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The Railway Library, the *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer* and other «literary rubbish that travels by the rail»

«Keepers of bookstalls, as well as of refreshment-rooms, find an advantage in offering their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dulness of a journey»¹.

With the *Railway Library* and other books of this kind, a moment is reached, the mid 19th century, when books were produced for a mass market mainly using mechanical printing processes such as steam-operated printing machines, industrially-produced paper, stereotyped and electrotyped printing matrices, and so forth.

Of course, this was not the first example of cheap books for a large, uncultivated, mass market – chapbooks and penny dreadfuls in England, the *Bibliothèque Bleue* and the *Imagerie d'Épinal* in France, the Remondini prints in Italy –, but in this case both the public and distribution were completely different from those of the other earlier cheap books.

These books were the true output of the industrial revolution and blossomed in connection with the development of railway transportation.

This was probably the first time the audience – a new reading audience indeed – had widened so rapidly and probably the first time books were distributed so quickly through different distribution means, using marketing politics to maximize sales.

By way of definition

These books were known as «yellow-backs».

Yellow-back recognisability as an editorial genre was essential for their saleability. This was an important step in customer-loyalty management, a practice the publishing industry derived from periodicals and serials and carried on building, banking on identification of material, physical and iconographical components as a genre, exactly as would happen, a century afterwards, with the *libri gialli*, the *libri rosa*, or the *noir*, and as had already happened, a century or so before, with the *Bibliothèque Bleue*².

¹ H.L. MANSEL, *Sensation Novels*, in «Quarterly Review», (April 1863), CXIII, pp. 483-91, reprinted in IDEM, *Letters, Lectures, and Reviews*, London: John Murray, 1873, pp. 213-52, pp. 218-19.

² One notes the strong symbolic value of colour, which is never a secondary detail in making an editorial or literary genre recognisable.

This term denoted a very specific, at first peculiarly British, editorial format with typical features involving not only the physical and material appearance but also the way it was distributed and commercialised. It was not a term in official circulation at the time, but probably one of those words used by printers, publishers, and readers for a long time without ever getting into print, at least until the late 1880s and early 1890s, when this publishing phenomenon was in its later, waning phase, as documented in 1891 by Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*³.

Its first definition is due to Michael Sadleir, the true pioneer of yellow-back studies: «*Yellow-back* was the nickname given to the particular type of cheap edition evolved about the middle of last century for display and sale on railway bookstalls. It was usually (but not always) a cheap edition of fiction; it usually (but not always) cost two shillings; its basic colouring was usually (but not always) yellow – to which last characteristic, not surprisingly, it owed its soubriquet»⁴.

In fact, yellow-backs always sold for less than half-a-crown – their price usually ranging between sixpence and two shillings, that is to say between one tenth and half the price of clothbound one-volume editions, usually sold at no less than a crown⁵.

Always, they were bound in pictorial paper covers – either monochrome paper wrappers at the lower end, or varnished paper over boards, in two or more colours, at the higher, in both cases printed from relief blocks.

Invariably, their covers were decorated – either pictorially, with large illustrations commissioned from important artists and painters, or typographically, with editorial cartouches and engraved titles produced by apprentices within the printer's workshop. They were always one-volume editions – it being greatly preferable to secure reader loyalty to the series rather than to the single title.

Invariably, too, they were ranked in series and were usually issued periodically – even if their belonging to one series or another was not so strictly stated and they could often switch series and series number.

³ A. CONAN DOYLE, *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, in «The Strand Magazine», (October 1891), II, pp. 401-416; see also: P.I.E., *The Vagaries of Book-buyers, III*, in «Book-lore», (January 1887), I, pp. 6-9, p. 9; «The Publishers' Circular», (June 11, 1904), p. 665; J. REDDING WARE, *Passing English of the Victorian Era, A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang, and Phrase*, London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1909, *ad vocem*.

⁴ M. SADLEIR, *Yellow-backs, Origins and Rise to Power of the Yellow-back, Facts and Phases of the Yellow-back period, Why to Collect Yellow-backs?*, in J. CARTER, edited by, *New Paths in Book-collecting, Essays by Various Hands*, London: Constable & Co., 1934, pp. 127-161, p. 127.

⁵ Note that before 1971 British currency was not decimalised; money was divided into pounds (£), shillings (s.) and pence (d.) – £1 = 20s., 1s. = 12 pennies – and there existed coins of different value such as the half-crown = 2s. 6d., or the crown = 5s.

And again, they were always small pocket books, never bigger than an 8vo (Foolscap, Crown or Post) – but other formats, usually smaller, were produced as well, such as 12mo, 16mo or 24mo.

In the end, their textual content was not so relevant in determining the yellow-back features. The sensational, spectacular, and even shocking aspects so much highlighted in connection with railway fiction need to be placed side by side with other features that figured massively in railway bookstalls. Yellow-backs could be works of fiction (detective stories, sensation novels, etc.) as well as world classics of literature, poetry, wide-ranging manuals (cookery, home management, farming, gardening, etiquette, investment handbooks), travel guides, children's books, or educational works (primers, schoolbooks, alphabets, song books).

Equally, the colour of the paper used for the cover changed freely from one issue to another of the same title, making that detail to defining this kind of editorial item. Undeniably, yellow-backs were bound up with railway transportation: distributed through the railway network, they directly sprouted from travellers' increasing demand for recreational occupation during long journeys and were therefore sold, at first, in railway bookstalls and even on railway platforms when no bookstalls were available, by a «boy» putting in a few hours daily at the station. However, their immediate success soon carried them out of station stands to overwhelm high-street booksellers throughout the United Kingdom.

It will be of some interest to see how this genre established itself on the market, defining its own identity and public through pricing and editorial features, using illustrated front covers as a marketing, selling tool, a tool to widen the audience and reach a more general, popular kind of reader.

More copious literature came in demand

England, mid-19th century. Railways sprawled in all directions and more and more people travelled by train⁶.

At first – from the 1840s – railways acted mainly as newspaper distributors, offering the publishing industry a reliable way of sending goods across the nation⁷. Then, as

⁶ On this subject, see part.: J.R. KELLETT, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969; IDEM, *Railways and Victorian Cities*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979; M. FREEMAN, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999; N. DALY, *Railway Novels, Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses*, in «EHL» (Summer 1999), LXVI, 2, pp. 461-480; M. HAMMOND, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006; M. HEWITT, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain, The End of the 'Taxes on Knowledge', 1849-1869*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

⁷ *The Newspaper Train*, in «The Graphic», (May 15, 1875), with a full-page illustration by H. Johnson portraying the different stages in newspaper distribution by train.

railways began to spread and travellers to multiply, book-kiosks began to populate stations.

«Sometimes they had been started by the enterprise of local booksellers, who generally combined a display of refreshment for the body with that of food for the mind. [...] Then the railway companies began to find bookstalls a convenient means of providing occupation for men disabled, or for the widows of men killed, in their service. [...] But, as journeys lengthened and travellers multiplied, more copious literature came in demand»⁸.

Among the cultural and social reasons hidden beneath the birth of the yellow-backs, several factors should be listed. One such was that yellow-backs helped create a «surrogate landscape», to quote the words of historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch. His theory suggests that, to escape the embarrassment of prolonged and at the same time too-brief confinement and enforced proximity with strangers within the same closed compartment, reading became almost obligatory: «the traveller's gaze could then move into an imaginary surrogate landscape, that of his book»⁹. (Figure 1)

Figure 1 – Nathaniel Parker Willis, *Pictures of Society and People of Mark*, London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, [1871]

Front cover printed in colours (red, green, black) on yellow paper by Evans after Crane Melbourne, Monash University Library, YEL 810.3 W735 A6/P 1871

And that was particularly true for those travelling in second-class carriages, which were compartmentalised, so that reading became not only a way to pass the time away but also

«a surrogate for the communication that no longer took place. [...] The perusal of reading matters is an attempt to replace the conversation which is no longer possible. Fixing one's eyes on a book or a newspaper, one is able to avoid the stare of the person sitting across the aisle. The embarrassing nature of this silent situation remains largely unconscious»¹⁰.

⁸ H. MAXWELL, *Life and Times of the Right Honourable William Henry Smith, M.P.*, New Edition, Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1896, pp. 28-29. See also: J.N. ALLEN, *Railway Reading, With a Few Hints to Travellers*, in «Ainsworth's Magazine», (1853), XXIV, pp. 483-87.

⁹ W. SCHIVELBUSCH, *The Railway Journey, The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 75. See also HAMMOND 2006.

Of course, though, yellow-backs were at first expressly meant for railway travellers, a captive audience of many rush-hour commuters seeking for light, inexpensive and appealing books to read and while away the boredom of the journey. An anonymous article appeared in 1854 in *The Leisure Hour* describing the situation:

«A hundred miles or two will keep [passengers] five or six hours in the carriage, and they must have something to pass away the time. [...] The railroad has been the means of at least doubling the number of books printed and published; [...] the habit of reading in railways has created new classes of readers, and spread the taste for reading, and awakened so general a desire for the accumulation of books, that myriads of volumes are now sold elsewhere, which, but for railway reading, would not have been sold at all. [...] Looking at this new fact in a moral light, its aspect is not so pleasant as it might be, in as much as no small amount of literary rubbish travels by the rail»¹¹.

«But», the anonymous journalist continues, «we are mending in this respect of late; works of the very best class are now to be found on the railway stalls»¹².

These «works of the very best class» were the output of the entrepreneurial vision of William Henry Smith II (1825-1891) – that very same W.H. Smith that populates railways and airports nowadays.

He was the one through whom everything started, the one who saw the railway potential for his business and was able to secure exclusive sale rights for railway bookstalls – covering some 1,000 miles of track in 1848.

His first railway bookstall was opened at Euston Station in 1848.

The first of what would become 1,742 by 1902.

It should be noted that W.H. Smith, later appointed First Lord of the Admiralty under Disraeli's government (1877), was dubbed by the satirical magazine «Punch» as «Old Morality»: he succeeded in securing a virtual monopoly for his railway bookstalls because he promised to make them respectable, to clean up the stations providing suitable reading for the new public, instead of «cheap French novels of the shadiest class and mischievous trash of every description which no respectable bookseller would offer»¹³.

This intent met the more general concern that lay beneath the Great Education Bill, approved in 1870 but latently present since the late 1840s.

¹¹ *A London Railway Station*, in «The Leisure Hour», (June 29, 1854), pp. 412-414, p. 413.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ MAXWELL 1896, pp. 28-29.

The shape of the butterfly

In this peculiar railway setting, it was the cover that saved the day. It was the cover that sold the book and not, or at least not largely, its content. (Figure 2)

Figure 2 – Bret Harte, *Sensation Novels, Condensed*, London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, [1874]

Front cover printed in colours (red, orange, black) on white paper by Evans after Crane Oxford, Bodleian Library, 251 h.105

As the Very Reverend Henry Longueville Mansel described in an article of 1863: externally, these books had the shape

«of the butterfly, with a tawdry cover, ornamented with a highly-coloured picture, hung out like a signboard, to give promise of the entertainment to be had within. The picture, like the book, is generally of the sensation kind, announcing some exciting scene to follow»¹⁴.

And examples are given in detail:

«A pale young lady in a white dress, with a dagger in her hand, evidently prepared for some desperate deed; or a couple of ruffians engaged in a deadly struggle; or a Red Indian in his war-paint; or, if the plot turns on smooth instead of violent villainy, a priest persuading a dying man to sign a paper, or a disappointed heir burning a will; or a treacherous lover telling his flattering tale to some deluded maid or wife. The exigencies of railway travelling do not allow much time for examining the merits of a book before purchasing it; and keepers of bookstalls, as well as of refreshment-rooms, find an advantage in offering their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dulness of a journey. [...] Written to meet an ephemeral demand, aspiring only to an ephemeral existence, it is natural that they should have recourse to rapid and ephemeral methods of awakening the interest of their readers, striving to act as the dram or the dose, rather than as the solid food, because the effect is more immediately perceptible»¹⁵.

This, as described by Mansel, is after all the core of modern marketing strategy.

¹⁴ H.L. MANSEL, *Sensation Novels*, in «Quarterly Review», (April 1863), CXIII, pp. 483-91, reprinted in *IDEM, Letters, Lectures, and Reviews*, London: John Murray, 1873, pp. 213-52, p. 218.

¹⁵ MANSEL 1863 (1873), pp. 218-19.

Content-wise, nothing distinguished yellow-backs from books bound in cloth. Horace Mayhew's *Letters Left at the Pastrycook's*¹⁶ – conventionally taken as the first, real yellow-back ever published – was advertised as published either in wrapper (1s.) or in cloth (1s. 6d.)¹⁸. (Figure 3)

Figure 3 – Horace Mayhew, *Letters Left at the Pastrycook's*, London: Ingram, Cooke, and Co., 1852

Front cover printed in colours (red, blue) on white paper by Evans

Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Sadleir 3623 1 (yellow-back edition)

In order to maximise sales, the same book would be bound and sold in different trade bindings – bindings that steered the book towards different, diverging publics. And for each binding variant, a different marketing strategy was developed. While those on cloth – usually sold within a *Library* or *Standard Edition* series – were bought by a higher class of public that would certainly keep them after reading, yellow-backs – bound in paper or wrappers, sold as *Cheap* or *Railway Edition* series – were generally bought by commuters or lower-class readers who cared nothing about books as aesthetic products and would generally not keep them after reading.

Price One Shilling Each, in Illuminated Covers

The market advertised, defined and distinguished yellow-backs from other books, bound in cloth, using the price and details of binding alone, and never using the word «yellow-back».

Price was consequently always clearly marked on the front cover or spine, or used as a name for the series (*Shilling Library*, *Shilling Series*, *Sixpenny Volume Library*, etc.).

Price always resulted from the material features of the series the volume was part of. A book bound in paper wrappers, «sewed», could cost up to eighteen pence (1s. 6d.); had it cost more, it would have been bound in boards. The cover could be printed in one colour (the key, which was usually black, though it could also be coloured) on

¹⁶ H. MAYHEW, *Letters Left at the Pastrycook's, Being the Clandestine Correspondence between Kitty Clover at School and her 'Dear, Dear Friend' in Town*, London: Ingram, Cooke, and Co., 1852.

¹⁷ [M. SADLEIR], *Yellow-backs*, in J. CARTER, edited by, *Catalogue of an Exhibition Arranged to Illustrate New Paths in Book-collecting*, Old Court House (November 1934), London: J. & E. Bumpus, 1934, p. 25, cat. no. 7. Among the books to be considered, see also J.C. VON SCHMID, *Paulina, The Foundress of an Infant School, A Tale*, London: Darton & Co., 1850 (*Holiday Library for the Young* series cover), London, British Library, 04422.aa.9.

¹⁸ *Ingram, Cooke & Co.'s List of New Books for December*, in «The Athenaeum», (November 27, 1852), p. 1307.

coloured paper (usually in pulp, or less often tinted)¹⁹; or a colour block of the simplest kind might be added to the key block, sometimes for 6d. more²⁰; as the years passed, up to three (two plus the key) detailed colour blocks might be printed, on white or coloured paper, for the same price²¹. (Figure 4)

Figure 4 – *Beeton's Book of Jokes and Jest*s, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1866 [but 1865]

Front cover printed in colours (red, black) on white paper by Evans after Crane
Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, inv. 1866.8.244

On the other hand, books bound in paper-over-board covers, «boards», usually cost no less than two shillings, and sometimes reached half a crown (2s. 6d.); their covers were typically printed in three workings – variations of red and green, or red and blue, and the key block which could be black or coloured. The paper might be coloured in pulp, varnished, or coloured with another simple working, and sometimes ruled or patterned²². (Figure 5)

Figure 5 – [B. Hemyng], *On the Line*, London: David Bryce, [1866], reissue of [1870] by Chapman & Hall

Front cover printed in colours (red, green, black) on yellow paper by Evans after Crane
Atlanta, Emory University Library, inv. PZ3 .H45 O7 1876

The more complex the cover design, the smaller the number of colours used, cutting costs, since the printing charge was diminished by suppressing one or more workings.

¹⁹ For example, the *Smith, Elder, & Co.'s Standard Authors* series, which had a front cover printed in only one working (black key on orange paper), cost 1s.: MISS URQUHART, *The Heiress of the Blackburnfoot, A Tale of Rural Scottish Life*, London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1866, Oxford, Bodleian Library, 256 f.733.

²⁰ The *Blackwood's London Library* series had for example a front cover printed in two workings (one of which was the black key, with an additional red one for the darker areas on orange paper) and cost 1s. 6d.: G. FERRY, *The Cavaliers and Free-lances of New Spain*, London: J. Blackwood, [1857], Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Sadleir 3447 21. Books included in the *Books to Amuse and Interest* series had a front cover printed in red and black (key) on white paper and cost 1s. (*Beeton's Book of Jokes and Jest*s, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1866 [but 1865, with S.O. Beeton on front cover], Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, inv. 1866.8.244).

²¹ For example, books included in the *Chapman & Hall's Standard Authors* series had a front cover printed in red, green and the black key on white paper and cost 1s. ([B. HEMYNG], *On the Line, or, Tales of the Royal Mail, by a Railway Guard*, London: David Bryce, [1866], reissue of [1870] by Chapman & Hall, Atlanta, Emory University Library, inv. PZ3 .H45 O7 1876).

²² For example, the *New Works for Railway and Home Reading* series, which had a front cover printed in red, green and the black key on orange paper, varnished, cost 2s. 6d.: J. PAYN, *Lost Sir Massingberd*, London: Sampson, Low, Son, and Marston, 1865, London, British Library, C.193.a.204.

A book in boards could cost 1s. only if it had an editorial cover repeated identical for the whole series (only varying in title and author)²³, or if it was of smaller format and printed in no more than two workings, as was *The National Song Book*, sold in boards at 1s. with two workings (red and black key on yellow paper) and in 24mo²⁴.

It must never be forgotten how closely the price of each copy was related to the printing technique and the number of colours used.

It was obviously not the engraver's sensibility which determined the quantity of blocks used or the refinement of the engravings. It was the agreement between the engraver and the publisher which established whether a cover, or an illustration, had to be printed in two, three, or ten workings.

In Routledge and Kegan Paul Archive there is a price list for the printer Edmund Evans's work dated March 24, 1868: for covers in two workings, the minimum print run was 3,000; for covers in three workings, the minimum was 1,000²⁵. In this latter case, a print run of

1,000 or 2,000 copies cost 10s. each 1,000 copies
3,000 copies cost 7s. each 1,000 copies
4,000 copies cost 5s. 6d. each 1,000 copies
6,000 copies cost 4s. each 1,000 copies
10,000 copies cost 2s. 6d. each 1,000 copies.

The best return, in terms of colour, came from paper coloured in pulp, dyed, or varnished, used both as an additional tint and to prevent paper soiling.

At first, they printed on thick white paper, then the trade required a toned paper so that the covers should not soil too readily, and yellow enamelled paper was used.

For the same reason, the key could be coloured instead of black, a thing that allowed the publisher to obtain the most from workings.

Sometimes the production was so hasty, and the costs had to be so low, that the printer did not commission a specific drawing for a yellow-back. Instead, he would recycle black and white illustrations produced for magazines or as frontispieces for clothbound books, as was the case with the full-page illustrations drawn by John

²³ The *Holiday Library for the Young* series, which had the same design for every title in the series, was advertised in «The Publishers' Circular», (January 15, 1850), p. 33: «Price One Shilling Each, in Illuminated Covers; or 1s. 6d. in Morocco Cloth».

²⁴ J.E. CARPENTER, *The National Song Book*, London: Routledge, Warne, & Routledge, 1864, Oxford, Bodleian Library, 280 m.164.

²⁵ Routledge and Kegan Paul Archive, University College London (now deposited at the National Archives, Kew), RKP.1, f. 318.

Everett Millais and engraved by the Dalziel Brothers for the monthly instalments of Trollope's *Orley Farm*²⁶, reused on the front cover of a yellow-back which had no relation at all to the original text²⁷.

But normally, the best artists in town would be hired and were asked to supply drawings especially designed for yellow-back front covers.

It is in these cases that marketing philosophy emerges more prominently. Documents give details about the ways the segments of text to be illustrated were selected, as in a letter where the engraver asks his illustrator to «make [the drawing] as interesting as possible – even if you exaggerate – the publishers are anxious to have a good cover for this. If you can find a more telling subject do it»²⁸. Or in another letter where the engraver asks his illustrator to «Introduce some pretty girls!»²⁹. Or, again, one where the engraver asks his illustrator to select a scene

«to be taken from the play now performing at the Olympic, will you run through the book and then see the play and do a scene from the play that is also in the book [...] I have to submit a sketch before it is drawn on wood [...] I will pay you for all this extra»³⁰.

Truly, the cover acted as a butterfly.

An increasing demand

The figures are impressive. George Routledge and Sons launched their Railway Library in 1848 – the same year as W.H. Smith's first bookstall at Euston Station – and this series alone listed more than 1,200 titles by 1899. Routledge had a dozen other series, among which a *Popular Library of Non-fiction Works*, a *Books for the Country Series* (1852-1899), a *Cheap Series*, a *Shilling Novels* – in all over 500 titles.

The same goes for Chapman & Hall, with its *Select Library of Fiction*, subsequently acquired by Ward & Lock, which reached 1,000 titles.

²⁶ A. TROLLOPE, *Orley Farm, With Illustrations by J.E. Millais*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1862, Vol. I, p. 18, London, British Library, C.190.e.15.

²⁷ D.M. MULOCK CRAIK, *The Ogilvies*, London: Chapman and Hall, [1879], Atlanta, Emory University Library, PZ3 .C68 O35 1880.

²⁸ Letter from Edmund Evans to Walter Crane, dated June 9, 1864, Manchester, John Rylands University Library, WCA/2/2/2, ff. 1-2.

²⁹ Letter from Edmund Evans to Walter Crane, undated [1868], Manchester, John Rylands University Library, WCA/2/2/2, ff. 2-5, with reference to *Routledge's Handbook of Conjuring*, London: George Routledge and Sons, 1868, Oxford, Bodleian Library, 268 c.54.

³⁰ Letter from Edmund Evans to Walter Crane, dated October 8, 1866, Manchester, John Rylands University Library, WCA/2/2/1, f. 62, with reference to A.M. HALL, *The Whiteboy*, London: Chapman and Hall, [1866] (reissue of [1884]), Oxford, Bodleian Library, 254390 e.1.

Each title had a standard print run between 2,000 and 6,000 copies at one time but it could reach and even surpass 20,000³¹.

It is difficult to tell how many titles were actually published in each series: some of them had already been published in other series, others were duplicated in other series, some series merged into others, only a select list of titles being included in the listing and their numbering continuously changed.

It is therefore tricky to state the exact number of books published, let alone the number of reissues – impressively high – and this opens the field to interesting new methodologies and research avenues, though we are not going to talk about that at this venue.

They were usually reprinted without interruption for many years, recycling the same stereotyped text and sometimes changing the cover design or series name or number. For example, *Common Shells of the Sea-Shore* was issued several times by the same publisher with changes only in paper colour and this specific detail turns out to be the only evidence for dating one issue: the title was first issued by Warne in 1865, in a cover printed on pink paper³²; it was then issued again in 1869, on blue paper³³, and then again, in 1873, on yellow paper³⁴. (Figures 6-8)

Figure 6 – J.G. Wood, *The Common Shells of the Sea-Shore*, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1865

Front cover printed in colours (red, blue, dark blue) on pink paper by Evans after Crane Oxford, Bodleian Library, 189 g.133

Figure 7 – J.G. Wood, *The Common Shells of the Sea-Shore*, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1869

Front cover printed in colours (red, blue, black) on blue paper by Evans after Crane private collection.

Figure 8 – J.G. Wood, *The Common Shells of the Sea-Shore*, London: Frederick Warne & Co., [1873]

Front cover printed in colours (red, blue, black) on yellow paper by Evans after Crane Oxford, Bodleian Library, Johnson f.311

³¹ See documents in the Routledge and Kegan Paul Archive, University College London (now deposited at the National Archives, Kew), RKP.8, f. 381.

³² REV. J.G. WOOD, *The Common Shells of the Sea-Shore*, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1865, Oxford, Bodleian Library, 189 g.133.

³³ IDEM, London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1869, private collection.

³⁴ IDEM, London: Frederick Warne & Co., [1873], Oxford, Bodleian Library, Johnson f.311.

On the other hand, the same cover was being used for several titles, as the moonlight landscape used at first for *Castle of Ehrenstein*³⁵, and then again for *Pilgrims of the Rhine*³⁶; or, the same cover might be used for the whole series, thus greatly increasing the readers' loyalty³⁷.

«These covers attracted the public taste so much at that time that publishers frequently gave orders for an illustrated cover for a remnant they had in stock, and not only were they able to sell off the remnant by this means, but often a reprint was demanded»³⁸.

The demand was so high that W.H. Smith had his work cut out to provide enough books for sale in his bookstalls.

Curiously enough, «it had always been one of Smith's rules not to have the smallest property in any publication [...] [so as] to deal impartially with every publishing house [...]. But a time came when the supply of bookstall literature ran low»³⁹. As a consequence, Smith's manager and head of the book department, Mr Jabez Sandifer (1823c.-1887)⁴⁰, was commissioned to buy up old copyrights [...], to buy paper, contract(s) for printing, to receive designs for covers and «in short, [to] undertake all necessary steps in setting out on a heavy publishing venture. [...] BUT these books were issued by arrangement with Messrs. Chapman and Hall, whose names, and not that of Smith & Son, appeared on the titles»⁴¹. Smith's advertisements usually appeared, all the same, on endpapers and pastedowns and his name was sometimes recorded as that of the printer on the last page of text⁴².

Hachette's *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer*

³⁵ G. PAYNE RAINSFORD, *The Castle of Ehrenstein*, London: George Routledge & Sons, [1864], Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Sadleir 3600 9.

³⁶ E. BULWER LYTTON, *The Pilgrims of the Rhine*, London: George Routledge & Sons, 1866, Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Sadleir 3460a 2.

³⁷ For example, the same cover design – engraved and printed by Edmund Evans after a drawing by John Gilbert now at Manchester City Gallery (1947.286/63b) – was used for many titles of the series, such as J.F. COOPER, *The Last of the Mohicans*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1854, Los Angeles, Charles E. Young Research Library, Sadleir 3489 8; IDEM, *The Pioneers*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1854, *ivi*, Sadleir 3489 13; IDEM, *Oak Openings*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1855, *ivi*, Sadleir 3489 10; IDEM, *Deer Slayer*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1855, *ivi*, Sadleir 3489 3a; IDEM, *Satanstoe*, London: George Routledge and Co., 1856, *ivi*, Sadleir 3489 14.

³⁸ H.M. CUNDALL, *Birket Foster, R.W.S.*, London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1906, p. 65.

³⁹ MAXWELL 1896, p. 52.

⁴⁰ *Feb. 15*, «The Bookseller», (March 4, 1887), p. 239.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² This happened, for example, in MRS. M. CALDWELL, *Emilia Wyndham*, London: Chapman and Hall, [1864] (reissue of 1872), Atlanta, Emory University Library, uncatalogued.

At the very beginning, this editorial format was uniquely and intrinsically British – a true creation of Victorian times.

But as soon as they were put on sale, such editions became a European phenomenon. W.H. Smith's first bookstall opened at Euston Station in 1848.

In 1851 Louis Hachette went to London by train to visit the Great Exhibition and found what W.H. Smith had been doing with railway bookstalls.

Hachette followed Smith's example and exported it to France. In May 1852, the Compagnie du Nord accepted Hachette's proposal and he received permission to install his own network of bookstores and newspaper-stands in every railway station owned by the company network.

Hachette's first bookstall opened at the Gare de Lyon in 1852, and the number grew to 1,179 by 1896, all selling his volumes from the brand-new series the *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer*.

Documents at the Archives Nationales explicitly state that Hachette asked to be allowed to sell «tous les Ouvrages soumis au Colportage»⁴³.

And so it did. The *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer* had seven different series, each identified with a different colour for the paper wrappers: 1re série, *Guides de Voyageurs*, in scarlet red covers; 2e série, *Histoire et voyages*, in a green cover; 3e série, *Littérature Française*, mustard; 4e série, *Littératures Anciennes et Étrangères*, yellow; 6e série, *Livres Illustrés pour les Enfants*, also known as the *Bibliothèque Rose*, established in 1856 and aimed at children, with pink covers; 7e série, *Ouvrages Divers*, beige.

All the same, yellow-backs and books from the *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer* had a radical difference: the *Bibliothèque* had plain typographical covers, deeply linked to its national ancestors, such as the *Bibliothèque Charpentier*, while yellow-backs had, from the very beginning, coloured and illustrated covers.

But colour it is that identifies and boosts the identity of this brand-new genre. With Hachette's *Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer* each colour identified the subject and embodied the genre – in the same way as would happen in Italy a century afterwards with the *libri gialli* (an Italian term that became synonymous with detective or mystery or crime stories).

⁴³ Paris, Archives Nationales, F 17/2681: *Rapport au Conseil d'Administration du Cercle de la Librairie et de l'Imprimerie, par la Commission nommée pour l'examen de la question concernant l'Établissement de Magasins de Librairie dans les Gares*. More work should be done on this topic, particularly on some archival documents at the Archives Nationales in Paris (*Ivi*, 148 AQ: *Dépôt de la Librairie Hachette*). See E. PARINET, *Les Bibliothèques de Gare, Un Nouveau Réseau pour le Livre*, in «Romantisme», (1993), LXXX, pp. 95-106; J. MISTIER, *La Librairie Hachette, de 1826 à nos jours*, Paris, Hachette, 1964, part. pp. 122-136, 297-323.

In the yellow-back case, the colour identified the editorial genre and distribution channels rather than the literary genre. But the yellow colour remained as a symbol, despite W.H. Smith's positive efforts at cleaning up stations and giving the new reading public suitable reading material.

The yellow of yellow-backs still identified the cheap, sensational, disreputable «literary rubbish that travels by the rail», so much that, when Bram Stoker published his *Dracula*, in 1897, it was deliberately bound in yellow with the one-word title in simple red lettering⁴⁴.

The book was bound in cloth, yellow cloth, and cost 6s.

It was not a cheap book for popular reading at all, but the colour was chosen on purpose, as it was synonymous with the more transgressive elements of Victorian culture.

⁴⁴ B. STOKER, *Dracula*, London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897, London, British Library, Cup.410.f.718.