Books and the Future

IN THESE critical times, American publishers of scientific and technical books carry a heavy responsibility. For one thing, English has become more and more the international language of science. For another, in order to meet the need for up-to-date books on specific subjects, it has devolved upon publishers to seek out authors and encourage them to write.

The academic author is a busy man, who often carries the multiple burden of teaching, research, and administration, and whose writing is therefore relegated to his private life. The research worker presents another problem. Universities, government, and industry are convinced of the value of research, but they are not always fully aware of the necessity of making the results of research readily available in book form. Yet a continuous production of good new text and reference books is vital for the training of future generations of scientists, engineers, and research workers.

To provide this flow of books, the publisher must make long-term plans—plans flexible enough to adjust to unforeseen events and developments. Past experience must be the basis for these plans. From the start of the century, scientific publishing has, in general, kept pace with the advance of science and technology, although economic conditions have inevitably caused fluctuations. As this publishing house looks back over the last two decades, certain conclusions emerge from the data on annual output of new books.

After the depression of the early 30s the number of new titles published annually remained about the same for seven years, 1935–41. We may refer to this as the "normal" period. In 1942–43 the output jumped 50 per cent, reflecting the urgency felt by authors and publishers to meet wartime requirements. For three years beginning with 1944, however, production declined to 25 per cent below "normal." Scientists and engineers were devoting their efforts to research, production, and training; national security, also, placed limits on publication.

Although by 1947 the trend had reversed, for three years new publications increased only 25 per cent above "normal." Record enrollments handicapped academic authors; reconversion and expansion were the first concern of others. In 1950, the increase had reached 100 per cent above "normal," and this level will be maintained in 1951.

The publisher's present problem is to prevent a recurrence of the disastrous lean period of 1944–49, when, in the face of acknowledged need, there was a dearth of the new books on which the growth of science and technology depends.

The lack of a program for universal military training and service has seriously interfered with the proper functioning of colleges and universities since the war began in Korea. Now the remedy is at hand, and the pessimism that only a few months ago guided the thinking of educators and textbook publishers should give way to constructive planning. If world conditions do not force us to mobilize completely, by the end of 1952 a substantial percentage of the 1950 inductees will resume their education, followed in due course by later inductees. Most important of all positive factors, however, is the increase in our birth rate which, beginning in 1940, by the end of that decade reached a rate one third higher than the 30s, and appears to be continuing at that desirable new level. Specifically, there were just over 2 million births in 1932 (present 18-year-olds), more than 2½ million in 1941, and in excess of 3½ million in 1948.

The future, as always, is uncertain. Publishers and their authors should continue to plan for it with courage and optimism, for there is ample evidence that academic and professional demand for scientific and technical books will within a few years be greater than ever before.

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