
James G. Nelson. *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 430p.

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Nelson has spent a career explicating the importance of the nineteenth-century small publishers and their contribution to the field of literary publishing. *Publisher to the Decadents* was preceded by *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head* and *Elkin Mathews: Publisher to Yeats, Joyce, Pound*. For those whose research usually targets a book's content, Nelson creates a fascinating, detailed history of a man whose contacts and interests irretrievably affected the publishing world not only of his own era, but of the twentieth century as well.

Nelson also provides a new perspective on the Victorian Decadents — Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Ernest Dowson — and on the struggle to preserve the works of Sir Richard Burton. A thorough study and skillful usage of passages from personal correspondence illuminate the relationships between Smithers and each of these individuals without any need on the part of the author to inject glaring twenty-first-century labels or explanations. In fact, Nelson writes so well that only the tell-tale superscript numbers remind the reader that he has segued from his own voice to that of the long-dead correspondents.

In note 29 of Chapter One, Nelson comments on Burton's disdain for works without notes and index (355). His own work would have earned Burton's praise for its exacting detail, uncluttered yet informative notes, reassuringly complete index, and sixty-five pages of appendices (four in all) itemizing Smithers' publications. "Appendix A: Smithers and the Erotic Book Trade" was written by Peter Mendes, and Nelson and Mendes collaborated on "Appendix D: Checklist of Smithers's Publications." The checklist is supremely useful, as indicated by the note to the entry on *Priapeia*:

As originally printed (probably by Nichols), Burton's collaboration was openly acknowledged in Smithers's Introduction, but Burton asked for this to be removed and the relevant pages were quickly canceled and replaced by a passage denying rumors of his involvement. According to Penzer, only 2 copies containing the canceled pages seem to have escaped, one now in a private U.S. collection. (Nelson 318)

Nelson maintains a non-judgmental distance throughout with regard to the works mentioned, saving his editorial acid for the restrictive morality of the world in which Smithers lived and worked. The historical information provides a counter-

point to the jaundiced ho-hum modern view of a publishing world where *Playboy* and *Hustler* are considered mainstream publications and “porn” is badly written, poorly printed, and miserably bound. Smithers’ devotion to the creation of artistic showcases of the works of those he deemed worthy of publication incurred considerable risk.

... shops having pornographic materials on the premises were at hazard of being visited by harmless-looking gentlemen who would evince an interest in purchasing erotic books only to turn out to be undercover policemen. Once caught with such materials for sale, a dealer could be sentenced to twelve months at hard labor. (53)

Nelson has carved a niche for his work at the point where publishing history, literary history, and gay studies converge. This work will be a reference point for anyone interested in the historical era, the artists, the publishing industry, or the mores of the period.