

Mudie's *Select Library* and the Three-Decker Novel – A Mutual Failure?

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One of the most successful circulating libraries in 19th-century Britain was Charles Edward Mudie's *Select Library*, which opened in 1842. As an important cultural institution, it satisfied the demand of a people that were becoming increasingly literate. For an annual subscription fee of one guinea, readers could borrow one volume at a time. The three-decker¹, for which Mudie got a discount of up to fifty percent of the nominal price, was his preferred publication format. It allowed him to triple the number of subscribers he could serve with one title, while also tripling his intake. In contrast, one-volume first editions were, while stocked, rarely advertised (Griest 40).

In the mid-nineteenth century, three-deckers were set at a costly 31s 6d² and thus not announced for sale, but as available through circulating libraries. They were therefore first and foremost library editions. Publishers were dependent on large purchases of three-volume novels by libraries like Mudie's.

Consequently, authors and publishers planned accordingly, and the length, plots, and subjects were attributed to Mudie's liking (Griest 35f.). Many writers, however, saw the three-decker as a "Procrustean bed on which novels were placed to be dragged out or broken into the statutory length" (Griest 41). The system of maintaining an artificially high price and small editions was indeed most beneficial to the circulating libraries who could profit from a brief monopoly on the availability of new novels (Bassett 61f.). The three-decker format was abandoned in 1894, at the libraries' instigation. Despite the dominance of the format in 19th-century British publishing, research on its eventual failure has been surprisingly limited. This article will thus take a closer look at the final stages of the three-decker novel in the 1890s. During the course of this article I will examine the failure of the three-decker system through the writing of contemporary author George Gissing, supported with the work of book historians. I will argue how the three-volume

¹ The three-volume novel is also known as the triple-decker or three-decker. This expression stems from eighteenth and nineteenth century war vessels having three gundecks. With over 200 feet in length they were costly vessels, but also had a distinct aura of class and dignity. Consequently, the term "three-decker" was used figuratively for something of great importance or size consisting of three divisions or three sections (Lauterbach and Lauterbach 267f.).

² This amounts to roughly £150 in today's money (Nesta 49).

novel that once proved so profitable for the *Select Library* resulted in Mudie's eventual business failure and that Mudie's deliberately decided to kill the format off entirely.

George Gissing and the “triple-headed monster”

The three-volume novel presented itself as an obstacle to many authors. With the establishment of the three-decker, authors began to think in terms of length. For instance, in order to meet their quota, they used certain padding techniques such as prolonged characterization, multiplying the number of chapters or resorting to the episode (Lauterbach and Lauterbach 272–274). The pressure to force a story into three volumes instead of allowing it to take on a natural shape is reflected in George Gissing's works.

Gissing was a British novelist who poses a perfect example of a serious writer in the 1880s and 90s who was forced to abide by Mudie's rules in order to make a living. He experienced how inconvenient the publishing format was to authors and how publishers succumbed to the pressure exerted by the circulating libraries. The three-decker system could thus only prevail as long as it suited the libraries which sustained it. After a failed attempt to convince his publisher to issue his work *A Life's Morning* in two volumes instead of three, Gissing realized that the time for change had not yet

come (Griest 98f.). In 1891, Smith, Elder & Co. published another novel of his, once again in the typical three-volume format. It can be argued that *New Grub Street* is Gissing's autobiographical take on the three-decker situation. One of his characters labels the three-decker a “triple-headed monster, sucking the blood of English novelists” (Gissing), which demonstrates how the protagonist feels. Edwin Reardon is a struggling young author who is unwilling to compromise his artistic integrity and therefore unable to produce a three-decker in the allotted time. Reardon sums up the dilemma perfectly:

“For anyone in my position (...) how is it possible to abandon the three volumes? It is a question of payment. (...) And here comes in the benefit of the libraries; from the commercial point of view the libraries are indispensable. Do you suppose the public would support the present number of novelists if each book had to be purchased? A sudden change to that system would throw three-fourths of the novelists out of work” (Gissing).

Nevertheless, Gissing's Reardon is overwhelmed by the task to put his story into the customary three volumes: “The three volumes lie before me like an interminable desert. Impossible to get through them” (Gissing). Other authors grew increasingly frustrated as well and expressed similar feelings. William Makepeace Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* satirized the three-decker: “This is what he pined after. Here it is—the summit, the

end—the last page of the third volume” (Lauterbach and Lauterbach 272). Three-volume novels were in many ways an obstacle to the author and could potentially damage the quality of the work. A flawed and restricting publication format such as the three-decker was doomed to fail from the very beginning and survived only until 1894 because the libraries and hence the publishers supported it. However, by the mid-1880s publishers did not have to rely on the circulating libraries as their major customers anymore.

The Unprofitable Three-Decker

Publishers profited from small editions and stable print runs which posed limited risk. Three-deckers typically had a print run of 500 to 1,500 copies, of which Mudie’s bought a significant number. However, he never paid the full price of 31d 6s for the three-decker. Instead, he negotiated discounts and often received new novels for less than half the market price.³ As the circulating libraries were the publishers’ main customers, they bent to Mudie’s terms. They still made a profit, however, despite the discounts (Bassett 62).

With its small print runs, the expensive three-decker proved to be a precarious system as it was unfit to cater to

the ever-growing reading audience. The economic barrier was the main reason why readers turned to circulating libraries as the three-decker was not priced for direct sale to individual buyers. When publishers recognized the growing demand of the audience, they published their novels in cheaper one-volume editions making them thus available for sale to the general reading public. The profits they made from the circulating libraries became less economically viable than direct sales to the reading public (Nesta 57).

Beginning in the mid-1880s, cheaper formats began to dominate in fiction. With readers willing to buy books at an affordable rate, publishers felt less compelled to wait a year to issue the first cheap reprint of the three-decker (Bassett 68). Since circulating libraries had running and labor costs in addition to the price of the books, a three-volume novel was only profitable for circulating libraries if it circulated for between nine months and a year (Eliot 129f.). Cheaper second editions that appeared before this time frame meant that the circulating libraries had to sell those titles off at a substantial discount (Eliot 298).⁴ The reprints of three-deckers in one volume

³ For instance, Mudie bought half of the first edition of Anthony Trollope’s three-volume novel *The Three Clerks* (Bentley, 1857) and received the 500 copies for 11s. 6d. each. For then-unknown authors like Thomas Hardy discounts were even steeper. Mudie acquired 50 copies of his three-volume novel *Desperate Remedies* (Tinsley Brothers, 1871) at 6s. each (Bassett 62).

⁴ By the late 1860s reprints were available less than a year after their original publication in three volumes. By the 1880s they could be issued just three months after their first edition. Prices for these reprints fell as

show that the publication format was artificial and that the whole three-volume system was created based on purely economic reasons (Lauterbach and Lauterbach 279f.).

A closer look at the production of three-volume novels reveals that while the *Select Library* based its main business model on the circulation of three-deckers, publishers did not. According to Bassett and his study on three-decker production,⁵ an average number of 95 new three-volume novel titles were produced in the 1860s. This number declined to an average of 85 per year in the early 1870s. However, from 1876 to 1884, production increased to an average of near 140. The following years show similar fluctuation from a gradual decline in the late 1880s to an increase in the early 1890s. Most interesting for this article is the steep decline in three-decker production after 1894 when most publishers stopped issuing their novels in this format. G. H. Henty's three-volume novel *The Queens Cup* in 1897 marks the end of the three-decker format (Bassett 67). Taking these numbers into account, it seems that the three-decker stayed a

consistent and viable publishing format until it was killed off by the circulating libraries in 1894. Bassett, however, shows that when compared to the overall production of fiction titles, the three-decker production does not even account for half of it. Three-deckers accounted for an average of 31.9 percent of new fiction titles from 1876–85. From 1886–1894, the data paints an even clearer picture of the situation with three-decker production, accounting for an average of 12.1 percent. Bassett's data clearly shows that the three-decker did not dominate British publishing at any period in time (Bassett 67f.). In reality, only a small cadre of publishers specialized in the production of three-deckers, whereas most other publishers issued only a few three-volume novels per year (Bassett 71).⁶ With a narrow base like this, the three-decker format was never intended for the mass market and could not accommodate the growing readership. Rather surprisingly, the three-decker system proved quite durable and comparatively stable, for which Richard Menke offers an explanation. The circulating libraries created a closed system that purposely stifled

well which made them more affordable for the general reading public (Eliot 135f.).

⁵ Bassett based his numbers on *The English Catalogue of Books* and the *Publishers' Circular*. Numerous other critics, including Guinevere L. Griest, quote Joseph Shaylor's statistics of three-volume novel production given in *The Fascination of Books* (1912). Shaylor had been working for distributors like Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, and Kent, and thus had extensive knowledge of the publishing industry. However, his data was compiled about fifteen years after the publication of the last three-volume novel and does not offer any source. Its accuracy is thus questionable (Bassett 63).

⁶ From 1867 to 1897 thirty-seven out of over ninety publishers produced only one three-decker. On the other hand, another fifteen publishers account for 86 percent of all new three-volume novel titles and thus represent the great majority (Bassett 71).

technical and economic innovation in favor of their financial interests (Menke). But clinging to the three-decker system proved increasingly unprofitable as it did not adequately serve the authors' needs or a mass readership intent on owning books.

Killing the Three-Decker

With an increasing number of publishers issuing a quick reprint, profits for Mudie's business greatly reduced. Mudie's business strategy rested on two pillars: subscription fees on the one hand and second-hand book sales on the other. For instance, after succeeding his father as head of the firm, Arthur Mudie complained that he was left with 1,750 copies, or 5,250 volumes, of *Marcella* by Mrs. Humphry Ward because a 6s. edition had been issued only three months after the original three-decker edition (Griest, *A Victorian Leviathan* 122). Arthur Mudie also shared his sentiments with regards to the three-decker on a regular basis with publisher George Bentley. He claimed that "by careful analysis of figures extending over 2 or 3 years that not one in twelve of the 3 vol novels pa[id] its way" (Griest 168). In a letter to Bentley, Arthur Mudie explicitly stated his preference for the one-volume novel and his aversion against the three-decker as it had outlived its usefulness

(Griest 173). In this respect he is in contradiction to his father, Charles Edward Mudie, who supported the three-decker and based his business on it. The *Select Library* had certainly stocked one-volume novels as well, but Charles Edward Mudie was reluctant to advertise these. Despite his death in 1890, the powerful impression he left was still molding policies and practices as the *Select Library* continued to rely on the three-decker (Griest, *Leviathan* 117).

27th June, 1894 marks the most important date for the history of the three-decker. Mudie's and W. H. Smith simultaneously issued a circular to the trade demanding future terms on which they would continue to buy novels from publishers. The libraries demanded to lower the cost for three-volume novels to no more than 4s. effectively calling for a further reduction to the substantial discount they already received on three-volume novels. Furthermore, they insisted that cheaper reprints appear no earlier than one year after the publication of their initial three-volume form. This would allow them enough time to properly circulate the novels to make a profit. Except for a few publishers who lowered their prices – though not to 4s.⁷ – nearly every publisher either abandoned the format entirely or greatly reduced production as the terms were

⁷ For instance, Bentley lowered his price to 18s., Chatto and Windus to 15s., and Hurst and Blackett to 21s. (Bassett 74).

simply unworkable (Bassett 73f.). While this step might appear like a desperate measure to save the three-decker, it was in practice the opposite. As Arthur Mudie confirms: “The Three Volume novel does not suit us *at any price* so well as the One Vol, and upon the old terms it is *no longer possible*.” (Griest 174). According to Griest, the *Select Library* had little choice from an economic standpoint. In order to avoid having to raise their subscription rates which could lose them subscribers, they opted for the only other option, which was to cut expenses for fiction by killing off the expensive three-decker (Griest 171). It can be argued that Arthur Mudie realized the changing conditions in the literary market and acted accordingly. In August 1894, the *Select Library* openly advertised “Novels in One Volume” for the first time (Griest 197).

The three-volume form vanished completely and rapidly within three years after it received its death blow. It defined the British fiction market for nearly seventy-five years, despite the fact that three-volume novel production accounted only for an average of one-third of total novel production. The system of three-volume novel production with circulating libraries buying the bulk of it and thus sustaining and perpetuating it, could only be dispatched by them when it was no longer profitable enough.

The three-decker system that had sustained Mudie’s for decades was deliberately killed off by that same business. Scholars are divided over the issue of whether Mudie’s was largely dependent on the three-decker novel or not. Simon Eliot argues that the *Select Library* did not close its doors until forty-three years after the death of the three-volume novel and can thus be “exonerated from the guilt of creating what many came to regard as a monster” (Eliot 135). While it is true that Charles Edward Mudie did not create the three-decker, he clung to it contentedly as it gave him a monopoly on the newest fiction titles, so that readers who could not afford the hefty price of 31s. 6d. had to subscribe to the *Select Library* in order gain access. Griest points out that the *Select Library* may have outlived the three-decker by forty-three years, but its glory days were a thing of the past. She argues that even though the *Select Library* survived in name until 1937, the three-decker and the circulating library were so closely intertwined that neither could prosper without the other. Thus, Mudie’s was doomed with the extinction of the three-decker (Griest, *Leviathan* 104). The firm was not adapting adequately to new publishing strategies with larger print runs. Its orders remained small and soon the firm had to move to smaller premises in Kingsway (Griest, *Leviathan* 112).⁸

⁸ Despite the fact that the demise of the three-decker format impacted W. H. Smith as well, the firm managed to survive in name until the present day. Where Mudie’s primarily relied on the flourishing three-decker, W.

Conclusion

The system of small editions at high prices that catered primarily to circulating libraries was eventually replaced by one that catered to a mass readership relying on large, direct sales (Bassett 75). With reprints available at 6s. or lower a few months after the original issue in three-volume format, the library edition found its way into the second-hand catalogue without being able to have its full run. As a result, changing publishing practices revealed that the three-decker was never made for longevity. The three-volume novel was only economically viable when the reading public was small, and the circulating libraries could adequately sustain it with

small editions. Because Mudie's relied so much on a system that could only serve a small reading public, which also proved difficult to work with for authors like George Gissing, the three-decker was doomed to fail his business eventually. As soon as Arthur Mudie realized that, he got rid of the three-volume novel, but failed to get rid of the business techniques that were designed specifically for triple-decker editions. This particular novel format would not have lasted an eternity, but its complete and abrupt demise can clearly be traced to the circulating libraries, particularly Mudie's. To quote Griest, "the end of the one spelled the doom of the other" (*Leviathan*, 104) and ultimately the *Select Library* and the three-decker failed each other.

H. Smith focused on railway stalls and thus preferred the cheap reprint in one volume which could conveniently be withdrawn at one station and be returned at another. The death of the three-volume novel thus mainly influenced its circulating library service which ran from 1860 to 1961 (Griest, *Leviathan* 112 and 117).

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