidence of the previous occupant of 6B Vigo Street having had his "Cabinet of Fine Arts" decorated with a sign of "The Rembrandt Head," prompted Mathews and Lane to agree that "The Bodley Head" would be a fitting designation for the business. As Lane was later to recount in his Introduction to *The Life of Sir Thomas Bodley, Written by Himself* (1894):

'It should have a sign,' I said, 'and I have thought *The Bodley Head* is what it should be.' 'The very same idea was in my own mind,' answered my partner, fresh from Exeter, Sir Thomas Bodley's birthplace; and consumed as he was at the time with that passion for old literature which would, Exeter even apart, have made the coincidence perfectly natural. So *The Bodley Head* it became. (Bodley v-vi)

Accordingly a sign was made, "an oval medallion-like affair with the head [of Bodley] (done in terra cotta) inlaid and gilded" (Nelson, *Early Nineties* 12).

Mathews's pre-Bodley Head titles indicate an interest in publishing within a modest scope, and it is clear from his post-Bodley Head career that he was a serious and self-motivated publisher. However, the dominating influence of Lane in the Bodley Head firm makes it difficult to discern Mathews's individual role in the partnership and in the creation of the publishing list. Nelson argues that, "[a]lthough there is ample evidence to suggest that Mathews returned to London partly to expand his interest in publishing, there is little to indicate that he alone, without the influence of Lane, would have published the twenty-five books which the firm brought out between 1887 and 1892" (*Early Nineties* 13). He concludes that the evidence "suggests that practically all the talent represented by the books published at the Bodley Head was enlisted by John Lane" (30). The author of the first book to be published by the Mathews-Lane partnership (under the imprint "C. Elkin Mathews at the Sign of the Bodley Head in Vigo Street, W."), *Volumes in Folio* (1889), was a "discovery" of Lane's, Richard Le Gallienne. According to Nelson, one of the first publications to add John Lane's name to the imprint was a reissue of Oscar Wilde's *Poems* on 26 May 1892, designed by Charles Ricketts (*Checklist* 35). William Strang's *The Earth Fiend: A Ballad*, published in April 1892 and three other publications in May also bore Lane's name on the imprint.

Although *The Yellow Book* was the only periodical initiated by the Mathews-Lane partnership, the Bodley Head imprint had engaged in publishing distinctive, artistically designed periodicals before the advent of that magazine. Two involved a partnership between Mathews and publisher E. W. Allen. *The Pioneer* (July-October 1890), a journal "of literature, social progress, economics and ethics" (Nelson, *Early Nineties* 304) and the official organ of the Pioneer Club, had, according to the prospectus for the July 1890 number, desired to bring Bodley Head quality to the periodical: "Henceforth *The Pioneer* will be printed on hand-made paper, in the finest manner, and published quarterly. The conductors aim to give a 'pioneer' character to its form as well as to its contents by making it an example of modern artistic letter-press printing" (qtd. in Nelson, *Early Nineties* 304). In 1891-92, Mathews and Allen published Volume 3 (June

1891-March 1892) of the Ruskin Reading Guild's periodical, *Igdrasil* (1890-92), as well as Volume 1 (September 1891-April 1892) of its reincarnation as *World Literature* (1891-92). Another pre-existing periodical, the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* (1884-94), was inspired by the artistic principles of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites and was one of the earliest periodicals devoted to the dissemination of the works and philosophies of the Arts and Crafts movement. Its final three issues, under the title *Hobby Horse*, were published by the Bodley Head in 1893 (numbers 1 and 2) and by Mathews alone in 1894 (number 3). Already famous as an exemplar of the book arts given its meticulous attention to the material and visual aspects of publication, the prospectus for the Bodley Head incarnation unsurprisingly reveals a careful attention to matters of design: "A new title-page, and new ornaments, will be designed by the Editor; and all copper-plates and lithographs will be printed as India-proofs. The paper will be expressly hand-made for the Magazine, and will bear a special water-mark; and new type will be cast for the fresh series" (qtd. in Nelson, *Early Nineties* 303).

Not surprisingly, it was Lane rather than Mathews who, along with co-editors Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley, constituted the driving force behind *The Yellow Book*. Beardsley's illustration for the Prospectus for Volume 1 featured a woman in black perusing a book bin in front of what has been recognized as a depiction of the Bodley Head storefront; the book browser is regarded with prim suspicion by a Pierrot standing in the shop's doorway. Supposedly a caricature of Mathews, the image may perhaps be taken as Beardsley's editorial comment on Mathews's attitude to *The Yellow Book* project. When the editors failed to invite Mathews to a dinner celebrating the launch of the magazine in April 1894, Lane disingenuously regretted the absence of his partner. Mathews regarded this as "the final in a series of provocations and affronts engineered by Lane" (Nelson, *Elkin Mathews* 16). The partnership had become increasingly strained after Lane joined the firm fulltime, effectively sidelining Mathews into the antiquarian book side of the business (Nelson, *Early Nineties* 268). "Thus the *Yellow Book*," Nelson writes, "which was fateful in the careers of so many, was the immediate cause of the breakup of the early Bodley Head" (271). Mathews was later to complain that Lane "had evidently represented to the Editors that he alone was the partner interested in the working of the *Yellow Book*, and they did not take the trouble to act

otherwise" (qtd. in Nelson, *Elkin Mathews* 16). However, given the strained relationship between the partners, intensified over the launch of *The Yellow Book*, Lane's representation and the editors' acceptance of it likely had more truth in it than Mathews was willing to admit.

At the end of September 1894, after the publication of only two volumes of *The Yellow Book*, the Mathews-Lane partnership dissolved. Nelson's study of the firm's records at the time of the breakup leads him to conclude that "the Bodley Head was not only financially very sound but riding the crest of two new and impressive successes: George Egerton's *Keynotes*, in its fourth printing, and the *Yellow Book*, the talk of the town" (*Early Nineties* 106). Lane took both *The Yellow Book* and the Bodley Head sign as part of his share, with Mathews retaining the 6B Vigo Street premises, until being forced to relocate in 1912 when the building was sold for redevelopment (Mathews reopened a few blocks away, at 4A Cork Street). In the division of the partnership, the issue of who would retain which Bodley Head authors must have made Mathews painfully aware of the extent to which Lane had dominated the publishing side of the firm. Indeed, Lane seems to have used Mathews primarily as a means to launch himself independently as a publisher. As Mathews wrote to *Yellow Book* contributor William Rothenstein: "Of course as Lane took upon himself to run after the authors *presumably* for the firm, but as it now appears from his own avowal, *really* for himself, many of them therefore feel they ought to offer them [i.e., their books] to Lane," adding, "I suppose there is no doubt the Editors of the Y. B. [*Yellow Book*] will offer it to Lane" (qtd. in Nelson, *Early Nineties* 273-74). While there was some acrimony in settling which publisher would retain which book rights and authors, "the two men concluded their partnership each with a sizeable list of publications and an adequate group of loyal authors" and "each publisher, by and large, retained for himself the books and journals he most favoured" (278). It must speak to Mathews's personal and professional reputation that he went on to publish books by twenty of the writers who had published with the Mathews-Lane Bodley Head, which included *Yellow Book* contributors Richard Garnett, Lionel Johnson, Dollie Radford, and Arthur Symons. As well, he was to publish works by an additional eight *Yellow Book* contributors who had not been early Bodley Head authors: Douglas Ainslie, Laurence Alma Tadema, Ernest Dowson, Mrs. Arthur [Georgie] Gaskin,

Edith Nesbit, Stephen Phillips, Lily Thicknesse, and William Butler Yeats. Lane may have been largely responsible for enlisting these authors for the Bodley Head and, with the co-editors, for the *Yellow Book*. However, these writers and artists evidently saw value in going on to publish with Mathews – and in some cases, with Lane as well.

Against the view of Lane partisans such as Richard Le Gallienne and John Lewis May, Nelson argues that it was "Mathews, not Lane, who through the kind of books he published and the kind of business he maintained best carried on the tradition of the early Bodley Head in publishing" (*Early Nineties* 279). In the analysis of Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, Mathews and Lane had fundamentally different ideas about their goals as publishers: "By 1894, what had begun as an antiquarian bookshop with a sideline in the production of pretty little volumes and limited editions had grown into a monster. Mathews [...] could not follow Lane into the 'decadent' world of Naturalist fiction, feminist polemics, and Beardsleyan eroticism" (viii-ix). In Mathews's subsequent solo career as a publisher, we get a clearer idea of the Bodley Head books and authors for which he would have taken the greatest solicitude. In essence, his later publishing career indicates that Mathews favoured the publishing of affordable (and profitable), attractive editions of poetry and belles lettres, as evinced through series like the Shilling Garland and the Vigo Cabinet. These brought many young writers (mostly poets) to the attention of the reading public, including some notable Irish and Americans and the Canadian Bliss Carman. In addition to those already mentioned, these included Richard Aldington, Laurence Binyon, Lord Dunsany, Ronald Firbank, James Elroy Flecker, James Joyce, John Masefield, Vincent O'Sullivan, Ezra Pound, J.M. Synge, the Cubist Max Weber, and William Carlos Williams. In his solo publishing career, Mathews should be acknowledged, in Robert Scholes's opinion, as one of the few "small publishers who were so influential in British literary developments around the turn of the century" (qtd. in Nelson, *Elkin Mathews* 29). The early Bodley Head's interest in publishing beautifully made, limited editions of poetry and belles lettres, rather than a spectrum of publications appealing to the broadest range of middle-class aesthetic and avant-garde readers that Lane always favoured (Stetz and Lasner vii-viii), surely must bear some of Mathews's influence and foreshadows his vision and success in his later publishing career.

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