4-1971

Dorothy Thompson's Role in Sinclair Lewis' Break with Harcourt, Brace

Helen B. Petrullo
Syracuse University

View of Lockport, New York, drawn about 1840 by W. Wilson.
Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

THE COURIER

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 3

APRIL 1971

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dorothy Thompson's Role in Sinclair Lewis' Break with Harcourt, Brace

by Helen B. Petrullo

The Dorothy Thompson Papers at Syracuse University occupy 77 linear feet of shelving. The correspondence, 1918-1961, family papers and manuscripts, including eighteen years of her syndicated column, "On the Record," and more than twenty years of her articles for the Ladies' Home Journal, *document the life and work of this famous American journalist, who was graduated from Syracuse in 1914.*

Professor Petrullo, who received the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Syracuse, is a member of the English faculty at Kansas State University. She has been researching Sinclair Lewis in the Dorothy Thompson Papers. The Thompson letters quoted here are from the Syracuse collection and are printed with permission of the Morgan Guaranty Trust of New York, executor and trustee of Miss Thompson's estate.

In the published accounts of Sinclair Lewis' decision to leave Harcourt, Brace and Company, the part Dorothy Thompson, his second wife, played has not been told, and yet she was probably more responsible for the termination of that publishing relationship than Lewis himself.[1] The final letters exchanged between Lewis and his publishers on this matter are printed in a selected collection of their correspondence issued in 1952 under the title

[1]Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Morgan Guaranty Trust of New York, executor and trustee under the will of the late Dorothy Thompson, for permission to use four letters among the Dorothy Thompson Papers in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, three of which are quoted here, entirely or in part. Robert Benjamin, Vice President of Morgan Guaranty Trust, and Sara B. McCain, Head of the Manuscripts Reference Department of Syracuse University Libraries, are especially thanked for their generous cooperation.

From Main Street to Stockholm.[2] Two letters on the severance, from Lewis to his wife in 1931, have been published in another work.[3] There is a letter from Dorothy Thompson to Lewis, undated but written in May of 1930, that rightly belongs in the public record of this much speculated about rupture, which did not formally take place until January-February of 1931, several weeks after Lewis' reception of the Nobel Prize.

This letter provides ample evidence of Dorothy's insistence that Lewis revise his arrangements with Harcourt, and it implies that she was the agent responsible for Lewis' growing dissatisfaction with Harcourt as a publisher during 1929-30. Three letters that she wrote to Lewis in 1931 at the time of the break–she was in Germany and Lewis in London, ostensibly to interview representatives of prospective publishers–will be used here also. One of these letters is important because in it Dorothy expresses her intention to help select the new publisher, another because she reveals in it her attitude toward making money, which was fundamentally different from that of Lewis. The third letter is used solely to confirm the approximate dates of the others. No one of the letters has been printed previously.

Dorothy's active participation in the ultimate decision to leave Harcourt warrants some revision of the opinions that have been published as explanations of Lewis' action. It has been said that the break was an "impulsive severance," that it was the result of Lewis' getting mad with Harcourt "about nothing," and that it was an expression of Lewis' "inability to cope with current history."[4]

The author-publisher relationship in the twentieth century has often been of a very special kind, with the function of the publisher expanded far beyond the publishing and promoting of books. The publisher–the term is used for any or all members of a firm–has frequently acted as an omnibus

---

[2] *From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930,* edited and with introduction by Harrison Smith, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, pp. 299-302. Other letters of this volume mentioned here will be identified in the text by date, without page citations.

[3] Vincent Sheean, *Dorothy and Red,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963, pp. 200-204. Although Sheean had access to the letters published here, he telescopes events separated by more than six months into a short summary: "Along with the pregnancy, the alcoholism, the endless parties, Dorothy now had to face the neurotic tensions which surround a very great 'literary property' when it is about to change hands," p. 178. Michael Lewis was born June 20, 1930.

[4] For the comments see respectively Sheldon Grebstein, "Sinclair Lewis and the Nobel Prize," *Western Humanities Review,* 13 (1959), 170; Sheean, p. 177; and Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962, p. 577. D.J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis,* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967, p. 164, uses what has become a reflex cliché to explain any event in Lewis' life: "Lewis's quarrelsomeness with Harcourt was only one aspect of his renewed instability."

Despite the many references to Lewis' alleged instability, it is noteworthy that Melville H. Cane, the first lawyer Lewis ever engaged, remained his legal counsel for the rest of Lewis' life and was named executor and trustee under Lewis' will.

"Dorothy Thompson," bronze bust by Jo Davidson, 1941.
Presented to the Library in 1961 by Dorothy Thompson Kopf

surrogate: he has served as intimate confidante as well as counselor in advertising, investments, intermediary legal matters, marital problems, and public relations; he has functioned as de facto banker, holding and dispensing royalty income, making deposits to exhausted checking accounts, and extending loans in the form of advances. Sometimes he has simply held the hand of his writer. Harcourt and his associates served Lewis at one time or another in all of these capacities, besides acting as his reference librarian on occasion. Whereas some American writers of this century have needed extensive editorial assistance from their publishers, Lewis definitely did not require editorial services of Harcourt. He once exposed, succinctly and sarcastically, a side of the author-publisher situation when he exclaimed to Harcourt, "God, it must be interesting to be a publisher and to be in touch with the sensitive and undemanding souls of these authors."[5]

The tie between Lewis and Alfred Harcourt was a particularly close one. Of similar small town backgrounds, the two had been friends for nearly a decade when Harcourt left Henry Holt in 1919. Lewis, who had earlier quit as editor for George H. Doran in order to write full-time, encouraged Harcourt to start his own firm, offered his future books for publication, and invested part of his savings in the new company. Apparently he continued to invest modestly in it during the twenties, for in 1930 he received a $1000 dividend from the company.[6]

Although Lewis and his publishers entered into contractual agreements, their arrangements on royalties and advertising costs were adjustable. For example, Lewis' royalty percentage was reduced frequently by mutual consent to cover his share of advertisement costs that exceeded the sum originally stipulated. The flexible nature of their agreements is borne out by Harcourt's letter of January 6, 1928, concerning *The Man Who Knew Coolidge:* "We are in our usual position as regards the contract. I have sent you one on the basis of *Mantrap.* I couldn't help snickering at finding that we are again trying to get you to take a little more and you're arguing for a little less. I think you had better let us have our way this time and sign the contracts that are sent to you on the understanding that if we need more room for advertising we'll lower the royalty on a certain number of copies to 10% and spend the difference in special exploitation." Six months later, in a letter dated May 5, Lewis told Harrison Smith, a member of the firm, to reduce the royalty on the next 5000 copies of *Elmer Gantry* to cover his half of an unusual advertising campaign launched in Kansas City. In the same letter, Lewis informed Smith that he and Dorothy Thompson would be married the following week in London.

[5] *From Main Street to Stockholm,* p. 226.

[6] This item appears in a list of Lewis' receipts for 1930 which is among the Thompson Papers.

During the remainder of the year after the marriage on May 14, 1928, Lewis wrote few letters to his publishers, partly because the couple was travelling and getting settled in the new farmhouse in Vermont and partly because Lewis was absorbed in finishing *Dodsworth.* Early in 1929 the flow of letters to Harcourt increased, but these letters, unlike those of other years, are redundant with complaints about Harcourt's handling of reprints and foreign rights and about his failure to bring out a uniform or library edition of the books already published. Lewis' usual keen interest in advertising, advances, and the reactions of reviewers and famous authors to his works was displaced by an anxious, and at times almost strident, concern for increasing his income. One of the most significant letters of this period is that of October 26, 1929 in which Lewis questioned the accuracy of the royalty statement for the first half of 1929.

The royalty statement for the second half of 1929 drew fire from Dorothy. After spending the early months of 1930 in California, the Lewises had returned East and in late April they went to their house at Barnard, Vermont. Dorothy, who was pregnant, left there on May 5 to go back to New York. The precise date of Lewis' return to the city is uncertain; a non-business note from Harcourt, dated May 19, was presumably sent to him in Vermont. The pertinent fact is that before he returned to New York Dorothy had received and gone over the royalty statement, which, according to the usual Harcourt contract, would have been sent out on April 25. Her letter spawned by that statement was not one to assuage discontent. Handwritten on the personal stationery of Mrs. Wallace Irwin of East Setauket, Long Island, the letter follows—with phrasing, punctuation, spelling, and underlining as written:

Thursday

Hal dear—

Your royalty statement from Harcourt is here, for the last six months of 1929 & I've been looking it over. Hal, what Harcourt & his agents have been taking out of your foreign books & serial rights and still are, is scandalous. Wallace incidentally, thinks so, too. I'm passing over the perfectly ridiculous arrangement whereby all books previous to Dodsworth continue to pay 1/3 of your foreign royalties to Harcourt. I thought that had stopped. I can't see to save my life, also, why Harcourt takes 10% of your motion picture rights and Ann Watkins takes 10%. It seems to me one agent ought to be enough.

On a lot of your foreign rights you are paying out 53% of your royalties on commission—33 1/3% to Harcourt, 10% to Curtis Brown, and 10% to a foreign agent. Again, to save my life, I don't see where Harcourt on these deals is contributing anything at all. It seems to me 20% to two agents ought to be sufficient to

place your work. Why in hell you should have to pay 33 1/3% commission on German Serial rights of Mantrap is more than I can see.

But it's when we come to Dodsworth that I get maddest because I thought you had changed all of this with Dodsworth. On the English rights Harcourt is only taking 10%. But I don't understand the French, & the Czechoslovakian editions. On the French & C-S editions of Dodsworth you are paying a 20% commission (to whom not indicated) plus a 25% commission to Harcourt—in all 45% of your total royalties, low anyhow, in commissions!!

All this on top of Ray Everett's letter makes me boil.[7] As far as the Library edition of your books is concerned, you can stipulate for that in the next contract you make with Harcourt & I think ought to do so. But Babbitt, Arrowsmith, & Dodsworth are likely to go on selling abroad indefinitely—and will Harcourt always & eternally, take 1/3 of your royalties. Wallace, incidentally, has found by long experience that having ones publisher as agent is a gyp game. He's tried it with two & abandoned it altogether.

I wish you could find out from Harcourt what Rowohlt is getting for German serial rights on Dodsworth & your short stories. I know what he ought to be getting. And how the commissions are distributed.

Forgive this heated letter, inspired by love of you.

Dorothy

I'm holding the
statement until you
come.

Despite the abrasive attitude expressed toward Harcourt in the letter and the rather callous overlooking of Lewis' extensive publishing experience, Dorothy's concern about the royalty income was natural enough under the circumstances. She was a second wife, and there were a former wife and an earlier child in the background demanding support, she was expecting a child, and she had dreams about the country estate in Vermont which was turning out to be a very expensive project.

That Dorothy fully intended to help select the new publisher, once the link to Harcourt was severed, is made quite clear in a letter she wrote to

[7] Dorothy misspelled the name. In an incident mentioned by both Schorer, p. 535, and Sheean, p. 178, Ray Everitt, a junior in the Harcourt firm, is said to have insulted Lewis when he wrote of the difficulties the firm had experienced in trying to place a short article about Lewis by the Frenchman, Paul Morand.

Lewis in early 1931. Following the visit to Stockholm for the Nobel Prize festivities, the Lewises went to Berlin where Dorothy was operated on at Christmastime for appendicitis. Toward the end of January, after her release from the hospital and a country vacation of about ten days, Lewis went to London, leaving Dorothy in Berlin. From London he wrote her on February 12 that he had completed the break with Harcourt and that Oswald Villard, who was also in London, had talked with him about the possibility of her assuming the editorship of the *Nation.*[8] While the letter Dorothy wrote in response is merely dated "Tuesday/ Berlin," it can be more closely dated by its contents, as can the two others she wrote from Berlin, all of which were referred to earlier. In each she mentions a Lewis letter, her efforts to secure an interview with "Zita," and her itinerary, with the changes made in it to facilitate the interview.

In the first of these letters she states that the interview with Zita is off and announces that she would go to Vienna on Friday of that week. Further, she asks Lewis to arrange with the Guaranty Trust to deposit money to her account in the States. She also poses these questions: "How can I take the Nation? What about Vermont? Europe? You? I see you staying home & minding the baby!!" In a paragraph devoted to the quest for a publisher, she wrote: "Hal–you can't go to Hearst. Not for a million. . . . if you do it, it will be a terrific disappointment to your real friends. Your novel will be a study of American idealism and the people who really love you & appreciate your work–Ben and Lewis Gannett, & F.P.A.–will simply receive the book under the worst possible impression. . . . Several people here who've had experience with American publishing say 'don't go to Viking–swell people but no sales organization.' I think we might be able to do a little investigating at home. Anyhow, I know you won't close, until we're both home."

In the second of the letters, dated "Tuesday Eve," Dorothy says that she has just returned from Upper Silesia, where she had apparently gone from Vienna, that she had received a letter from Lewis, and that she had finally arranged the interview with Zita for the 23rd in Brussels. The third letter of this group was written before she left Berlin for the interview. The complete text follows, as written, with letterhead:

Hotel Adlon Berlin W.
Unter den Linden 1
am Pariser Platz

Thursday

Darling:

Can you possibly make $5000 free immediately for investment, because if you can I've got a swell proposition. The

[8] This is one of the letters printed in Sheean, p. 202, that is referred to in paragraph one.

Ford Company has recently been organized here with 15.000.000 marks capital, of which 10.000.000 is owned by the British Ford Co. 2.000.000 by I.G. Farben, (the German chemical trust) and 3.000.000 is theoretically free. Actually only a handful of people know about it, it's not on the open market, and can only be bought in Germany. Our commercial attaché, Miller, told me about it, also I promised not to tell another soul and under no conditions to purchase more than 500 marks worth per day, and then not every day. The company made over 40% profit in the first nine months (its only so old) and, with a capitalization of 15.000.000 has 8 1/2 millions in the bank here. Two or three rich Americans (they would be) are very quietly purchasing stock in very small quantities–not to drive up the price.

I would like to leave instructions with the National City bank here, after depositing $5000 to be spent for buying this stock over a period of three months. Its quoted now at 190, and is going to have little ones, Miller says, very soon. It can't be bought except in Berlin.

Please wire me if you can do it.[9]

———

Darling–I should write oftener but I am a slave. Upper Silesia was worth the trip. I've got the interview with Zita & shall go (as I wired you) to Brussels–thence to Paris, catching the boat at Cherbourg.

Sweetest–sweet–are you well? Are you working (which I understood to be the object of your leaving your loving Dotty) and when do you think you'll come home?

I kiss you tenderly,

Dotty

Dorothy's concern for making money has not been commented on directly in the reports published so far about the couple. The letter above recalls, however, Philip Goodman's facetious letter to H.L. Mencken in 1933, which is quoted in part in Schorer's biography of Lewis. The letter was written from Austria where the Lewises had taken a house for the winter and staged a prolonged and disastrous party. Goodman poked fun at both of them. Dorothy, he reports, said that she was going to leave "Wredde," and Goodman continues, she has her own ego "and it goes marching down the street behind a brass band at times, and she is an energetic money-maker; but

[9] I have not located Lewis' response to the request.

she is honest and not cheap, and she hates all of Wredde's vermin friends."[10] Mencken mainfestly belonged in that category, and perhaps Goodman did too.

The letters from Dorothy to Lewis that have been quoted and discussed here disclose two things. First, Dorothy badgered Lewis into making a change in his publishing relations–and without any understanding of the sympathetic reciprocity that existed between Lewis and Harcourt, or, seemingly, any perception of the test that relationship had undergone when Lewis collapsed just prior to the publication of *Elmer Gantry* (1927). Secondly, Dorothy had a strong capitalistic drive, and in 1931 she obviously expected Lewis to finance her speculative ventures. Interestingly, Lewis had paid her $5000 as a secretarial fee in 1930.[11]

Some of Alfred Harcourt's remarks on his experiences as a publisher appropriately belong to the full story of Lewis' cutting his ties with his old friend. Harcourt had left his editorial post with Henry Holt because of differences in editorial orientation, and he felt that Holt was somewhat relieved by his decision to leave.[12] Of Lewis he says, "He was one of the most generous-spirited men I ever knew. With some of the earlier books, he insisted that we take a larger share of some of the rights than I had proposed."[13] And Harcourt gives a more generous account than anyone else has of Lewis' response to his desire to start his own publishing house.[14]

Harcourt's quiet statement about the end of his publishing relationship with Lewis is suggestive: "After *Dodsworth,* we did not publish any more of Lewis's new books, but we kept the old ones. Although I saw him less frequently–and for a number of years not at all–nothing ever interfered with our personal feeling for each other. We had long and intimate visits when he was in Santa Barbara in 1949."[15]

[10] Schorer, pp. 579-80.

[11] The item is referred to in a letter of February 9, 1931 from Bernard M.L. Ernst, late law partner of Melville H. Cane, concerning Lewis' 1930 income tax return, and it appears on Lewis' list of business expenses for that year. Both letter and list are among the Thompson Papers.

[12] Alfred Harcourt, *Some Experiences,* Riverside, Conn., privately printed, 1951, p. 31.

[13] *Ibid.* p. 84

[14] *Ibid.* pp. 35-36

[15] *Ibid.* p. 83