

Preface

I worked on this bibliography for more than fifteen years. During that period, I visited many libraries and used bookstores. I discovered that even among bookish people the Little Blue Books are little remembered. Among the general public they are virtually unknown. But only ninety years ago, these books were ubiquitous. A wide variety of magazines and newspapers routinely carried full-page advertisements for the series. Such was their popularity that Simon and Schuster prevailed on Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, the publisher, to write a book divulging the secrets of his success. The result was *The First Hundred Million*, (1928) in which E. Haldeman-Julius claimed he was selling over twenty million books a year. While their popularity waned in the 1930s and 1940s, even as late as 1948 the writer of a profile of the publisher in *Liberty* magazine could confidently state, “Everybody’s read those Little Blue Books.”¹

After the death of E. Haldeman-Julius in 1951, the series began falling into obscurity and in 1978 his family sold the operation. Shortly after the sale, the printing plant in Girard, Kansas was destroyed by fire. Within two years, sales of the books were discontinued. Yet, the series left its stamp. The list of people who made use of the books ranges from royals and movie stars to railroad men and hobos. Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, purchased many. A complete set accompanied Admiral Byrd on a trek to the South Pole.² Charlie Chaplin and Gloria Swanson were regular customers.³

Many prominent writers remembered the impact of the series. While learning about life from “boomer firemen, journeymen carpenters and ex-Wooblies” in the lobby of his mother’s Chicago hotel, Studs Terkel was introduced to Aristotle, Voltaire, Shakespeare and Tom Paine through the series.⁴ Chicago novelist James T. Farrell claimed he was brought up on Little Blue Books. Jack Conroy considered himself a “charter member of Haldeman-Julius’ ‘University in Print.’” He started reading the People’s Pocket Series in the early 1920s. Fellow proletarian writer Ed Falkowski reminisced, “The Blue Books were my university curriculum when I worked at the collieries.”⁵ Famed Western writer Louis L’Amour remembered buying handfuls of the books as he headed toward hopping a freight train.⁶ Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Gore Vidal all read them in their youth.⁷ Of course, many thousands of unknowns found the books an important part of their development and, fortunately, some of their testimonies are recorded.⁸

¹ Peter H. Wyder, “Book Baron,” *Liberty Magazine*, Nov. 1948, 20.

² *Time Magazine*, August 8, 1949, 14.

³ Wyder, “Book Baron,” 21.

⁴ Studs Terkel, *American Dream Lost and Found* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), xx.

⁵ Douglas Wixson, *Worker Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 66, 331.

⁶ Louis L’Amour, *The Education of a Wandering Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 27.

⁷ Melanie Ann Brown, *Five Cent Culture at the “University in Print”: Radical Ideology and the Marketplace in E. Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books, 1919-1929* (Unpublished dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2006), 1.

⁸ Dale M. Herder, *Education for the Masses: The Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books as Popular Culture During the Nineteen-Twenties* (Unpublished dissertation Michigan State University, 1975), 257-268. Herder ran advertisements in *The American Rationalist* and *Progressive World* asking for remembrances of the books from the 1920s and early 1930s. He received 35 letters in reply. Most can be summed up by a

The present work hopes to help rescue the series from obscurity. Detailing the contents of each book will display the tremendous breadth of the series beyond what was previously done with a simple listing of the titles.⁹ This bibliography will be of service to scholars of particular authors, as existing bibliographies often provide an incomplete accounting of appearances in the series. For example, a bibliography of Clarence Darrow contains dozens of entries from the series, however, two articles by Darrow and three pieces about him are not recorded.¹⁰ Someone interested in Jack London is better served by the current Bibliography of American Literature (BAL) than earlier editions. Still, while all of London's book titles are listed in the latest edition, BAL is inconsistent in detailing the contents of the books and is mistaken in the determination of some publication dates.¹¹

I have listed a record of every impression I was able to locate for each of the titles in the series.¹² Since many of the publisher's records were destroyed and what does remain is not widely available, this listing gives some idea of which titles were reprinted and when. Thus, it affords insights into the reading interests of Americans.

The highest number in the series was No. 1916 but given replacement titles for slow sellers the actual number of titles was around 2,300. Four titles were issued as No. 5 in the series and many numbers were assigned two or three titles over the years. Some editions appeared in over 20 distinct wrappers. The total number of books detailed in this bibliography is over 12,600.

While this work is surly incomplete, at least one copy of every title was located. There are a few lacunae in editions. I did not, for example, locate copies of the second, fifth and sixth "editions" of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. However, in many cases what Haldeman-Julius labelled as a new edition was only a new impression. From the evidence available, it is not always possible to tell if all the missing "editions" were truly separate editions. In the case of No. 6, Guy de Maupassant's *The Piece of String*, "editions" one

correspondent who described himself as a 76-year-old, 8th grade graduate: "The Little Blue Books opened up my mind." Of course, some readers were drawn to the racier titles. William McCann writing in *The Progressive* admitted to being attracted to such titles as, *Wild Woman of Broadway*, and called Haldeman-Julius "A whiz at concocting sex-mad book titles." "Sex-mad Socialism," William McCann, *The Progressive*, Vol. 31 (September 1967), 45.

⁹ A list compiled at the Special Collections department of the Axe Library at Pittsburg State University is a tremendous aid to people interested in the series but it does not detail the contents of each book. In addition, there are many errors, as well as confusion as to what constitutes a separate edition.

¹⁰ Willard D. Hunsberger, *Clarence Darrow: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N. J., & London: Scarecrow Press), 1981.

¹¹ Many corrections were made after Johnson and Tanselle pointed out problems concerning London and other authors. See: Richard Colles Johnson and G. Thomas Tanselle, "The Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books as a Bibliographical Problem," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 64 (First Quarter, 1970): 31-32.

¹² Not every impression of a title is necessarily recorded here. When a new name was assigned to the series, it can be assumed there were new impressions. For example, books with the series name Pocket Series are surely separate impressions from those printed as Little Blue Books. Likewise, books with differing wrappers in most cases are from different impressions. But since there was little change in wrapper design and no name change from 1924 until around 1940, surely there are impressions that there is no way to differentiate.

and four have been located. Since the text is identical, clearly the missing second and third “editions” were not new editions, just new impressions.

To compile this bibliography, I amassed a collection of around 20,000 books. I examined collections at more than 20 college and university libraries, as well as several private collections. While I am confident all titles and nearly all editions are recorded here, there are wrappers – usually indicating another impression -- that remain undiscovered.

This work was largely inspired by a 1970 article by Richard Colles Johnson and G. Thomas Tanselle. While elaborating on the popularity and merits of the series, the authors detailed the challenges presented to bibliographers. They noted that there is no way of finding every appearance of a given author in the series. They also pointed out that often while the title of a number did not change with successive printing, the contents did. Another problem stems from the frequent changing of the name of the series up to 1923 when the name Little Blue Books was settled on. Colles and Tanselle wrote, “The only satisfactory solution [to these problems] would be a thorough descriptive bibliography of the entire Little Blue Book series.”¹³ I hope this work proves satisfactory.

¹³ Johnson and Tanselle, “The Haldeman-Julius ‘Little Blue Books’ as a Bibliographical Problem,” 29-32.