



W. H. SMITH AND SON.

By W. M. ACWORTH.

With Illustrations by A. G. MACGREGOR and from Photographs.

H. & W. Smith, 192, Strand, opposite St. Clement's Church, beg to call the attention of their friends and the public to their READING ROOM, which is supplied with one hundred and fifty different newspapers every week, being on a more liberal scale than any yet established; also the most approved reviews, magazines, &c.

TERMS OF SUBSCRIPTION.

One year	£1 11 6
Half year	1 0 0
One quarter	12 0
One month	5 0

Open from nine o'clock in the morning till nine in the evening, Sundays excepted.



THE above notice, which is copied from the advertising columns of the *John Bull* for Sunday, December 9th, 1821, is the earliest record in existence of the firm of W. H. Smith & Son. Of H. Smith, whose name stands first in the above advertisement, there is but little more to tell. Tradition says that he managed a West End branch of the business, and that the plentiful lack of energy which he displayed in pushing it was a thorn in the flesh to his impetuous younger brother. This latter, W. H. Smith the first, though the advertisement gives him only the single initial W., was the real founder of the fortunes of his house.

And a very good right the "old gentleman" —to give him the name by which he is still always called by the few remaining servants of the firm who personally knew him—had to found a fortune. For if he took care of the pence—"Man!" he exclaimed one day to a startled customer who in paying an account at a desk beside him had remarked that he supposed he needn't pay the odd farthing, "Man! this house is built upon farthings"—on occasion he could display a regal disregard of the pounds, whether it was in subscribing a thousand guineas to rebuild the Methodist chapel where he worshipped, or in chartering special coaches or trains or steamers to carry the news of great events to the furthest ends of the country. And if he exacted a high standard of energy and devotion from every man in his employ, at least his demand was couched in the form not of "Go and do that," but "Come and do this;" and clerks and packers could hardly complain of early hours and heavy work when their employer was the first among them to arrive and the hardest worker when he got there. Sometimes, perhaps, it was difficult for

his people to know whether speed or economy was the quality which he valued highest. From a man, sent off in hot haste to fetch a bundle of missing newspapers, who came galloping back with them in a cab, he turned away more in sorrow than in anger, only saying as he paid the driver his shilling, "You'll ruin me with your extravagance."

But 1821 was as yet the day of small things; the delivery of newspapers to country subscribers was still entirely in the hands of the Post Office; and at No. 192

Strand, the old gentleman's attention was doubtless mainly devoted to the shop for the sale of dressing-cases and stationery as well as newspapers on the ground floor, and to the reading-room which, with its exceptionally liberal supply of papers and its approved reviews and magazines, was, we may presume, situated on the floor above it. But not entirely. The Post Office only dispatched its country mails at night, so it was nearly twelve hours after the newspapers were published before they commenced their journey to the provinces. Mr. Smith conceived and carried out the idea of collecting the papers from the publishing offices and sending them out with the early morning coaches, which were often as fast and faster than the mails; and for this purpose he organized a service of express carts. If the coaches started too early, or the papers were published too late, the carts galloped after the coaches and overtook them. On great occasions they even went all the way, and in 1830 Smith's express delivered the news of the death of George IV. in Dublin twenty-four hours in advance of the Royal messenger. At this period the firm were at least free from the most serious of the difficulties which nowadays oppress them, the bulk, namely, and weight of the papers which they have to send out with a very narrow margin of time, for it is recorded, apparently upon trustworthy authority, that "even at the latest period of the coaching-time one man was able to carry all the papers to the coaches under his arm."



W. H. SMITH, SEN.

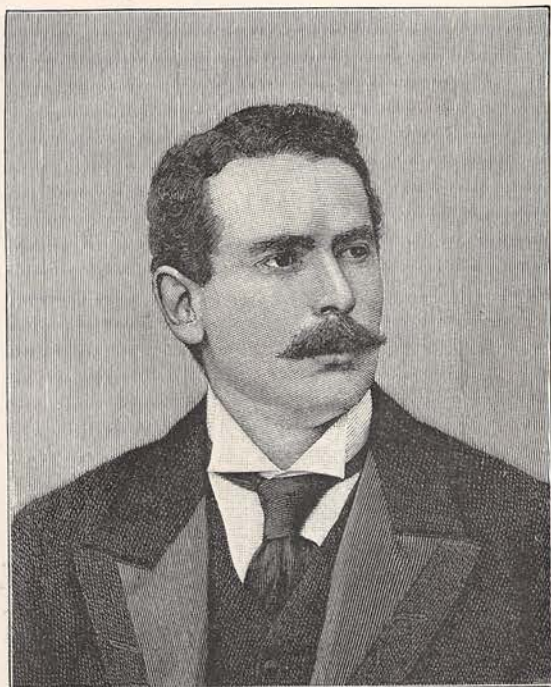
From a Bust by Joseph Durham. Drawn by W. D. Almond.

run for newspaper purposes. But at length, in the autumn of 1847, when the mass of new projects which were being almost daily brought forward had concentrated public attention on railway matters, and the contests both in Parliament and on the ground between the broad-gauge and narrow-gauge champions had incited railway managers to feats of speed hitherto unheard of, there was run a very remarkable newspaper express. It left Euston at 5.3 A.M., twelve minutes earlier than its modern representative starts to-day. It reached Manchester at ten o'clock (the exact time given in *Bradshaw* for May, 1892), Liverpool at 10.30 A.M. (the time is now 10.25, but the route *viâ* Runcorn cuts off some ten miles of the original distance), and Carlisle at 1.6 P.M. as against 1.5 to-day. At Beattock, forty miles further north, which was reached at 2.15, the railway came to an end, and for the remaining sixty miles the newspapers had to be taken by post horses to Glasgow, where they arrived at 8 P.M. A few months later, on February 19th, 1848, on the occasion of the Budget

statement of Lord John Russell's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Wood, afterwards Lord Halifax, which proposed an increase of the income tax from sevenpence to a shilling in the pound, Messrs. W. H. Smith ran an express yet more remarkable. This time, though the railway from Beattock to Glasgow and Edinburgh had been opened for traffic four days before, the route taken was by the East Coast. Not indeed the familiar Great Northern road through Peterborough and Grantham, but the old Midland route *viâ* the North-Western to Rugby, and thence through Leicester, Derby, and Normanton to York, and so *viâ* Newcastle, Berwick, and Edinburgh to Glasgow. The time for the 472½ miles was ten hours twenty-two minutes, or, excluding stoppages, nine hours thirty-two minutes, that is a running speed of very nearly fifty miles an hour, a really marvellous performance all things considered. The papers which left London at 5.35 A.M. were delivered in Edinburgh at 2.55 and in Glasgow at 3.57 P.M., "two hours," the *Newcastle Journal* adds, "before the mails which left London the previous evening."¹

It was in the year 1841 that W. H. Smith the second, a lad of sixteen, just returned from Tavistock Grammar School, where—so a former pastor recently related in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*—"he had already acquired a strong proclivity towards the Established Church" first joined his father at 192 Strand. And from that time forward he devoted himself heart and soul to the business till his election as Member for Westminster in November, 1868, led him gradually to withdraw from active participation in it—a fact which, however, can hardly have been known to a correspondent who not long before his death addressed a letter to "Mr. W. H. Smith, the Stationer, Downing Street, London." The bulk of a newsagent's work is done before an ordinary man of business has begun to think of getting out of bed; but morning after morning, year in, year out, Mr. Smith was down in the Strand, superintending in person the sorting and dispatch of the newspapers, and if a hitch had occurred and work was a few minutes behind time, he was always ready to buckle to and lend a hand at folding and packing. A business so managed deserved to succeed, and succeed it certainly did.

In 1849 the firm removed from 192 Strand, where now are the offices of the *Graphic*, to No. 136, at the corner of Wellington Street, which is now occupied by another literary firm, Messrs. Sotheman & Co. Three years later they moved again to No. 186, a house which already had a distinguished title to literary fame, for it was here that fifteen years earlier Chapman & Hall had published the first edition of *Pickwick*. Builders were at work and scaffolding was up round the house, when on November 18th, 1852, the body of the Duke of Wellington was borne past it, "with the noise of the mourning of a mighty nation," to its last resting-place under "the

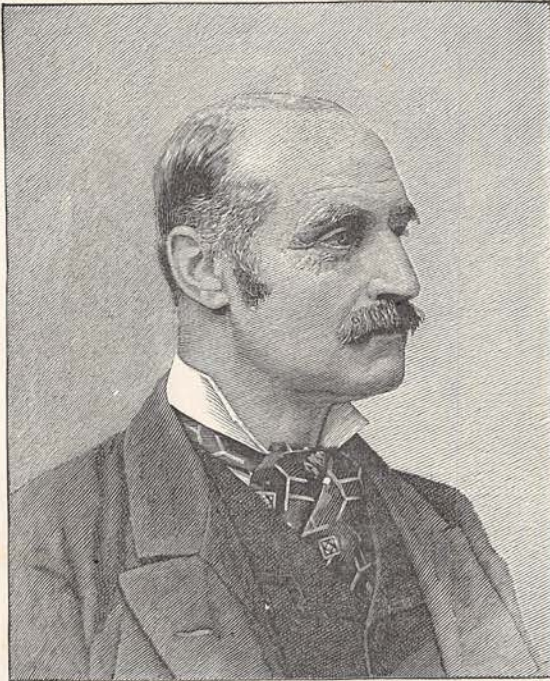


HON. W. F. D. SMITH, M.P. (*Partner*).
From a photograph by James Ball, 17 Regent Street, W.

¹ The Post Office still preserves the same fondness for slow services which apparently characterised it in 1848. That it pays a huge subsidy for a weekly mail to Brindisi, which is run markedly slower than the ordinary everyday expresses over the same road; that it dispatches letters to New York by the *Britannic* when the *City of Paris* is sailing the same and the *Fürst Bismarck* the following day, is well enough known. Perhaps it is not quite so commonly realized that the heavily subsidized day mail to Scotland leaves Euston two and three-quarter hours earlier than the unsubsidized ten o'clock express, which is only three-quarters of an hour behind it in Glasgow; or that the ordinary passenger train from Truro to Paddington gains sixty-five minutes on the mail which runs in front of it,

dome of the golden cross." The firm issued invitations to watch the passing of "the towering car with its sable steeds." Among all those who were present we may be very sure that not one imagined that there was amongst them one, their host of the day, the junior partner in the firm, whose death less than forty years later in the historic castle at Walmer, as the successor of the Great Duke in his Wardenship of the Cinque Ports, would be mourned as truly and almost as universally; or that to him England would owe the preservation at Walmer for all future time of the memorials of Pitt and Wellington as national heirlooms.

But it is high time to leave ancient history, and to come to the practical business of the firm to-day. And though Messrs. W. H. Smith & Son are much more than newsagents, being indeed advertisement agents, advertisement contractors, printers



MR. C. AWDRY (*Partner*).

From a photograph by Elliott and Fry, 55 Baker Street, W.

and lithographers, booksellers, librarians, and bookbinders, not to mention minor branches, they are newsagents first and foremost; so with the newspaper business it is only right to begin. "What is a newspaper?" is apparently a question as puzzling as Lord Liverpool's famous "What is a pound?" *Punch*, for instance, may be, and is "registered at the General Post Office as a newspaper." But to Messrs. W. H. Smith & Son, though the *Athenæum* is a newspaper, *Punch* is only a periodical, and so are about 300 other weekly publications. When one asks what really is the difference, one learns that essentially there is none. "A periodical is a publication which would be called a newspaper if it were published at an hour of the day when it could be packed and despatched along with the ordinary dailies"—such was the best definition I could attain to after considerable cross-examination. As it is, periodicals come out, not in the middle of the night, but at a reasonable hour, usually say eleven or twelve o'clock in the forenoon.

And if Smith & Son have their way—and their wishes are not lightly to be disregarded by editors and publishers—they are likely to continue to come out at some such hour. For the pressure of the newspaper work in the early morning is quite as severe as need be already, and the bulk of the periodicals is growing with astonishing rapidity. Indeed, literature of the order of which Mr. Newnes is the parent, and *Tit-Bits* the eldest child, is springing up and flourishing with a rank luxuriance which seems likely to choke the growth of all other forms of journalistic enterprise. It is no doubt as true as it ever was that more than one of the great dailies has "the largest circulation in the world," but that circulation, large as it is, is not increasing. It is not that the provincial press is gaining on that of London, for the morning papers of the great towns are stationary too. Again, some of the famous weeklies are even steadily declining, though without showing any diminution in ability to justify the change. With journals of what one might call the *omnium-gatherum* type, on the other hand, stacked in great heaps ten or fifteen feet square and six feet high, the spacious ground-floor at No. 186 is at times well-nigh solid from end to end. I noted the number sent out in an ordinary week of a single one of them—a paper whose name I would undertake to say is unknown to half the readers of the *English Illustrated Magazine*—and it reached 3000 quires, or 78,000 copies. And then, as I was specially warned, a large part of these papers are supplied to Messrs. W. H. Smith direct from the publishers to the branches in Liverpool and Manchester, and

never pass through the house in the Strand at all. Moreover, their receipt and dispatch can be spread over a considerable space of time, as many periodicals—*Punch* for instance—begin to be issued to the agents a full day before they are on sale to the public, and consequently the whole of the copies taken by Messrs. Smith are never on their premises at the same time. Which, seeing that they have sent out before now ninety tons of a single issue of an illustrated paper, is perhaps just as well; otherwise not only would their own premises be congested, but the thoroughfare which passes their door would be in yet more urgent need of “betterment” than is the case at present.

The real pressure comes not from the periodicals but from the newspapers, in other words it lasts from three to five o'clock each morning; the worst of it coming after

four o'clock, when the daily papers begin to appear. Nor is the pressure equal throughout the week. The dailies have, it is true, to be dealt with each day. But the weekly newspapers mostly appear on Friday and Saturday. On these two days Messrs. Smith's lists contain respectively fifty-eight and one hundred weeklies.

The clocks were striking three as I entered Messrs. Smith's premises one Friday morning towards the end of April, and was met by one of the partners in the firm, who acknowledged, however, that he did not often nowadays keep such unconscionable hours, though when he first joined the business he had been down at business at three o'clock every morning. Work had hardly begun, and though there were vast masses of papers piled up in every part of the room, and porters were staggering in every moment with fresh loads from the row of carts drawn up opposite the door, many of the sorters were still lingering over their morning cup of coffee, supplied from a stall established for the purpose in the basement. And excellent the coffee was—price for a large breakfast-cup one halfpenny.

Perhaps some day the firm will add to its departments one for the management of railway hotels and refreshment rooms. There should be a very fair profit in supplying a halfpenny cup of coffee at sixpence, to say nothing of the marked reduction in quality which might safely be made, and yet leave the article a good deal above the normal standard of railway refreshment rooms.

In broad outline the method of sorting is as follows. A cover is prepared beforehand and addressed to each bookstall or newsagent that Messrs. Smith supply. Inside each cover is pasted a printed list of all the papers published that morning, and against the name of each paper is written the number of copies which are to be sent. The covers for all the stations served by the same train are kept together and assigned to a definite group of eight or ten sorters, who are surrounded by piles of all the papers of the day. Let us say we are watching the Paddington group. One man takes up a cover addressed to the Oxford bookstall. Into it he puts twenty copies of the *Weekly Times*, thirty of *Lloyd's*, and thirty-five of the *People*, ticking them off as he does so on the printed list inside. Then he pushes the parcel along to his next neighbour, whose business it is to add the illustrated papers; so many copies of the *Graphic*, the *Illustrated London News*, and *Black and White*. He too ticks off his additions and passes on the bundle one stage further. In go this time cheek-by-jowl the *Rock* and the *Church Times*, the *Temperance Chronicle* and the *Licensed Victualler's Mirror*. And so the tale of the weeklies is gradually completed, till finally the parcel reaches one man

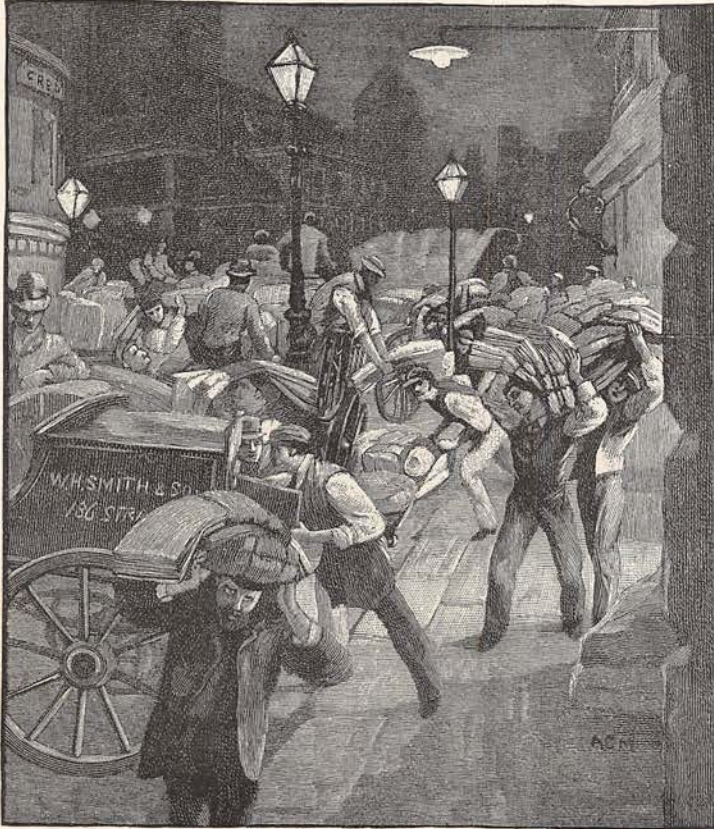


MR. A. D. ACLAND (Partner).

From a photograph by Elliott and Fry, 55 Baker Street, W.

whose business it is to add any miscellaneous and unusual extras, and then to see that the whole of the requisitions of the list have been duly complied with. At this point the parcel, if it be for an important station like Oxford, has probably reached the practicable limit of size; it is accordingly closed and packed (Messrs. W. H. Smith's bill for string does not fall far short of £3000 per annum). If it be for a small local station it stands aside till the morning papers arrive and can be added to it.

Not so many years back the whole of the work was done in this manner within the four walls of the principal office. Nowadays not only has the bulk of the papers dealt with so greatly increased, that 186 Strand could not hold them all, but also the increased speed of output of the modern printing-presses on the one hand, and the



THE STRAND AT 3.30 A.M.

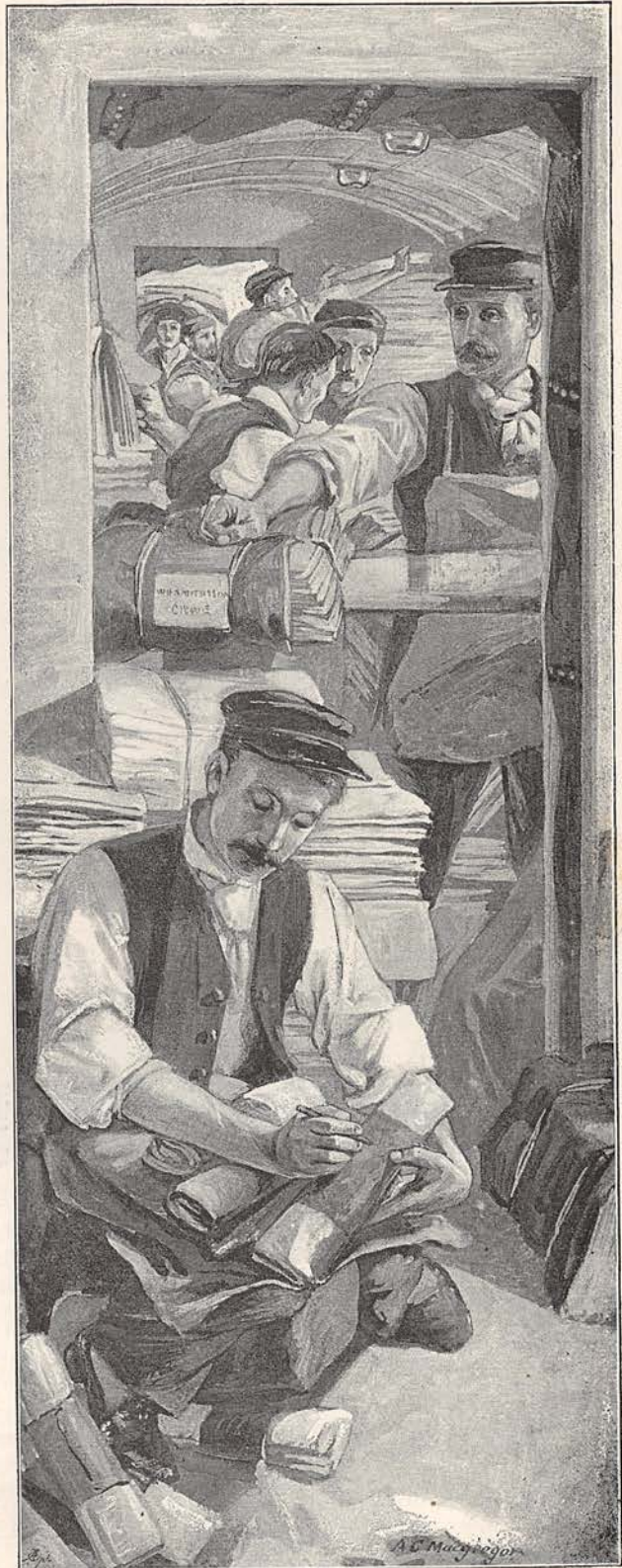
earlier hour at which newspaper trains leave on the other, have so curtailed the time available for sorting that a system of decentralisation has been perforce adopted. The Great Eastern is the only one of the great companies for which the whole of the parcels are made up at No. 186 Strand. Those for the North-Western and the Midland are sorted for the most part in the trains, after leaving Euston and St. Pancras as the case may be. At Waterloo and Paddington, as well as at King's Cross, accommodation is provided for sorting papers within the station buildings. In this way the work can be carried on up to the very last moment, and if it becomes imperative that something should be left behind, at least it

is only a few unfinished parcels and not the entire contents of a van. One of the most striking sights I saw was a huge two-horse vehicle galloping off through the grey dawn to Paddington filled full with hundreds of quires of weeklies, while a dozen men clustered, like so many Neapolitans, all over on the heaps of papers, or sat with legs dangling over the sides.

Towards four o'clock there came a lull. The weeklies had either been sorted or dispatched in bulk to the different stations; it was time to get ready to dispose of the dailies. Not that the lull lasted long, for while the weekly papers were still being finished off, carts were already arriving with the first batches of the morning papers, and porters were already beginning to distribute a load of supplements of the *Times* and of *Morning Posts*. Nor were the rest many minutes behind them. If the weekly papers were overpowering in their number, the dailies made up by their tremendous bulk. At this point Messrs. Smith's own resources became inadequate—though they have a staff of some thirty-five carts and drivers, and fifty horses—and great two-horse vans from the different railway companies hurried up, and were hastily loaded and dispatched. As I saw it, everything went smoothly enough, though one cart-load was run so fine that partner and superintendent were constrained to lend a hand

to finish the packing; but if by a late sitting at the House of Commons or any other cause the publication of the papers is delayed; if the Strand is "up;" or worse still, if there is a black fog or a hoar frost making the wood-pavement as slippery as glass, it may become impossible to finish in time. Then the superintendent, whose lifelong familiarity with the place enables him to tell at a glance how things are going, anxiously watches the inexorable hand of the big clock till the final moment, when the order becomes essential, "Parcels must be closed and dispatched immediately." A printed slip is then inserted into each, "The remainder will follow by next train." But on a fine morning in April, with a House of Commons so *blasé* that for the most part it gets counted out at nine P.M. precisely, such *contretemps* occur not. A few minutes before five the last cart was dispatched for Liverpool Street; a moment later another gathered up the last odds and ends for Euston, and as five o'clock was pealing from the neighbouring belfries, and the newly restored spire of St. Mary le Strand was flushing a rosy red in the light of the rising sun, we left No. 186 and walked across the bridge to Waterloo.

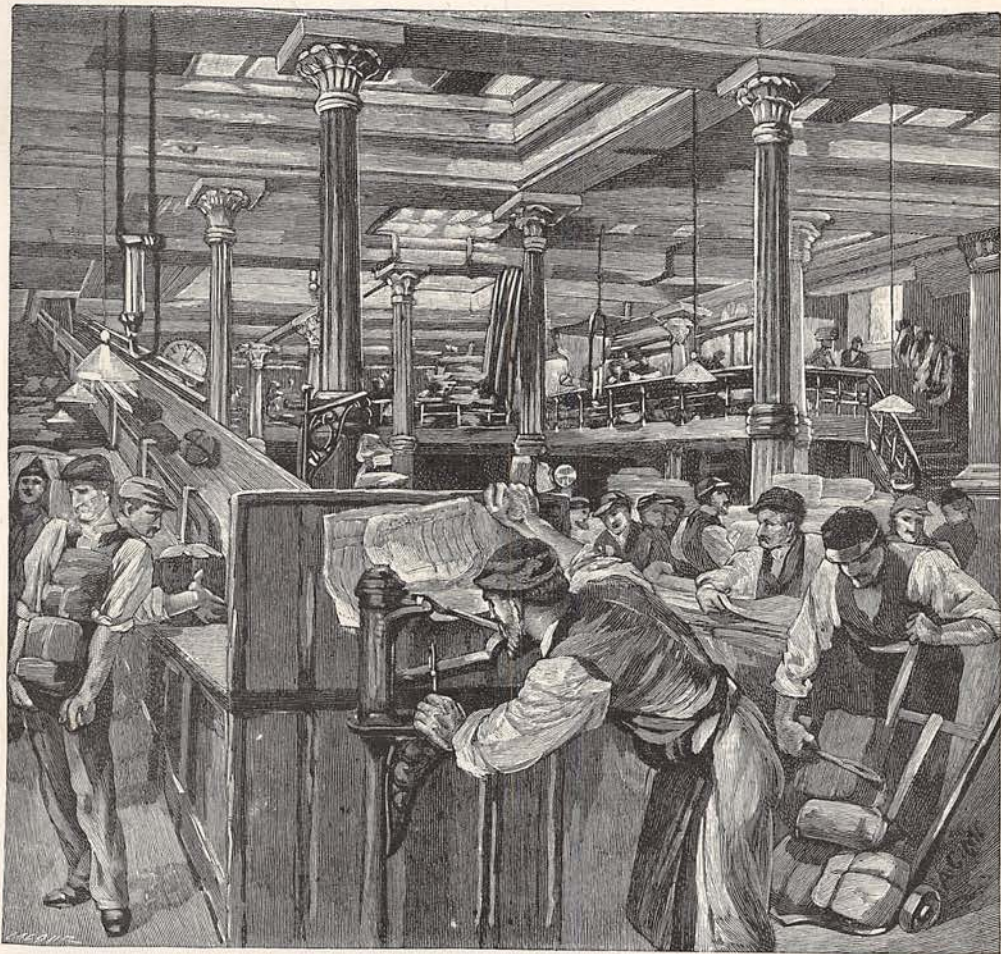
It is wonderful what a beautiful place London is, on the rare occasions when one gets a chance of seeing it. The broad bright sun had risen behind the dark mass of the dome of St. Paul's, and paved a path for himself with gold across the muddy waters of the Thames, while further up stream every line of the architecture of the Houses of Parliament stood out sharp against the transparent blue of the sky. The smoke and steam from the factory chimneys on the south side of the river only added to the charm by force of contrast with the perfect clearness of the atmosphere



THE SORTING-VAN, LONDON AND NORTH-WESTERN RAILWAY.

elsewhere. The very roof of Charing Cross Station awoke thoughts, not so much of what it is, as of what London might be, and will be when its citizens begin to take a pride in its beauty. One line alone in Wordsworth's great sonnet seemed inapplicable. The "calm so deep" which he felt is gone; nowadays the "mighty heart" never lies still; and even at this hour workmen were pouring across the bridge, and van after van loaded with vegetables for Covent Garden Market came clattering up from Nine Elms and Bricklayer's Arms.

Arrived at Waterloo Station, we found a large part of the open space between the booking office and the platforms of the "south station" was in temporary occupation

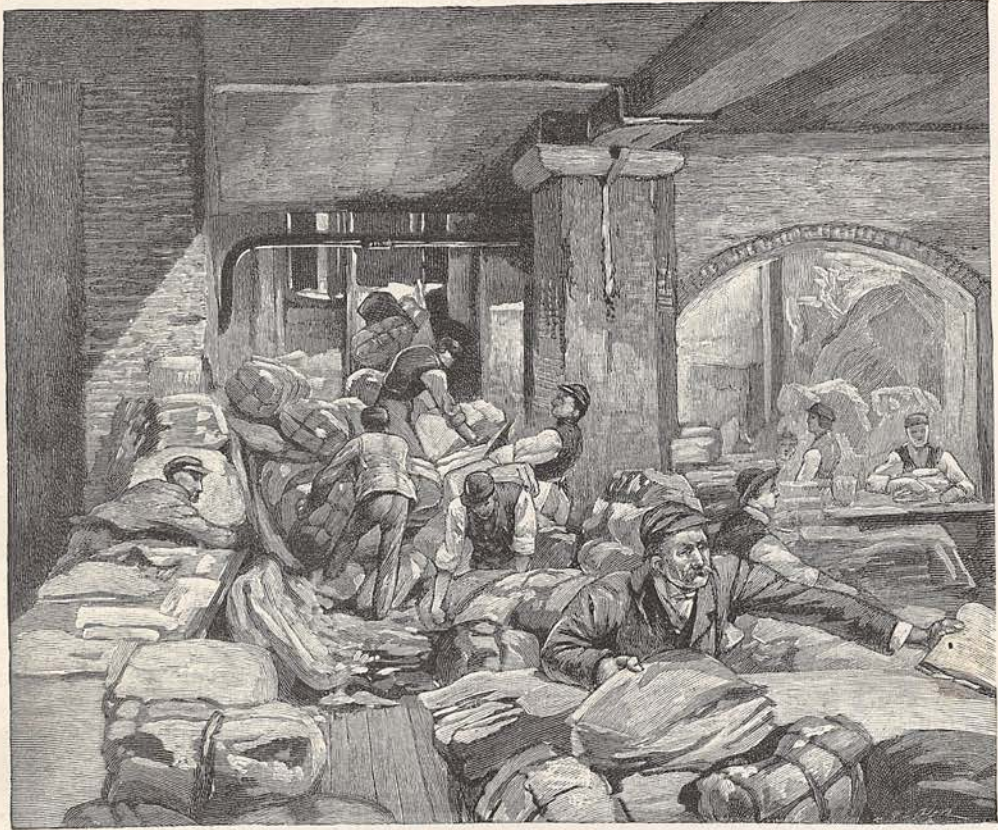


GROUND FLOOR, 186 STRAND. DISPATCHING "PERIODICALS."

of Messrs. Smith and Son. Tables were rigged up of boards laid on trestles, and there sorting was going on as energetically as in the Strand. On railway barrows all round were bundles ready finished for the more distant stations, such as Bournemouth and Weymouth. Piles of papers still untouched were waiting to supply the needs of the nearer points, and would follow by later trains. In the case of a self-contained line like the South Western, from the point of view at least of charge for carriage, the distance is immaterial; and everything, whether it be going to Wimbledon or to Ilfracombe, pays at the same rate, an average being struck between the small parcels for long distances, and the large parcels for short ones. A line like the North Western, on the other hand, serves not only its own stations but every part of Wales, of Scotland, and of Ireland, and, as an overhead charge of so much per ton leaving Euston would afford no basis of division with the Welsh and Scotch and Irish companies, every individual parcel (with the exception of those for Liverpool and

Manchester) has to be charged separately. The waste of time and of clerical force must be so considerable that it ought not, one would think, to be beyond possibility for all the railway companies to divide their receipts from Messrs. Smith on a percentage basis such as that which is found practicable in the case of the Parcel Post.

The sorting which is carried on in the newspaper trains from Euston and St. Pancras differs of course in no respect from the same process as carried on in the office in the Strand or on the platform at Waterloo. But these trains cannot, for all that, be passed over without a word of notice. In the first place they represent a special development which is unique in railway experience, and further they afford a



“RETURNED UNSOLD.”

good instance how it is not the “bloated capitalist,” but the public at large, who benefit by the competition which nowadays it is the fashion to decry as “cut-throat” and wasteful. The origin of the train was on this wise. The proprietors of the *Times*, having at that time both more rapid machinery and a smaller number of copies to print than their penny contemporaries, thought they saw the opportunity of improving their position by getting down to the Midlands and Lancashire before their rivals. So in March 1875, they put on a special train which carried the *Times* from Euston at 5.15 A.M. and reached Rugby in time to catch the early morning trains thence to the whole of the North-Western system. The other newspapers, however, refused to be left behind. The result was that the North-Western had to put on a new express at 5.15, open to all comers; and as the Midland, the Great Northern, and the rest of them equally declined to leave to the North-Western a monopoly of this business, the public now get half-a-dozen expresses starting from London at this hour, and penetrating to the furthest corners of the kingdom. The trains once put on, sorting *en route* followed as a matter of course, it being impossible to find time to sort the mass of papers sent down to the great towns on the North-Western and Midland systems before 5.15.

Five years ago I travelled down to Rugby in a newspaper sorting van, and perhaps I may be permitted to quote here a description, written when the occurrence was fresh in my mind, of the scene I saw in the half-awakened solitude of Euston. For a smarter piece of work it has not since then been my lot to witness. "Not that the silence and solitude lasts long, for the newspaper train starts at 5.15. A rumbling of heavy wheels driven at speed is heard, and big spring vans dash up, piled with papers reeking hot from the press. Bundle after bundle is tossed into the foremost of the sorting vans, of which there are three, joined together with gangways opening between. Of passenger carriages on the train there are two, but the passengers might be counted on one's fingers. The clock points to twelve minutes past the hour, the papers are all in the train, but the chief sorting clerk looks anxiously at the clock, and then out into the station yard. The *Times*, it appears, does not come with the other papers from the office in the Strand, but is sent direct from Printing House Square, and it has not yet arrived. The minute hand reaches the quarter; time waits for no man, not even for the editor of the *Times*; the guard blows his whistle, we step in, and the train moves off. At the same moment is heard a 'rushing of horse hoofs

from the east,' the train is stopped before it has gone twenty yards, the van gallops into the yard, and every official in the place, from the inspector and the sorting clerks to the lamp man, precipitates himself upon it, before there has been time to pull the horses on to their haunches. In less time than it takes to describe, the bundles of papers are transferred, and by 5.17 we are again under way, having seen a sight that, so at least the officials declared, had never before been seen by mortal eyes."



F. J. F. WILSON, HEAD OF PRINTING DEPARTMENT.

But Messrs. W. H. Smith and Son have many other strings to their bow beside newspaper trains. For one thing there is what is known as the "town trade," and every morning scores and hundreds of small newsvendors crowd to their office and buy and pay for across the counter the papers they need to supply their shops. Then there are the papers which are distributed by cart to private customers at the West End, whether they be large buyers like clubs or hotels, or to individuals content with a solitary *Times* or *Standard*. Last but not least, there is a large business carried on through the medium of the post office.

At one time, as has been said already, and that not so many years ago—the post office carried every newspaper that was sent out of London. It has lost the trade now, and more than one fortune—for Smith and Son are by no means the only wholesale newsagents in London—has been built up out of post office leavings. That the business has left the post office can surprise no one who considers the way in which it is conducted. For the complication of the regulations as to times and places of posting to catch the early morning mails is such that the subject could hardly be mastered in an ordinary lifetime. Newspapers can be tumbled in bundles into Smith's van, as the train is actually moving away from the platform, but before the post office will condescend to touch a single copy, though there may be a sorting tender on the same train, it must be folded up tight in a paper wrapper, and so rendered as disagreeable as possible to read, addressed in full, stamped at the rate of seventy-two per cent. of the wholesale price, and finally taken to the General Post Office and posted in time to allow an ample margin for further formalities.

Naturally the newspaper business is done to-day by the wholesale newsagents; or rather the post office is left with nothing but the retail business of supplying single copies in thinly populated country districts where the expenses of distribution are so great as to leave but scant room for profit. It is only necessary to add that the post office is by common consent the best managed and most enterprising department of the Government, in order to satisfy every fair-minded person what a rich harvest of gain is waiting to be reaped by the nation as soon as the state socialists shall succeed

in handing over to national or municipal control the railways, the tramways, the docks, and all the rest of the vast and complicated machinery of modern inter-communication.

It is not, by the by, quite fair to say that newspapers have to be posted needlessly early, for on condition that Messrs. Smith and Son do the bulk of the post office work gratis, the authorities at St. Martin's Le Grand are good enough to allow them extra time to do it in. Indeed they go so far as to allow them in some cases to obliterate the stamps for themselves, in others to pack the papers unstamped in the official mail-bags, merely rendering an account of the number of papers each bag contains, and subsequently forwarding a cheque for the amount of the postage. Not that Messrs. Smith have obtained the use of the mail-bags without a struggle. At one time the privilege was withdrawn, and the firm were called upon to find bags for themselves. They found them, and then the post office proceeded to lose them with such persistent frequency that Mr. W. H. Smith's personal attention was called to the matter. Under his instructions the lack of bags was supplemented by a supply of paper baskets. Next morning when the mail carts called, a procession of porters bearing paper baskets advanced to meet them and emptied their contents loose on to the bottom of the carts. The post office surrendered, and the official bags were restored.

Two more points and we have done with the newspapers. In the basement of No. 186 is an immense room devoted to sorting, checking, and packing papers returned unsold. The bulk of them go back to the publishers, by whom they are allowed for. Even so Smith and Son remark truly enough that carriage, sorting and resorting, invoicing, and so forth, is not done for nothing, and that the "returns" department is the reverse of a profitable one. In the adjoining room is housed the "back number department," which has a gross income of something like £12,000 a year. Assuming the papers to cost on the average twopence each, it would seem that Messrs. Smith's customers call for a million and a half back numbers in a twelve-month. So after all newspapers are not quite so ephemeral as is commonly supposed.

Messrs. W. H. Smith first turned their attention to bookselling about the time of the Great Exhibition. In the early days of railways, it was beneath the dignity of the management to be troubled with such petty matters as bookstalls. If there was a bookstall at the station, it was usually presided over by an ex-porter who had lost a leg or an arm and so was disabled from active service, and the books offered for sale were of the class naturally corresponding to an ex-porter's literary taste and command of capital. Writing in the *Times* in 1850 Samuel Phillips tells how he travelled "the other day in a first-class carriage, in which the young ladies and a boy, for the space of three mortal hours, were amusing themselves and alarming us by a devotion to a trashy French novel, most cruelly and sacrilegiously misplaced." They held strong opinions on the propriety of tight-lacing, those early Victorians! For our author continues:—"A volume of Eugène Sue was in the hands of each. The colour of the books was light green, and we remembered to have seen a huge heap of such covers as we hastily passed the bookstall on our way to the carriage. Could it be possible that the conductors of our railways, all-powerful and responsible as they are, had either set up themselves, or permitted others to establish on their ground, storehouses of positively injurious aliment for the hungry minds that sought refreshment on their feverish way? Did they sell poison in their literary refreshment rooms and stuff whose deleterious effects twenty doctors would not be sufficient to eradicate? We resolved to ascertain at the earliest opportunity, and within a week visited every railway terminus in the metropolis. It was a painful and a humiliating inspection. With few exceptions, unmitigated rubbish encumbered the bookshelves of almost



W. FAUX, HEAD OF LIBRARY DEPARTMENT.
From a photograph by Watson and Son, St. Leonards.

every bookstall we visited, and indicated only too clearly that the hand of ignorance had been indiscriminately busy in piling up the worthless mass. . . .

"As we progressed north, a wholesome change, we rejoice to say, became visible in railway bookstalls. We had trudged in vain after the schoolmaster elsewhere, but we caught him by the button at Euston Square." Kügler's *Hand-book of Painting*, Humboldt's *Kosmos*, Prescott's *History of Mexico*, *Logic for the Million*, price six shillings, were offered one after the other to the astonished inquirer. The result of the more minute inquiries which he was thereby led to make he gives as follows:—

"When the present proprietor of the Euston Square bookshop (Messrs. W. H. Smith and Son, that is) acquired the sole right of selling books and newspapers on the London and North Western Railway, he found at the various stations on the line a miscellaneous collection of publications of the lowest possible character, and vendors equally miscellaneous and irresponsible. The keepers of the bookstalls, in fact, were without credit, without means, without education, without information. They bought cheaply to sell at a large profit, and the more despicable their commodities the greater their gains. At one fell swoop the injurious heap was removed. At first the result was most discouraging. An evident check had been given to demand; but as the new proprietor was gradually able to obtain the assistance of young men who had been educated as booksellers, and as public attention was drawn to the improvement in the character of the books exposed for sale, the returns perceptibly improved, and have maintained a steady progressive increase greatly in excess of the proportion to be expected from the increase of travelling up to the present time. Every new work of interest as it appeared was furnished to the stalls, from Macaulay's *England*, down to Murray's 'Colonial Library,' and purchasers were not slow to come for all. Upon many good books, as well of recent as of more remote publications, there has been an actual run: Macaulay sold rapidly, Layard not less so, *Stokers and Pokers*, a sketch of the London



W. F. KINGDON, HEAD OF BOOK DEPARTMENT.
From a photograph by Martin and Sallnow, 416 Strand.

and North Western Railway, published in Murray's, 'Colonial Library' sold to the extent of upwards of 2,000 copies. Borrow's *Bible* and *Gypsies in Spain* are always in demand, and St. John's *Highland Sports* keeps pace with them. Graver books have an equally steady sale. Coleridge's works are popular on the rail. *Friends in Council*, *Companions of my Solitude*, and similar small books grasping great subjects, and written with high philosophical aim, are continually purchased. Poetry is no drug at the prosaic terminus if the price of the article be moderate. Moore's *Songs and Ballads*, published at five shillings each; Tennyson's works, and especially *In Memoriam*, have gone off eagerly; the same remark applies to the *Lays* of Macaulay and to the *Scotch Ballads* of Aytoun. A pamphlet, a new book, written by a person of eminence, on a subject of immediate interest, goes off like wildfire at the rail. The Bishop of Exeter's pamphlet on *Baptismal Regeneration*, and Baptist Noel's book on the Church, had an unlimited sale at Euston Square while excitement on these questions lasted. Books on sporting matters, published by Longmans, such as *The Hunting Field*, are purchased very generally by country gentlemen, who appear, according to our intelligent informant, to have had no opportunity of seeing such works before. Ladies—we beg their pardon for revealing the singular fact—are not great purchasers of good books at the station. This season they have been greedy in their demand for *The Female Jesuit*, but their ordinary request is for the last cheap novel published in the 'Parlour' or 'Popular Library'. If they do by chance purchase a really serious book, it is invariably a religious one. There is a regular sale on the line for what are termed Low Church books, but scarcely any demand for the religious works published by Masters.

"Unexpected revelations come forth in the course of inquiry. It has been remarked that persons who apparently would be ashamed to be found reading certain works at

home, have asked for publications of the worst character at the railway bookstalls, and, being unable to obtain them, in evident annoyance have suddenly disappeared. It is much to be feared that the demand for such publications continues because it has not in all cases and at all stations been immediately and sufficiently checked. The style of books sold depends more upon the salesman than on the locality; but there are exceptions to the rule.

“At Bangor, all books in the Welsh language must have a strong Dissenting and Radical savour. English books at the same station must be High Church and Conservative. Schoolboys always insist upon having Ainsworth’s novels and anything terrible. Children’s books are disdained, and left for their sisters. *Jack Sheppard* is tabooed at the North Western, and great is the wrath of the boys accordingly. Stations have their idiosyncrasies. Yorkshire is not partial to poetry. It is very difficult to sell a valuable book at any of the stands between Derby, Leeds, and Manchester. Religious books hardly find a purchaser in Liverpool, while at Manchester, at the other end of the line, they are in high demand. *Sophisms of Free Trade*, by Serjeant Byles, sold at all the stations to the extent of some hundreds. The *Answer* to that brochure was scarcely looked at, although the line is crowded with free-trade passengers, and traverses the most important free-trade districts in the Kingdom.”

The slightly musty flavour of the foregoing extracts, telling of a time when *The Female Jesuit* was greedily demanded, when *Jack Sheppard* was tabooed, and five shillings was looked upon as a popular price, gives them a piquancy which no modern account could hope to rival. So we need say little about the literature supplied to the public nowadays, when the bookstalls, not only on the North Western, but on every line in England, with the single exception of the Metropolitan, have long been the undisputed monopoly of W. H. Smith & Son. It is worth mention, however, that the firm are entitled to some credit for the introduction of wholesome works of fiction at popular prices. About the year 1857 they brought out the “Select Library of Fiction,” and the first book in the series was Mrs. Gaskell’s *Cranford*. But this step roused, naturally enough, a good deal of jealousy on the part of the publishing trade, and after a short time Messrs. Smith found it desirable to dispose of their copyrights to Chapman & Hall. But not before their purpose had been served, for the other publishers had been forced to follow suit, and the “yellow-back” had been safely launched on its triumphant career.

That that career shows no signs of interruption will certainly be the opinion of any one who casts a look over the stock kept in reserve at No. 186. Dickens alone seems to have more than one room to himself, while the various editions of *Jane Eyre*, published at prices from sixpence upwards, would more than fill all the shelves of the library at Haworth. There is another class of literature in constant demand, though it is difficult to imagine in what rank of life the purchasers are found. Who buys shilling copies of the *Language of Flowers*, or the *Polite Letter-Writer*? Or why do people (to whom money must be an object, or they would not buy cheap and nasty editions) pay two shillings for a copy of Milton or Cowper, when they might get the same book from the nearest bookseller for eighteen-pence? That there is a run on ordnance maps during the summer, or on children’s books at Christmas time, one can easily understand. But why any one who wants a copy of the *Fairy Queen* should postpone his purchase of it till he reaches the station, is by no means so easy to understand.

Closeiy connected with the book-selling is the circulating library business; and a novelist desirous of compiling a history of “our failures,” would be interested in the abrupt transition from a room filled with new copies of Dickens and *Jane Eyre*, to an



E. COCKETT, HEAD OF ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT.

From a photograph by E. Smorthwaite, 174 Regent Street, W.

adjoining one yet more closely packed with stacks of dead and forgotten three-volume novels awaiting their final departure, whether to the sea-side Berlin wool shops, to the Colonies, or to the portmanteau makers. The library books which are still alive are arranged on shelves in alphabetical order; the only classification adopted being one of size. In this point I cannot but think that Messrs. Smith are wiser than not a few librarians who attempt, and usually without success, a classification according to subjects. For may not a book as a rule equally well be classified under two heads? Is *The Railways of America*, for instance, to go under America or under railways? But also mistakes are apt to occur to all but skilled librarians. When I was a boy, we got *Cometh up as a Flower* into the school library, past the vigilant scrutiny of a novel-hating head-master, who fancied it a meditation on the transitory nature of earthly pleasures. That Ruskin *On Sheepfolds* has had a large sale among the farmers of the Yorkshire dales is an old story. But sheepfolds naturally recall us to our mutton.

Instinctively one compares the library business of Smith and Mudie, yet their conditions are widely dissimilar. Mudie maintains only one central stock. When a book is away from their library, it is always, so to speak, earning money. Moreover, they have nothing to pay for carriage, which is paid both ways by the country customer. Smith, on the other hand, delivers books, that are ordered by subscribers, free to the nearest bookstall, and has to keep filled, not only the central reservoir, but also some hundred local cisterns scattered all over the kingdom. There may be a run on a book at Brighton or Bournemouth, and fresh copies may have to be bought to supply the demand. And yet at the same time copies may be standing idle at Carlisle or Newcastle, whither the reputation of the new work has not yet penetrated. Of course there is another side to the question, and Mudie has not the advantage of having six hundred agents all over the country, with their expenses paid mainly by the regular business of selling books and papers, whose interest it is to devote their leisure to pushing the library circulation. But this brings us to the local agencies themselves.

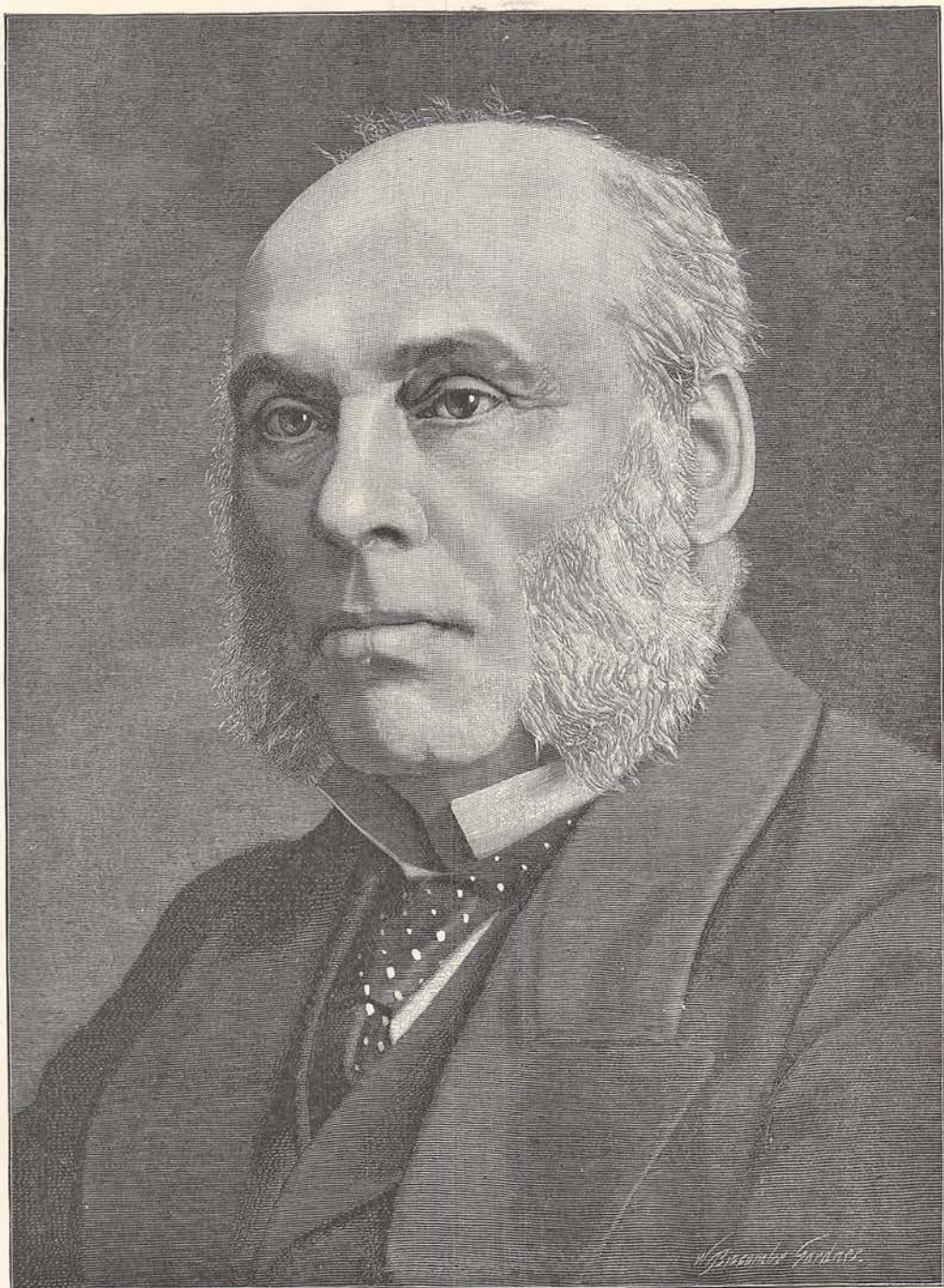
There are, as has been said, some six hundred bookstalls, each in charge of a clerk, whose income is mainly derived from a commission on sales, and there are also about as many more stations at which newspapers are sold by lads sent over from a neighbouring bookstall. For purposes of supervision the country is mapped out into some six or eight districts, for each of which there is a travelling superintendent. Then, further, the bookstalls are all grouped in such a way that the money transactions between each of them and the head office always pass under the eye of the same chief clerk. Again, they are all graded according to a rough scale of their importance; and to each bookstall according to its grade are new publications distributed. A guinea book of travels, for instance, goes only to those in classes i. and ii.; *Robert Elsmere*, when reduced to six shillings, goes down as far as class v.; the yet smaller stalls hardly rise above two shilling literature. But in the main the bookstall clerk is responsible for his own affairs. He gets a weekly list of all new publications, and requisitions what he thinks he will be able to sell. If on the one hand he is too timorous, his own commission suffers; if on the other he is over sanguine, he will have to return unsold an undue proportion, and then he will get a warning from headquarters to draw in his horns.

Not infrequently the firm are urged to increase their revenue by advancing beyond the lines of their present business. Tobacco and matches have been pressed upon them for years past, but hitherto the objections have been found insuperable. I saw an old letter in which they were assured that the public had found the *patent sansflectum japon* indispensable, and that a fortune beyond the dreams of avarice awaited them, if only they would undertake the sale. Only the other day they were pressed to sell a new traveller's cooking-stove. But on points like this the railway companies, whose licensees Messrs. Smith are, would have a word to say; and they might object if the firm set up on their platforms as universal providers. Indeed, some of them are so particular even now as to stipulate that no reading-lamp provided with hooks to fasten into the padding of the carriage backs shall be sold at their stations. The public, perhaps, may consider that companies, which in the year 1892 still persist in lighting—or rather not lighting—their carriages with filthy and antediluvian oil lamps, get a good deal less than their deserts in finding the upholstery only occasionally torn.

There are not a few other branches of Messrs. Smith's business still left unmentioned. For one thing they are bookbinders in a large way ; for another, they print for themselves, not only their own catalogues and lists of papers, but also, every day on a separate wrapper, the address of each customer to whom they have to post a newspaper the following morning. Then again they are agents for the insertion of advertisements in every newspaper, and what is more important, they carry on on their own account what is probably the largest advertising business in the world. For, as is well known, they have contracted with almost every railway company in the country for the right to display advertisements at their stations. And in connection with this, they have a large establishment where advertisements are designed, printed and lithographed, and then framed and glazed. But advertising is a business which chiefly concerns the advertiser and his agents—though outsiders may perhaps wish that the tariff for soaps and mustard could be raised two or three hundred per cent.—while the processes of chromo-lithography could hardly be made intelligible without a long and detailed description, and perhaps would not be very interesting even then. So we must be content to leave untouched these matters, in which, moreover, Messrs. Smith and Son are not without rivals, and which are not those that have made their name a household word in every corner of the country.

In concluding this sketch, it is impossible to refrain from the speculation, why in England of all countries the railway bookstalls should be the monopoly of a single firm ; and why in this particular instance monopoly has not ripened into its accustomed fruit of indolence and inferior service. For that the English bookstalls are better served, not only than those which they displaced, or than those still carried on by individualistic effort in Scotland, but also than the meagrely furnished bookstalls of foreign stations (which in France invariably offer the *Figaro* or the *Intransigeant* when one asks for the *Temps* or the *Débats*, and in Germany charge twice or three times the published price of a newspaper), still more that they are an improvement on the yelling newsboy of the American cars, is a point on which Englishmen have no doubt whatever. Perhaps Messrs. W. H. Smith and Son can solve the riddle.





W. B. Smith

ENGRAVED BY W. BISCOMBE GARDNER FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY FRADELLE AND YOUNG, 246 REGENT ST., W.