



HENRY & CO. (1889–1897)

Scholars of the fin de siècle primarily know the firm of Henry & Co. (H. Henry & Co. from 1895) as the publishing house behind the annual *The Pageant* (1895–96; postdated 1896–97). While information on the company's publication history is scarce, Henry & Co. merit close attention for their connections to neglected but often pivotal figures in the artistic and literary networks of the 1890s. They also warrant recognition for their role in the mid-1890s commercial endeavours to promote avant-garde literature and art to a wider audience.

The company's involvement in trailblazing publications could hardly have been anticipated from the firm's earliest works. The first books to appear under the imprint are all stylistically unchallenging and thematically non-divisive. Initially adventure novels predominated, with Lord Alfred Douglas's aunt Lady Florence Dixie as the only author who is still studied today. An early flagship series entitled the Whitefriars Library of Wit and Humour (1891–92) featured such familiar names as G. A. Henty, Andrew Lang, and Israel Zangwill. The recurrent title page claimed that the series would be conducted by Joseph Addison's principle of "spar[ing] no pains to make instruction agreeable to our readers and their diversion useful." While stringent moralism was avoided, the books in this series never sought to challenge their readership through either style or message, and were clearly aimed at the middlebrow reader. The Whitefriars Library was initially edited by the journalist W. H. Davenport-Adams, who, shortly before his death in 1891, had also set up another series for Henry & Co., entitled the Victoria Library for Gentlewomen (1892–95) (Latané 4). The nine volumes in the latter series advise middle-class women aspiring to gentility on how to dress or manage

their homes, as well as on suitable forms of recreation such as gardening. As one of the volumes has it,

the object of the enlightened woman of to-day should be not to discard household and domestic duties, but to apply to them the results of recent researches in hygiene, economics, science, and art, so as to elevate what was once mere domestic drudgery to an honoured and honourable occupation. (Chamberlain 8)

Although stricter pronouncements on domesticity from this period could certainly be found, this ideal stands in stark contrast to that of the New Woman literature that was starting to gain influence in the progressive political and artistic circles with which the publishing house would soon associate.

While they had published George Moore's mildly Naturalist novel *Vain Fortune* as early as 1891, Henry & Co.'s first move into more daring publications came two years later, with a drama series undertaken for the Independent Theatre Society. This avant-garde initiative, led by Dutch-born drama critic and promotor J. T. Grein, managed to circumvent the Theatre Licensing Act applicable to public theatres by requiring its audiences to pay a subscription fee. They could thereby stage plays that had no chance of passing the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain, such as the still scandalous works of Henrik Ibsen. Grein and his countryman Leo Simons, who would later contribute to *The Pageant*, had become partners in Henry & Co. in 1893 (Van Buul 121), and it is probably due to their combined influence that the publishing firm developed an interest in more controversial literature. Little is known about the other partners in the firm. Looking back on his experiences with Henry & Co., Israel Zangwill mentions Joseph Hannaford Bennett as another "active partner" (177). Grein, Bennett, the illustrator Alfred Henry Bennett (likely a relation), and the engravers Joseph Swain Senior and Junior (father and son) are all listed in the Electoral Register of 1894 as joint tenants of the company premises (Ancestry.co.uk). The precise nature of each person's involvement with the firm (or that of anybody actually going by the surname "Henry") has not been determined.

Henry & Co. issued four instalments of the Independent Theatre Series of Plays (1893–95), starting with the first staged play by George Bernard Shaw, *Widowers' Houses*

(1892). They went on to publish Elizabeth Robbins and Florence Bell's feminist play *Alan's Wife* (originally published anonymously; 1893), a translation of Danish playwright Edvard Brandes's *A Visit* (1893) that is representative of the confrontational Scandinavian realism of this period, and the characteristically irreverent farce *The Heirs of Roubourdin* (1893) by Émile Zola. The final play published was the tragi-comic account of late-Victorian sexual liberation *The Black Cat* (1894) by Rhymer's Club member John Todhunter, who would later contribute to the little magazine *The Green Sheaf* (1903–04).

While Henry & Co. never pushed the envelope as far as John Lane at the Bodley Head or Leonard Smithers, their decision to branch out into such contentious subjects fits in with the business practices of these competitors. Like these firms, they attempted to sell stylistically experimental literature that often dealt with heterodox subjects to a wide audience that may have cared more about sensationalism than literary innovation. As Laurel Brake has argued, this strategy of “marketing notoriety” was not in the first place an attack on contemporary public ideology, but rather a strategy of offering an expanding readership a flattering opportunity for cultural distinction and for dissociating themselves from the unattractive image of the moralistic and aesthetically undiscerning philistine (Brake 171–80). One of the inventive advertising strategies employed by both Lane and Smithers was to quote dismissive reviews in their advertisements, implying that the publications that had printed these criticisms were part of a backwards mainstream that was caught on the defensive. Henry & Co on occasion used what may be seen as a more prudent version of this tactic. In an advertisement in the trade journal the *Publisher's Circular*, for instance, Mary E. Mann's accessible novel *Susannah* (1895) is listed with excerpts from reviews full of unmitigated praise under the heading “The Critics All Agree,” whereas a notice for Herbert Vivian's rakish and formally experimental gambling narrative *Boconnoc* (1895) enticingly cites both negative and positive assessments, under the heading “The Critics All Differ” (*Publisher's Circular* n. p.).

Such relative caution may have saved Henry & Co. from becoming a target in the brief anti-Decadent backlash during the Oscar Wilde affair that had affected Lane and Smithers. In November 1895, only half a year after Wilde's conviction, Henry & Co. published *The Pageant*, featuring some of the most notorious members of the 1890s

avant-garde, and flouting the, by then, potentially suspicious canons of Aestheticist book design. And yet, they marketed the publication to a wide audience, and even presented it as belonging to the innocuous genre of the Christmas annual. The two numbers of *The Pageant* were conceptualized by Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts under the guidance of the more business-savvy Gleeson White, who had recently made the artistic monthly *The Studio* (1893–1964) a commercial success. With this annual, Henry & Co. joined a growing list of publishers who sought out affordable applications of design aesthetics formerly valued only by connoisseurs, and put them within the reach of a larger readership. In so doing, they furthered the demand for beautiful books in the popular marketplace. Henry & Co. followed *The Pageant* with what is ostensibly a children’s version of the periodical, in line with their long-term interest in publishing illustrated children’s books. Like *The Pageant*, *The Parade* (1896; postdated 1897), again edited by Gleeson White, was sold as a Christmas gift book. It has been judged to be “[o]ne of the most interesting experiments in the realm of children’s illustrations in the Nineties” (Houfe 149). In this annual catering to juvenile aesthetes, controversial avant-garde authors and artists such as Max Beerbohm and Aubrey Beardsley featured alongside the respectable humorist and long-standing Henry & Co. author Barry Pain. In a review of the first *Yellow Book*, Pain had recommended “a whiff of grapeshot” as a cure for the allegedly morbid Beerbohm (qtd. in Waller 562). Both *The Pageant* and *The Parade* attracted unanimously positive reviews, and in some of the same magazines and newspapers where *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* were being lambasted as agents of cultural degeneracy.

Another of Henry & Co.’s mid-decade strategies towards greater prestige was to issue more translations, mainly of French and German literary classics and historical works. These were often commissioned from avant-garde insiders such as Ernest Dowson and his fellow Rhymer’s Club members G. A. Greene and A. C. Hillier, as well as Alexander “Tex” Teixeira de Mattos (Jepson 267). The firm also published the first English translations of the works of Nietzsche, by Alexander Tille and Thomas Common. Holbrook Jackson tells us that this endeavour “aroused so little interest that it was abandoned after the production of four volumes” (129). The translation did, however, prompt Havelock Ellis to write a three-part introductory essay on the philosopher for *The Savoy* in 1896, where the translations were duly advertised.

Common himself contributed several articles on Nietzsche to Henry & Co.'s periodical *To-Morrow* (1896–98), a political and to a lesser extent literary monthly edited by Grein. *To-Morrow* was not the first periodical that they had taken on. From January to June 1893, Henry & Co. published the *Westminster Review* (1824–1914) which in this period moved between publishers with confusing regularity. The prestigious *Review* is the most likely inspiration for *To-Morrow*'s open-minded editorial line; it accommodated conflicting opinions argued by expert contributors from across the political spectrum. For *To-Morrow* the firm again made good use of its broad network, employing for its literary and critical items authors such as Simons, Teixeira de Mattos, the novelist Edgar Jepson, Hubert Crackanthorpe, and the Irish Celtic Revival poet Katharine Tynan. In 1897 a stillborn attempt was made to attract subscribers for a new periodical entitled *The Children of the Hour*. This “*Paper for the Few*” was to revisit the early-eighteenth-century genre of the essay periodical. It promised to publish several expertly printed instalments a week that would feature articles written by established authors from the avant-garde and mainstream alike (Prospectus ii).

Nevertheless, the firm was now nearing its end. Shortly after Henry & Co. had published the second *Pageant*, they started the appropriately named Random Series (1897), that seems to constitute a return to their early days of commercially safe publications. This series was advertised as “a new holiday library” (*Bookseller's Review* 143) of reprinted bestselling books from their list, which were offered at a discount price of 2 shillings instead of the regular 6 shillings. Nearly all of the featured titles were satirical works and urbane essays from the former Whitefriars Library series, suggesting that the more innovative publications of the intervening years had not been as lucrative. The final advertisements for Henry & Co. appeared in September 1897. Around this time *To-Morrow*, without explanation, suddenly moved to the roster of the publisher Grant Richards, only to fold after one more volume.

Due to a lack of preserved ledgers or other substantial archives, scholars might not be able to acquire much more definite information about Henry & Co.'s proprietors. Nevertheless, the firm's publications remain relevant as testimonials to the diversity of British print culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Studying them more intently will also help us to interrogate critically the commonly assumed distinction between avant-garde and trade publishers during the Yellow Nineties.

Koenraad Claes © 2018

Koenraad Claes is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Research Foundation Flanders based at Ghent University in Belgium, where he is currently researching connections between plot conventions in the British novel of the long nineteenth century and conservative political discourse. His first monograph, *The Late-Victorian Little Magazine*, will appear in August 2018 with Edinburgh University Press. He is the managing editor of the open-access journal *Authorship*.

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