

Asbury Dickins, Bookseller, 1798-1801, or, The Brief Career of a Careless Youth

BEFORE he reached the age of twenty-one, Asbury Dickins had become a figure of some importance in Philadelphia literary circles at the turn of the nineteenth century. He published the *Port Folio*, which Frank Luther Mott called the most important magazine of the time.¹ He also published such American worthies as Charles Brockden Brown, and his store on Second Street became the “rendezvous of the Philadelphia sons of literature.”² One can well imagine that young Dickins thoroughly enjoyed being the patron of some of the foremost literary figures of the Federalist period, yet there is little about this young man’s stint as a bookseller that commends him to later historians. Dickins’ personality is probably responsible for this impression. Despite an attractive face and some evidences of personal charm, one comes away from the surviving Dickins material with the distinct impression that Asbury was a callow young fop whose career as a bookseller was deservedly short.³

Born the oldest child of one of America’s most influential Methodist clergymen, the Reverend John Dickins, and named after the country’s first Methodist bishop, young Dickins seems to furnish one more proof of the adage that the children of ministers come to no good. He very quickly sloughed off his Methodist heritage and directed his considerable gifts toward distinctly secular goals that

¹ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (Cambridge, 1938), 227.

² John Davis, quoted in James Penn Pilkington, *The Methodist Publishing House, a History* (Nashville, 1968), 129.

³ See, for example, the engraving reproduced in Pilkington, 124. The Dickins material cited in this article constitutes part of one of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania’s recent acquisitions, the Loudoun Papers. Included in the collection are two journals and two ledgers of John Dickins, a journal and ledger of Asbury Dickins, marked “E.D.”, and one box of loose, incoming correspondence addressed to Asbury Dickins and Thomas Armat. There are a good many letters from John Ward Fenno. How the papers came into the possession of Thomas Armat will become clear later in the article. Hereinafter, the material will be cited L, D-A (Loudoun, Dickins-Armat).

his father had eschewed. To achieve these ends he continually curried favor with "Men of Affluence, Men of Liberality, and Men of Letters."⁴ In short, Asbury Dickins was a snob, a social climber, and a Federalist toady.

Yet his bookselling career, from 1798 to 1801, really deserves some attention because it illustrates many of the ills that beset Philadelphia's book trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century. And, these ills, in turn, may partially explain the dismal state of American letters in that period.⁵

There can be little doubt that the city's book business was in a deplorable state in 1800. No printer or bookseller could command the capital to finance lengthy or ambitious publications by himself. He was forced to rely upon advance subscriptions, often insisting upon partial payment even before the work went to press.⁶ Dependence upon subscribers necessarily inhibited innovation and probably perpetuated canons of literary taste no longer appropriate for the self-conscious "cultural life" of the new nation.⁷ To be sure, many booksellers were aware of their responsibilities to instruct their public, to improve literature, and to encourage innovation, but such hopes were often barren without the fostering hand of patronage. More often than not, the hand was withheld. Perhaps more completely than at any time since, the relationship between the publisher and his public was a closed circuit.⁸ Only aggressive

⁴ The phrase is Fenno's, written to Joseph Dennie from New York, Jan 17, 1800, and was later used by Dennie in the prospectus for the *Port Folio* Meredith Papers, *Port Folio* section, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), "Prospectus of a new Weekly Paper" (n p , n d), bound with the *Port Folio*, I

⁵ See, for example, Robert Spiller's preface to *The American Literary Revolution, 1783-1837* (Garden City, 1967), x xi

⁶ See John Davis' broadside *Proposal for Publishing by Subscription the Wanderings of William L. D-A* The practice continued as late as 1817 G B Sawson wrote William M'Carty from Lancaster, forwarding a list of subscribers with their deposits for the M'Carty and Davis edition of the *Battle of New Orleans*, Dec 11, 1817. M'Carty & Davis papers, American Antiquarian Society

⁷ Russel Blaine Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830* (New York, 1960), 235-267. See also Richard Beale Davis, *Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1964), 255-262.

⁸ The term is borrowed from Robert Escarpit, *Sociology of Literature*, translated by Ernest Pick, *Lake Erie College Studies* (Painesville, Ohio, 1965), IV Although based largely upon twentieth-century European data, the framework of Escarpit's analysis is useful here He stresses that the purchase of books is essentially gratuitous To survive in a business that

bookmen like Mathew Carey were able to create their own new distribution circuits to peddle their wares. And they quickly learned that most Americans were only Bible-literate; testaments and catch-penny tracts were what was wanted in this wider market.⁹ Whatever the market, the bookseller had to cater to rather than cultivate its taste; the lack of operating capital gave him no alternative.

One can see, then, why Asbury Dickins had to pander to a particular group of people, but it is somewhat more difficult to understand why he chose the market he did. The surviving evidence is all pretty much of the negative sort: it explains why Dickins turned his back on Methodism; it does not explain why he chose, or was drawn to, Federalist literary circles.

Asbury Dickins was born July 29, 1780, in Halifax County, North Carolina, where his father had a regular pastoral circuit. John Dickins seems to have been one of the rocks upon which American Methodism was built. He certainly was a strong man, and, however fortunate this may have been for the Church, the consequences for his family were not so happy. It does not take much imagination to discern a rather dour presence between the lines of his eulogist: John Dickins was "full of excellent instruction, and gave the best of counsel and example to his children. He governed them with so much skill, firmness, and love. . . ."¹⁰

The needs of American Methodism consumed the energies of John Dickins for most of his life. In 1780, before the Revolution was over, he worked to found Cokebury College in Maryland for the education of Methodist youth. In 1783 he was called to the Wesley Chapel in New York, only to return to a North Carolina

dealt in nonessentials, the bookseller-publisher continually had to be aware of the shared assumptions and values of his particular market. Because the functions of publisher and retail seller were not yet completely separated, the American bookseller had the advantage of knowing first-hand those works best adapted to his market. The personal contact with his customers, whether they be purchasers or other booksellers, provided him with direct "feedback" that would be the envy of many twentieth-century publishers. "The act of publication is creative in appearance only. In reality, it takes place in a closed circuit within one social group" (p. 56).

⁹ Mathew Carey, for example, made such a business of Bibles that in 1810 he issued a broadside headed "BIBLE WAREHOUSE, Philadelphia," in which he advertised no fewer than forty-one grades and sizes of Bibles, with prices ranging from \$3.50 to \$18.00, retail. E. C. Gardiner Collection, HSP.

¹⁰ Ezekial Cooper, *A Funeral Discourse on . . . John Dickins* (Philadelphia, 1799), 24.

circuit several years later. In 1786 he revised the Church's discipline and proposed that the Church undertake to publish its own tracts, rather than rely upon English imports. And, in 1789, the Church's annual conference took him up on his suggestion by appointing him Superintendent of the Book Concern.¹¹

John Dickins moved his family to Philadelphia where he soon put the Book Concern on a firm footing, but he found that he had taken on other responsibilities for which he had not bargained. He had become the *de facto* treasurer for the Church and Bishop Asbury's financial agent as well. Certainly his life was busy; Ezekial Cooper, his successor as Superintendent, estimated that Dickins had published and distributed some 114,000 books and pamphlets in the four years prior to his death.¹²

Yet, busy as he was, apparently John Dickins could not make ends meet. Hence, about 1792, he began to trade on his own account as a stationer and bookseller. This was the business with which young Asbury helped his father and which he himself was to run for his mother when John Dickins died.¹³

One needs little psychological insight to understand why Asbury found his father's Methodism unattractive. John Dickins' life was full of many cares which he discharged competently if sternly. "I am of a cool constitution," he admitted to a friend, "and never shew so much affection as other people do." Later he told the same friend, "It affords me some satisfaction that I can serve the cause of God by promoting the circulation of our books. This I feel inclined to do for conscience sake."¹⁴

John Dickins died during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1798, on September 27. Asbury, it seems, had been sent to Baltimore to escape the fever, which claimed one of his sisters as well as his father. At least six weeks passed before the epidemic subsided and Asbury and his mother were able to sort things out.¹⁵ And there was a great deal to be sorted out. For six years, at least, John Dickins had sold school books, slates, and quills from his own stock

¹¹ Pilkington, 91-92.

¹² Cooper, *Funeral Discourse*, 8.

¹³ John Dickins' will, Nov. 13, 1789, Book Y, #35, Department of Archives, City of Philadelphia.

¹⁴ Quoted by Pilkington, 107.

¹⁵ The first entry in Asbury's journal is dated Nov. 13, 1798, L, D-A.

while shipping Bibles and tracts for the Methodist Concern. For an even longer time the elder Dickins had met some of the expenses of the Book Concern out of his own pocket. Not all of his customers had been prompt in paying their bills. So things were really in a muddle when Bishop Asbury dispatched Ezekial Cooper to Philadelphia "to assist Asbury Dickins in the [*sic*] conducting our work as heretofore." Cooper soon discovered what the Dickins family probably already knew: John Dickins had been more enthusiastic than prudent in distributing books for the Church, a failing that John Dickins' executors were going to try to remedy.

There is a considerable encumbrance on it [*the Concern*] which I am not willing to take upon myself; the executors of Mr. Dickins estate will not give me the property on hand unless I first assume payment of a debt from the Concern which is more than four thousand five hundred dollars. I proposed that I would be accountable for as much as the amount of the property put in my hand, or that I would be accountable for all of the property I received either in books or money, in the payments by the different preachers in debt to the Concern; but that I should not engage to pay a large debt upon the credit of debts due the Concern scattered abroad from New Hampshire to Georgia, and some of it in very doubtful hands, and of many years' standing.¹⁶

Evidently John Dickins had tempered good business with Christian enthusiasm and charity for entirely too long; neither his executors, nor his family, nor Cooper were ever able to straighten things out. Asbury tried. The ledger and journal that he began in November are meticulous examples of double-entry bookkeeping, but the first two folios of the ledger are incomplete. They carry no values opposite the initial credit entries. This should have been a simple procedure: merely post the values from the inventories of assets and merchandise. It is difficult to believe that no inventories were ever made; Cooper's encounter with the executors, as quoted above, suggests otherwise. However, because no one could agree on what belonged to whom, Asbury could not make the initial credit entries. And, because of this, he never knew the actual state of the business he ran for his mother.

So, in November, 1798, Asbury began to manage the store according to his own taste and talents. It was not immediately evident in what direction he would take the business. He floundered a bit at

¹⁶ Quoted by Pilkington, 121.

first. Cooper took the Methodist publishing business elsewhere, and Asbury was reduced to regaining the business of his father's customers. His journal for the first week of December indicates some success. On December 4, Benoni Harris of Dover bought a blank book, half-bound, for \$1.10. On the following day John McCulloch bought twelve copies of Dilworth's *Schoolmaster's Assistant*. The same day, Dickins purchased seventy-two *American Tutor's Assistants* for \$5.67. For the week, Asbury's journal showed credits of \$398.39 and debits of \$220.96. Of the credits, \$222.70 represented cash sales.¹⁷

As healthy as the business appeared to be, it evidently did not satisfy Dickins. There is some evidence to suggest that it was Hugh Maxwell who introduced Asbury to the people whose tastes and interests encouraged him to find a way out of what promised to become the rather dreary life of a stationer. Maxwell, an aspiring printer, had bound some pamphlets for John Dickins. Shortly after the elder Dickins' death it was to Maxwell that Asbury came with printing work, rather than to Henry Tuckniss who had printed for John Dickins. The relationship with Maxwell became increasingly close, for, early in 1800, Maxwell became the tenant of the rear of the Dickins house on North Second Street. Through Maxwell Dickins probably met Joseph Dennie, John Ward Fenno, and the other Federalist publicists and literateurs whose company he found so attractive.

Unfortunately, however, Asbury's friends were little help when trouble came in October, 1801. A law suit compelled Dickins to take ship for England rather suddenly, leaving both his family and the business in some confusion. The circumstances of his departure may never be fully known, but the exit was certainly a fitting end to his brief career as a publisher. Bishop Asbury became so agitated when he learned of the flight that he imagined his namesake to have been capable of anything, even murder. "[W]hat a reproach he would have been to his father . . . Oh that he should bear my worthless name."¹⁸

Asbury Dickins had not become the scapegrace at once; it took some time for the heady atmosphere of Philadelphia to produce the result. The process of his development is really a study of one

¹⁷ Journal and ledger, L, D-A.

¹⁸ Quoted by Pilkington, 131.

individual's responses to the conditions of and the influences upon the book trade in the city. From working with his father Asbury had acquired a set of attitudes towards Methodism, but his exposure to the Concern and to his father's own business had provided him with some assumptions about the book trade. Many of these he shared with other booksellers. Despite pious protestations to the contrary, booksellers at the turn of the nineteenth century knew that the books and pamphlets they dealt with were nothing more than commodities. They were hardly different from paper, quills, or slates; one had to get cheaply and sell dearly in order to stay in business. Undercapitalization compelled them to specialize, to share marketing responsibilities, and to seek alternatives to money capital.¹⁹

Credit offered one substitute, but one's ability to secure credit depended upon more than one's reputation for paying bills promptly. Modern credit bureaus are reputed to take everything from political views to marital status into account when determining an individual's credit rating; the Philadelphia commercial community of 1800 was hardly different. Certainly the conduct of one's business was important, but family, friends, political loyalties, and, for want of a better term, one's "prospects" were equally important. Taken together, these attributes came to constitute a persona which the commercial community could trust, providing that it remained consistent. However, to change one's persona without destroying trust was something of a feat. Asbury Dickins almost succeeded.

We have already seen that, in his first efforts, Asbury ran the business much as his father had. Indeed, his accounts for the first few months were an improvement over those kept by his father. His ledger, for example, had pages for house expenses and cash accounting, pages that were missing from his father's accounts. Asbury's journal entries for the first six months or so suggest that he traded with many of the same people his father had served. In short, Asbury did little that might threaten the fabric of trust.

Immediately after his father's death Asbury published two works very much in keeping with the role that he had inherited from his father: the sermon preached at John Dickins' funeral by Ezekial

¹⁹ For a more complete discussion of undercapitalization and specialization see my "The Philadelphia Printer," *Business History Review*, XL (1966), 24-46; see also Rollo Silver's *The American Printer, 1787-1825* (Charlottesville, 1967), esp. chapter 3.

Cooper and the *Awful Death of an Impious Youth*. The ways in which these pieces reached the public, however, begin to suggest some of the differences between father and son. Asbury published them for personal profit. Despite the fact that the sermon had been preached by the new superintendent of Methodist publishing, it was young Dickins rather than Cooper who published and sold the work. On January 31 Asbury laid out \$1.70 to register the copyright. On February 2 he paid Hugh Maxwell \$25.13 for printing it. Considering the number of entries in Asbury's journal for paper and binding, it is likely that Maxwell did no more than set up and print the work. Even if one doubles the printing costs to approximate the total production expenses, Asbury totally recovered his investment by the end of March. During April and May of 1799 he sold at least 300 more at ten cents apiece. Apparently the sermon went through at least a second printing and Dickins continued to sell it to his father's correspondents as late as November, 1800. Clearly, Asbury found it impractical to give up all of the advantages of his father's business.

The story of the *Impious Youth* is not so easily pieced together as that of the funeral sermon. The most recent historian of the Methodist Publishing House believes that the tale comes from the pen of Dickins himself rather than that of some divine. If so, it represents a remarkably cynical attempt to exploit the Methodist market. It was a short, twelve-page "fragment" that conformed to many of the conventions of these pieces. In a brief preface Dickins told his readers that it was an "affecting tale," but that he regretted that "we cannot inform you of the [author's] name, or the place where this tragic scene was exhibited, the title page being lost. . . ." Since the substance of the tale had been "preserved entire," Dickins reprinted it in the hope that it might keep youth from dissolute company.

In a very few pages one learns that the young man in the tale had "apostatized, denied in word and conduct the existence of a God, derided his ways, mocked his holy religion, affirmed his sacred word to be a lie, laughed at death, and ridiculed the idea of a future state." Dickins, as the letters from his mother make clear, had done as much; perhaps writing the fragment was an act of personal atonement. But the piece itself suggests otherwise. From the very begin-

ning the language is overblown. "Ah, me! . . . what's this?" Apparently death had come for the young man. "But oh, my head, my head . . . what ghastly spectre is that I see?" And so the tale continues for another eight pages, suggesting nothing so much as young Werther with the "d.t.'s."²⁰

Although it may be bootless to speculate about Dickins' motives when putting the piece together, a twentieth-century reading suggests a straight-faced parody of the emotional enthusiasm of late eighteenth-century Methodism. The sales records support this view: in all of 1799 Dickins sold but twenty-four copies to the Methodist market, if one defines that market as his father's former customers. But in March and April alone he exchanged at least twice that many with other booksellers. Unfortunately, his journal contains no information about the production of the *Impious Youth* so it is impossible to determine whether Asbury made a profit from the venture, but at least he was beginning to find his way into different, more congenial circles.

And it seems that Hugh Maxwell eased his way. Maxwell had printed both of Asbury's ventures so far. Later in 1799 he undertook a much more ambitious work, Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn; or Memoirs of the Year 1793*, a novel set in Philadelphia during that year's Yellow Fever epidemic. Although Maxwell might have secured enough subscribers to make the venture worthwhile, he joined with several booksellers in another technique of securing the investment and sharing costs. They created a marketing congerie, described on the title page of *Mervyn*: "Printed and Published by H. Maxwell . . . , and sold by T. Dobson, R. Campbell, H. and P. Rice, A Dickins, and the principal booksellers in the neighboring states." None of the details of this particular congerie have survived, but, from the arrangements provided for under other such agreements, one can presume that each of the named booksellers had agreed to take a specified number of copies. They probably also agreed to recognize that each had exclusive marketing rights to a particular area.²¹

²⁰ *Awful Death of an Impious Youth* (Philadelphia, 1799), 1, 2.

²¹ Two examples will suffice. On Feb. 13, 1806, Hugh Maxwell billed Isaac Riley & Co. of New York for 250 copies of volumes 2-5 of Shakespeare. Five weeks later, Maxwell's waste book has the following notation: "John Morgan D^r To my right to one half Shake-

Dickins' partners in the *Mervyn* venture had many years seniority in the book trade. Dobson had been in business since 1785, and had completed publication in 1797 of his eighteen-volume encyclopedia. Campbell had been a bookseller since 1789, and the Rices, in business since 1785, were in the process of developing a network of intercity partnerships.²² One wonders what induced these experienced booksellers to take on Asbury, still somewhat wet behind the ears. Perhaps they were impressed with the network of correspondents that he had inherited from his father. Perhaps, too, they hoped that the Dickins name might overcome some of the distrust of fiction shared by many Bible-literate Americans. Whatever the reasons, the arrangement seems to have been satisfactory for a few of the partners, as, later in the year, Dickins, Dobson, and Maxwell published the first volume of Brown's three-volume *Edgar Huntley*, the other volumes of which they completed in 1800.

With these two ventures Dickins had begun to give the business a distinctly personal stamp. This should become clear from his list for 1800 and from a comparison of his customers with those of his father. The 1800 list is singularly ambitious:

The Claims of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency examined at the Bar of Christianity. By a Layman. [Evans 37187]

Crawford, Charles, *An Essay upon the Eleventh Chapter of Revelation.* [Evans 37268]

Gentz, Frederick von, *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution, compared with the origin and principles of the French Revolution.* . . . [Evans 37501]

[Mathias, Thomas James], *The Imperial Epistle, and the Shade of Alexander Pope.* . . . [Evans 37937]

[], *Pursuits of Literature. A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues.* . . . [Evans 37939, 37940]

speare's Plays sold him from and after the publication of the fifth volume, to hold in partnership with Thos. S. Manning . . . for Two thousand five hundred dollars." Maxwell waste book, HSP. In 1805, Mathew Carey worked out a marketing agreement for Joseph Priestly's *Church History* with Caleb Bingham, by which Carey promised that he "Shall not exchange a copy in Massachusetts for twelve months." Carey to Bingham, Oct. 26, 1805, Carey Letter Books, Lea and Febiger, HSP.

²² "William McCulloch's Additions to Thomas's History of Printing," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, n.s., XXXI (1921); H. Glenn Brown & Maude O. Brown, *A Directory of the Book Arts and Book Trade in Philadelphia to 1820* (New York, 1950).

- [], *The Shade of Alexander Pope on the Thames*. [Evans 37941]
 Murray, Lindley, *English Grammar, adapted to the different classes of learners*. . . . First American Edition. [Evans 38015]
 [], *Exercises, adapted to Murray's English Grammar designed or the benefit of Private Learners*. . . . [Evans 38020]
 [Ogden, Uzal], *Two discourses occasioned upon the Death of General George Washington*. [Evans 38155]
An Act to Establish an Uniform System of Bankruptcy throughout the United States. [Evans 38697]
 Washington, George, *George Washington to the People of the United States announcing his intention of retiring from Public Life*. [Evans 38990]
 [], *The Last Will and Testament of Gen. George Washington*. [Evans 38992]

With the apparent exceptions of the Crawford *Essay* and the Ogden sermons, this list bears little resemblance to those published by John Dickins for the Methodists. And the title of the Crawford piece is misleading. It is really a Francophobic diatribe prompted by the undeclared naval war in which Crawford argued "There is a better chance of the [mercantile] interests of the United States being promoted by the establishment of a limited monarchy, than of a republic in France. A republic . . . is in every way unsuitable to France."²³ (Napoleon had, of course, just confirmed Crawford's judgment in the *coup d'état* of November, 1799, by which he became First Consul.) Much as Methodists might agree with Crawford's sentiments, the piece was hardly written for their exclusive consumption. And the same may be said of the Ogden sermons. These, as well as the two Washington pieces, were produced to capitalize upon the death of the first president.

The list has several other features that bear comment. Missing are the catch-penny almanacs and chapbooks that so many earlier printers and booksellers had regarded as the staples of their trade. The two schoolbooks that Dickins chose to publish, Murray's *Grammar* and the *Exercises*, were not American, nor were they even "improved" by an American. And this while Noah Webster and other American schoolmasters were assiduously scribbling their own grammars and tutor's assistants. Dickins had apparently concluded

²³ Charles Crawford, *An Essay*. . . . (Philadelphia, 1800), 12.

that an audience that read Pope would certainly prefer the clarity of a Murray to the barbarisms of a Webster.

One can hardly surmise that all of Dickins' customers read Pope, but they were assuredly a different lot from those of his father. If one compares John Dickins' ledger for 1796 with that of his son for 1799-1800, one finds that Asbury had lost the business of 100 of his father's 131 accounts. But, in the same period, Asbury had acquired 121 new accounts. Of the thirty-one accounts that Asbury retained, eleven were identified with the booktrade in some way, and eight more were postmasters, whose services as subscription agents and distributors were not to be overlooked. Not only did Asbury lose—or slough off—many of his father's accounts, but his new customers were really quite a different group of people. Eighty-eight of them, or 51%, were Philadelphians, as compared to forty-one, or 31%, of his father's customers. Only one-fourth of the identifiable Philadelphians had any connection with the book trade, while the remainder of the list included such notables as Horace Binney, Elias Boudinot, and the firm of Thomas W. Armat, which later was to be of such importance to the fortunes of the Dickins family. This is not to suggest that all of Dickins' customers might be numbered among the mercantile elite; there were a number of the lesser sort, too: John Clifton, a blacksmith; Thomas Amies, a shoemaker; and Achilles Parker, a bottler. However, it appears that the majority of the lesser sort lived within two squares of the Dickins shop on Second Street, so that proximity rather than Pope or politics was responsible for their custom. By the end of 1800, then, Asbury's business was definitely an urban enterprise, with different customers and different stock from that of his father. Young Dickins seemed well on his way toward establishing a different persona for himself.²⁴

But success would spoil Asbury Dickins. Sometime during the summer of 1800 he agreed to become publisher of the *Port Folio*, a decision which was probably responsible for his failure as a bookseller. At the time, however, one can imagine that Dickins found the proposition an attractive one. Hugh Maxwell, with whom Dick-

²⁴ The Thomas Stephens 1796 directory and the Cornelius Stafford directories for 1798, 1799, 1800, and 1801 were used to identify the individuals listed in the indexes of the ledgers of John and Asbury Dickins.

ins had had such a happy working relationship, had agreed to print the magazine, and Joseph Dennie was to be its editor. Notwithstanding his idiosyncratic snobbery—and perhaps because of it—Dennie had established a considerable reputation for himself amongst the nation's literati. Surely the venture could not fail, and Dickins would gain considerable *éclat*.

Surviving Dickins accounts and letters are almost silent about the details of the arrangement, but it appears that Asbury assumed most of the risks. As Dennie put it in the "prospectus" for the *Port Folio*:

The compositor *must* be requited for his mechanical toil, the publisher *must* be compensated for his cares and risque, and the conductor, if competent to his highly responsible duties, has a claim to what an ancient author, who well knew the value of literary service, calls the "quiddam honorarium," the generous stipend for mental efforts, not the paltry wages of a vulgar hireling.²⁵

Maxwell was requited and Dennie received his stipend largely through Asbury's efforts. But, if the immediate financial rewards went to others, one can be certain that Dickins expected compensations as well. As publisher of the *Port Folio* he could continue his association with the city's "Men of Liberality and Men of Letters." Further, because the magazine had no competition in Philadelphia, and because the city was still the publishing center of the country, Dickins could hope for the national reputation so necessary for his continued success as a bookseller.

At first all seemed to go well. Adulatory letters and unsolicited offers for exchanges with other booksellers showed that Asbury's expectations had been well founded. Thus, in August, 1801, the firm of M. Ward & Co. wrote from New York:

We have now in the press, and will publish in a very few days, a life of Kotzebue, written by himself. . . . Being but young in the business, we have not formed many connections, and are unacquainted with you, but by your respectable standing in the line of your profession, which is indeed a sufficient recommendation.²⁶

²⁵ "Prospectus of a New Weekly Paper," i.

²⁶ M. Ward & Co. to Asbury Dickins, Aug. 12, 1801, L, D-A.

Even the estimable Hugh Gaine, then seventy-four, sought the young man's custom. Publishing the *Port Folio* had immediate advantages, as well. Dickins frequently used its pages to puff his own wares. Thus, in the issue of January 17, 1801, one finds a letter from an "anonymous critic" announcing that James Blair Linn's poem, *The Powers of Genius*, would soon appear, commending it to the "notice and encouragement of every American reader." Not until several issues later did it become clear that Dickins himself was Linn's publisher. Others, too, sought the *Port Folio*'s pages to parade their achievements. John Davis, author and translator, wrote from New York, "I beg permission, through the medium of your respectable miscellany, to inform the printers and booksellers of Philadelphia, that I have ready for the press a quarto manuscript. . . ." Davis had chosen the right medium; several months later his "Wanderings of William" appeared.²⁷

Within a few months the *Port Folio* fulfilled even the most sanguine expectations of both editor and publisher. Lively original contributions permitted Dennie to spare his readers the large doses of John Quincy Adams' journey through Silesia that had dominated the early issues.²⁸ Circulation quickly reached at least 1,500, probably the work of the eighty-two agents Dickins had enlisted from Montreal to Savannah. Evidently, if there was to be such a thing as an American community of letters, the *Port Folio* would be essential to its creation.

Despite its special character, the problems of producing and distributing the *Port Folio* were exactly the same as those involved with any other publication. Printing and binding arrangements cannot be detailed because the separate accounts for the *Port Folio* have not yet turned up at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania or elsewhere. (Surviving accounts cover a later period.) But obviously Maxwell had to be paid for printing the magazine. Since the magazine contained few, if any, paid advertisements, the subscribers were the most important source of revenue. To get them Dickins created a network of agents of the kind familiar to all booksellers who sold by subscription. In the larger towns, especially in the

²⁷ Hugh Gaine to Dickins, Mar. 30, 1801, *ibid.*; *Port Folio* I, 133.

²⁸ Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (Boston, 1858), 20, cited by Pilkington, 513.

North, he relied upon those with whom he had already done business. Thus, James Parker in Perth Amboy and Ezra Sargeant in New York took orders on a commission basis. Others, such as John Ward Fenno, helped Dickins find agents.

The subject [*distribution*] which you suggest to my consideration will prove one of the most delicate of your Establishment. I tell you from experience that you cannot be too cautious in appointing your agents. I would recommend to you Geo. Hill at Baltimore, and Augustine Davis at Richmond, to whom you are welcome to use my name. I think 2½ per Cent. an adequate compensation for collecting 5 Dls. each from 20 people—tho I think it likely that you may have to give 5. . . . I would have you look well to a man's ability as well as honesty, and select men either rich or in good business: I lost more by the poverty of agents than by dishonesty. Indeed, I do not see what need you have of a great number of agents.²⁹

Dickins seems to have followed Fenno's advice in several respects. The agents who were not booksellers were probably doctors, lawyers, or merchants, and many of the booksellers whom Dickins appointed had at one time or another been associated with the Philadelphia book trade.³⁰

Fenno's suggestion that Dickins look to both the honesty and the ability of his agents underscores one of the most serious problems faced by businessmen at the time. Dickins simply could not know the reputations of Boston booksellers or their business practices; he had to trust the recommendations of others. Similarly, those who had come to trust Dickins called upon him for advice. For example, John Boies wrote from Waltham, Massachusetts, asking for the "Commercial Character of Mess^{rs} Simon and Hayman Grats [*sic*], Grocers."³¹

However, if mutual trust and responsibility made recommendations possible, they also brought some altogether unpleasant obligations. Throughout 1800 Fenno continually called upon Dickins for assistance. Fenno, it seems, had found himself in a difficult position early that summer as a result of his efforts to assist William Cobbett establish himself in London after Cobbett had suffered a

²⁹ John Ward Fenno to Dickins, Feb. 21, 1801, L, D-A.

³⁰ List of agents, "Prospectus," *Port Folio*, I, iv.

³¹ John Boies to Dickins, July 12, 1800, L, D-A.

\$5,000 judgment for libel in favor of Benjamin Rush. Dickins helped all he could, but, even so, Fenno was compelled to seek a loan from the Manhattan Company, a situation which Fenno found unpleasant for "they are all Jacobins."³²

Fenno's attitudes toward Cobbett and the Republican bank managers suggest that personal and political loyalties were at least as important as keeping one's business afloat. Dickins seems to have adopted many of the same attitudes. Fenno's many letters to Dickins give one the impression that both imagined themselves members of a brave little band of Federalist publicists in a hostile Republican world. And their fears were hardly unjustified: Cobbett's experiences at the Pennsylvania bar were not unique. Caleb Wayne, who had bought the *Gazette of the United States* from Fenno in the summer of 1800, found himself the defendant in five libel suits in the seventeen months he operated the paper. One can easily understand, then, the attitudes of mutual trust *and* mutual protection.³³

There is every reason to believe that, despite the unspeakable Republican peril, Dickins felt genuinely confident in the summer of 1801. At twenty-one he was the publisher of one of the country's most influential magazines. He had published several authors of undoubted merit, especially Charles Brockden Brown and Elias Boudinot. Both established and new firms sought to exchange books with him. And, sometimes to his annoyance, the city's literati regularly gathered at his shop on Second Street.

Already, however, there were signs that Dickins had become both overconfident and imprudent, if not downright careless in the conduct of his business. In July, 1800, for example, Ezra Sargeant complained from New York, "I wish you had printed the Bankrupt Law sooner it has been much called for here but now the city has got well stocked with them. . . ." Dickins had been slow off the mark. A month later a letter from James White of Boston suggests that Asbury had become somewhat cavalier in dealing with his correspondents. Maxwell had just completed an edition of Mathias' *Pursuits of Literature*, which was issued with several different title pages. One showed Maxwell as the publisher, another showed

³² George Harvey Genzmer, "William Cobbett," *Dictionary of American Biography (DAB)*, IV, 248-249; Fenno to Dickins, July 25, Oct. 19, Oct. 24, 1800, L, D-A.

³³ *Port Folio*, I, 173.

Dickins as publisher in congerie with John Ormrod of Philadelphia and James Nancrede of Boston. Dickins, rather disingenuously, had arranged to send some copies of the *Pursuits* to White. White apparently knew nothing of the Dickins-Ormrod-Nancrede edition when he complained to Asbury that Nancrede had "advertised the same day I did."³⁴

In 1801 the situation became worse. Dickins began to treat correspondents more important than White in the same offhand manner. Thus, in August, John Hill of Baltimore complained, "It is many months ago since I particularly ordered a doz. or so Murray's Exercises & Key, but you never paid any attention to my orders—I never did so to you." Even Fenno suffered from Asbury's neglect. Sometime late in 1800 Fenno had sent Dickins a large consignment of books to be sold on commission. Fenno valued the shipment at \$1,377.90, but throughout 1801 Fenno could get neither a statement nor the books out of Dickins.³⁵

Incidents of this sort could be multiplied almost indefinitely, but the most telling evidence of Asbury's neglect is found in his own account books. The journal suggests that Dickins' over-the-counter trade had begun to fall off sharply by December, 1800. December, 1798, had filled twelve pages in the journal, while December, 1800, barely fills three. Moreover, Asbury completely neglected to post cash sales. Dickins' bookkeeping began to break down, too. In July, 1800, he ceased to make any entries on the "Cash" or "Merchandise" folios of his ledger. And it appears that he made few attempts to collect long-standing debts. Perhaps a partial explanation for Asbury's neglect may be found in an undocketed bill in the Dickins papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: "[Sept.] 26: Dinner & Club 14/4." Asbury's tavern bill for September and October amounted to more than £60.

Neglect and carelessness such as that described above probably did much to undermine the position of confidence and esteem that Dickins thought he enjoyed. He probably did not know how shaky that position was until he opened a letter from C. W. Hare on October 26. "It is with pain," Hare wrote, "that I find myself in some measure compelled to send you the Enclosed Notice."

³⁴ Ezra Sargeant to Dickins, July 25, 1800; James White to Dickins, Aug. 29, 1800, L, D-A.

³⁵ John Hill to Dickins, Aug. 25, 1801; Fenno to Dickins, Mar. 16, 1801, *ibid.*

Samuel Blodget	}	Supreme Court
v		Pennsylvania
Asbury Dickins		December Term, 1801
		Action on the Case

You will please take notice that unless you enter special bail in the above case in the sum of fifteen thousand dollars on or before Wednesday next at twelve o'clock at noon at the office of Edward Burd Esq in Fourth Street near Walnut capias ad respondendum will be issued against you at the suit of the above mentioned Samuel Blodget.³⁶

Why Blodget began the suit will probably never be clear, but the case did not concern the business. The amount and kind of bail demanded and Blodget's political connections together suggest more than an unpaid debt. One would imagine that even Dickins' sloppy bookkeeping would reveal the name of Samuel Blodget or a debt of this magnitude, but neither appears.³⁷

Yet the cause of the action is less important than Asbury's reaction to it—flight. On the 27th, the day after Hare's note, Dickins executed a general power of attorney to Thomas W. Armat, who had been both customer and friend of the family since the days of John Dickins. Dennie witnessed the instrument. Almost immediately Dickins set off down-river to New Castle where he took ship for Liverpool. His leave-taking was singularly abrupt, for Armat's record of his assistance to Dickins shows "To Cloaths at New-castle—50" and "Pocket 20 Guineas—\$93.33."³⁸

Asbury's troubles were hardly over. Although he wrote Armat from Liverpool full of hope that the "business in Philadelphia goes on well and prosperously," Armat found things were not quite as Dickins had represented them. In a long, undated letter to Asbury, Armat gave a much bleaker picture.

³⁶ C. W. Hare to Dickins, Oct. 26, 1801; notice of summons to appear, *ibid.* The Supreme Court records for the period are in considerable disarray, but the form of action, "case," comprehends any action for recovery for damages for any wrong committed without force and not involving contract or conversion. Thus Asbury might have disturbed Blodget in the use of his church pew, or might have enticed away or seduced his daughter or servant. John Bouvier, *A Law Dictionary* (Philadelphia, 1883), I, 282, 288–289.

³⁷ Wells Bennett, "Samuel Blodget," *DAB*, II, 380–381.

³⁸ Copy, dated Dec. 3, 1803, of general power of attorney executed by Dickins in favor of Thomas W. Armat, Oct. 27, 1801; list of debts and assets, undated, endorsed "Dickins Estate," L, D-A.

Have only one moment to say that your note to John Vaughn is this day protested for non payment & that he has intimated a determination to send it to London to collect of you there. The Demands upon you are to the amount of ten thousand Dollars . . . Fenno has taken away the books he sent you on Commission & says there is still 1700 Dollars due . . . your Books throw no light on it there being but 4 Entries pro or Con with him. I have taken an Acct of Stock, a list of your Debts & ascertained what is due on the Port Folio—if Ten Thousand Dollars are due the Property will not more than Pay it—if that. In the Interim, You are not safe from Wynne & Scholey [*an English firm to whom Asbury's father had owed £120*]. . . . I know not what you have left for it but flight.³⁹

When Asbury's departure became known the jig was up. Even Fenno had had enough. A business built upon trust, albeit shaky, could hardly survive such a blow. All that Armat could do was to wind it up.

The list of debts and the inventory of stock have survived. Armat had evidently exaggerated the debts, but they were still substantial: \$6,420.17. Accounts receivable amounted to only \$4,383.12. The deficit of over \$2,000 would have to be paid from the sale of Dickins' inventory. Asbury had left behind him more than 3,000 unsold volumes, 348 titles in 1,436 bound volumes and 1,600 volumes in sheets, as well as a considerable stock of stationery and blank books. Despite the pressure from Asbury's creditors, Armat was not able to arrange the sale until 1805. On July 20, six weeks after Asbury's mother had agreed to the terms of the sale, David Hogan bought the entire stock for \$2,800, payable over three years.⁴⁰

But even the sale failed to end Asbury's misfortunes. The confused state of his father's affairs plagued him once again. An unsigned, and unsent, letter in Armat's collection of Dickins papers completes the story.

Thomas W. Armat has just now told me that you are in the Bench Prison at the suite of Win and Showley. I hope these Gent^m will not detain you there for the mere purpose of punishment however you might have deserved it, they may be assured they are in a much better situation than any other creditor & that nothing more can be had on this side of the Water.⁴¹

³⁹ Thomas W. Armat (Philadelphia) to Dickins (London), no date, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Agreement, David Hogan and Thomas W. Armat, July 25, 1805, *ibid.*

⁴¹ ? to Dickins, Dec. 28, 1805, endorsed "never sent," *ibid.*

Thus ended the brief bookselling career of Asbury Dickins. A law suit, a lost business, and imprisonment for debt in London may seem a rather steep price to pay for inattention to some details of his business, but one can easily see why these calamities followed hard upon one another. Because he neglected Fenno, Hill, and the others, they were probably content to let him face the Blodget trouble by himself. Because he was unable to find bail, Asbury fled. And with him went the credibility of the concern he managed for his mother. His creditors lost confidence and Armat was forced to preside over the dissolution of the firm. Failure meant that there was not enough to pay Wynne & Scholey. And so came prison. Apparently, however, the experience was sufficiently chastening, for Asbury next comes to view as the secretary of the United States Senate, but that is another story.

*Historical Society of
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