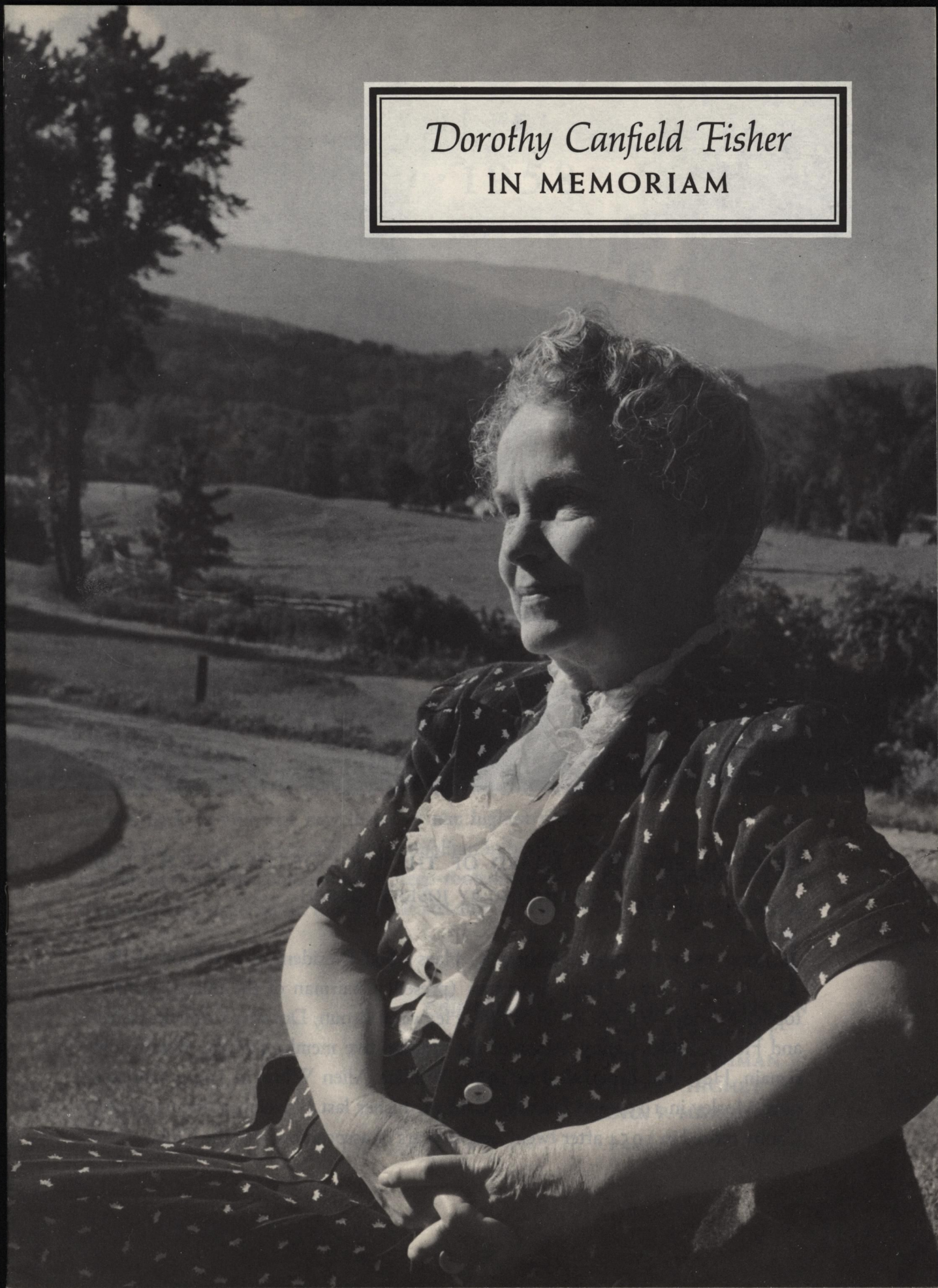


Dorothy Canfield Fisher
IN MEMORIAM





ORIGINAL EDITORIAL BOARD OF THE BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB
A PAINTING BY JOSEPH HIRSCH

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Robert K. Haas (first President of the Book-of-the-Month Club), Harry Scherman (present Chairman of the Board), Christopher Morley, William Allen White, Heywood Broun, Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Henry Seidel Canby. None of the original five members of the Board now remain. Heywood Broun died in 1939, William Allen White in 1944, Christopher Morley in 1957 and Dorothy Canfield Fisher last November. Henry Seidel Canby retired in 1954 after twenty-eight years of association with the Club.

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER 1879 · 1958

SHE DIED on November 9 in the little town of Arlington, Vermont, where so many Canfields lie in peace. She was 79; and those many years were richly and beautifully lived. In the course of them she had won for herself high reputation in many fields: as novelist, short-story writer, essayist, historian, writer of books for the young; as translator, lecturer, and interpreter of the Vermont tradition; as educational philosopher and as a member of Vermont's State Board of Education. For a quarter of a century, from the year of its founding, she served as a member of the editorial board of the Book-of-the-Month Club. When in 1951 she retired, only her colleagues could estimate how much her independent judgment, rigorous standards and broad scholarship had contributed to the Club's healthy growth. ☞ But when we of the Club think of her it is not her many achievements that we recall, nor the honors and distinctions that quite properly came her way. Other Americans have achieved as much and won for themselves equally respectful obituaries. But this does not necessarily mean that they will be remembered in quite the same way that Dorothy Canfield will be. For she was more than an American of great ability. She was one of the rarest and purest character. In her completely unself-conscious integrity, her courage, her humor and her practical good sense (the last almost always used to help other human beings) she harked back to and lent new luster to our highest pioneer traditions. ☞ A confirmed Vermonter, she was also a cosmopolitan in both space and time. All who knew her felt at once this combination of deep-rootedness and broad humanity; and felt themselves the larger for it. Her death leaves our country poorer. Her life enriched it.

Editorial Board: JOHN MASON BROWN
BASIL DAVENPORT
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GILBERT HIGHET
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AN ANNUAL MEMORIAL AWARD

ALL HER LIFE, from her girlhood to her last days, one of the deepest concerns of Dorothy Canfield Fisher was the wider and ever wider dissemination of books. That was the reason she associated herself with the Book-of-the-Month Club at its inception in 1926 and why her work on our Editorial Board became, next to writing, the most absorbing activity of her life for a quarter of a century. In discussing how we might set up a lasting memorial to this beloved friend and associate, we felt that it would be most representative if it could take the form, in some way, of books. Accordingly, it has been decided that an annual DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER LIBRARY AWARD will be made by the Book-of-the-Month Club, with the advice and co-operation of the American Library Association. The Awards will be made, one a year, to libraries in small communities, where it is usually not easy to raise money to equip a library properly. The Awards will be in the sum of \$5000 each, in the form of requested books. They will continue to be given over a period at present undetermined, but at the least for five years. The first one will be made to the library in Arlington, Vermont, where Mrs. Fisher lived most of her life. Thereafter, they will go to other libraries selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club with the advice of the American Library Association. . . . There is nothing her friends at the Book-of-the-Month Club could do, we feel sure, that would have pleased Dorothy Canfield Fisher more than this expression of their devotion to her. This sort of thing would have delighted her inmost being, just the doing of it, unconnected with her name or any other; but there is no possible name such Awards could be more fittingly associated with than that of Dorothy Canfield Fisher. That name will be on a bookplate, the first thing each reader sees, in every book.

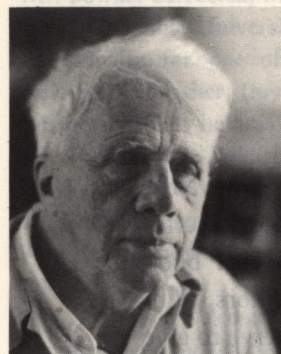
Harry Scherman

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

Meredith Wood

PRESIDENT

DECEMBER 1, 1958



FROM ROBERT FROST

DOROTHY CANFIELD was the great lady of Vermont just as someone else we all admire might be called the great lady of the United States. But there was more to it than just that. It was as a great storyteller with a book called *Hillsboro People* that I was introduced to her by her publisher, Alfred Harcourt, who was then my publisher too. There was nothing she was happier in than storytelling in prose and speech unless it was doing good to everybody and anybody. She came from all directions from as far West as Kansas and from as far East as France. She was brought up by a nomadic mother who pursued the practice of art in Paris and New York. I believe she won her doctorate in Old French at Columbia University. But everything that ever happened or occurred to her converged as into a napkin ring and came out wide on the other side of it Vermontly. I don't know whether she realized it or not, but even the Basques she lived with and wrote about read to me like Vermonters. The people of her witchcraft story among the Basques might well be Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys. ☞ Her benefactions weren't restricted to Vermont (I consider her work with the Book-of-the-Month Club one of them). But of course they were most intimately felt there all up and down the state. She made it a welfare state. I remember her remarking that the Puritan word Commonwealth meant exactly the same thing. Her great good nature kept her from thinking too hard about doctrines, though she was plainly proud of a Vermont ancestry, Episcopalian, among the other sects non-conformist that came up from Connecticut and Rhode Island to settle the state. ☞ Alfred Harcourt brought our families together from a notion he had that the White Mountains we lived in were neighborly to the Green Mountains she lived in. Many are our family obligations to her. She is often in our thoughts. Only the other day my granddaughter fresh from college asked me about her young resolution to devote her life to doing good. I used a parable to make it out better to do well. She was unconvinced. Hers was the last word: "Wouldn't it be enough of an ideal to do good well—like Dorothy Canfield?"

BOOK-CLUBS

by Dorothy Canfield Fisher

[THIS WAS A Richard Rogers Bowker Memorial Lecture delivered by Mrs. Fisher at the New York Public Library in 1947. It was the eleventh in a series established at the Library "as an aid and stimulus to the study of book publishing in the United States and the problems common to authors, publishers, librarians, readers, all makers and users of books." It will serve to give readers, in her own words, some indication of how Dorothy Canfield Fisher felt about her work at the Book-of-the-Month Club, and also about her early and long devotion to public libraries. A few deletions in the original, largely factual information now out of date, have been made for reasons of space.]

THERE ARE TWO perfectly good reasons why I should not be standing here today, and since they have a bearing on what I am going to say, it may be worth while to tell you about them.

The first reason for my not accepting an invitation to speak about book-clubs is that I don't know much about them. How would I? Suppose you asked a professor of Latin—or physics—at Harvard, to give an address about American universities. His only honest response would be that he knows very little about them, beyond the teaching of Latin—or physics—at Harvard. My connection with the wildly complex field of book-clubs in the U. S. A. in 1947 is about as partial. I read and report on books for one of them, and have for more than twenty years. But as to the varying programs of organization and financing and publicity of that one book-club, I know as much as that professor of Latin knows about the various methods of heating and lighting the campus, of the way the financial advisors of the Board of Trustees have managed the investments of the university. . . .

And yet it would be a foolishness to say that I know no more about the subject than somebody who has not been intimately connected with it. All I want to say in this connection is "Don't expect too much of me." I'll give you as complete a picture as I can, but it will show only what is visible from one corner of the big enterprise.

The second of the good reasons for my not accepting the very interesting invitation to speak here

is a personal one. Like most people in their later sixties, I find myself compelled by limitations of strength and vitality—also by the doctor's orders—to simplify my life and cut out part of the over-strenuous program which most people in their middle years take on. For a writer the simplest thing to cut out of course is speaking in public. That's not one's business, after all.

So I have cut that out. I practically never speak in public any more, although I like to. The reason why I am here today, the reason why I felt it impossible to give up the pleasure of accepting this invitation to be one of the speakers on the Bowker Foundation is precisely because of that name. I have a sort of family connection with Mr. Bowker which I would like to tell you about, as a commentary on the cliché about the instability of American life.

MYSELF had known Mr. Bowker—was there anybody in the literary and publishing world who did not know and admire him!—as long as I could remember. But I did not realize that his connection with my family was much longer than my memory, until one day he said to me, "I am now correcting proof for the fourth generation of the Canfield family."

Seeing me astonished, he explained that as a lad, learning the printer's trade, he had corrected proof for my grandfather, who was a New York clergyman, as articulate both in speech and in writing as all the Canfields seem to be. After my grandfather's retirement it was copy of my father's which

Mr. Bowker corrected, when my father was Librarian at Columbia University. Later, it was copy for me. Finally for one of my nephews, who has followed his father (my brother) into the paper business. When he was given the job of writing advertising for *Publishers' Weekly*, and Mr. Bowker began to correct proof on these papers too, he realized that he had corrected proof for one American family through four generations. . . .

IT IS WITH the second of those four generations mentioned by Mr. Bowker, my father, Dr. James Hulme Canfield of Columbia, that the impassioned Canfield interest in libraries and other means of distributing books to the citizens of a democracy began. If you think it is a little odd for anyone as old as I, to begin back in my father's time some remarks about book-clubs when it is perfectly evident that he, dying forty years ago, never heard of such a thing, you can just count yourself lucky that I don't begin, as most Vermonters would feel it necessary to, with my grandfather.

My father graduated from Williams College in 1868. That was in the midst of the post-Civil War expansion in our country. It was expansion in every direction—geographical, educational, economic, and cultural. Into this boiling cauldron of aspirations towards an America bigger and better in every way, my father took an ardent flying leap—and never got out of it till his death.

His particular special interest in all these aspirations was the educational aspect—the improvement of the quality of the citizens of this huge, growing democracy. He went from Williams out to the West, became a professor in one state university, Chancellor in another, President of the third, and finally returned to his native city of New York, to spend the last ten years of his life as Librarian at Columbia. There was an inner meaning in this life-graph. The development from college president to librarian was a logical one.

During his work in one or another state university he put his faith in educational opportunity, and threw himself with all his ardor—he had a great deal—into leading the fight for educational opportunities for all, which he used sometimes to express in the phrase, as radical and revolutionary then as it is threadbare with familiarity now, "An open road for every citizen from the kindergarten through the Ph.D."

By the time he was fifty-six he saw this principle

practically accepted in those Western states that had state universities. That crusade had succeeded. Then he turned his eager spirit toward the cause of public libraries. "What's the use of having an educated population," he used to say, "if books are not provided for them all to use?" . . .

I was in my late 'teens when my father began his ten years' of preaching more and better libraries. I often went with him on those never-ending lecture tours of his—perhaps some of the older people here have heard him speak. He accepted, up to his strength, any invitation which came to him, and no matter what the subject given him he always ended by talking about the need for libraries of all kinds in a big democracy. Probably very few of you here can possibly realize what a lot of pioneer work had to be done to get this principle, now an axiom, accepted. I couldn't count the number of times I heard my father arguing eloquently on this point. I was very familiar with the picture in his mind—a well-supported public library in every town, with a branch in every part of the town, all doors wide open to American citizens. For him, the unquestioned corollary of those open doors was of course a stream of American citizens marching up the steps to take advantage of the wisdom, art and knowledge of the ages thus laid before them.

MY FATHER died in 1909, before Douglas Waples, whose distinguished name is familiar to you specialists in the library world, began those devastatingly accurate researches of his as to which books in the public library are actually taken out and read by the American citizenry. In fact I think it was after my father's death that the American Library Association first began to print figures on the circulation of books per capita in American cities and towns. The earlier, pioneer generation of workers for public libraries would have been shocked by that figure alone, showing how small a percentage of Americans, compared to the total population of literate men and women, use the public library. I don't need to give any of those figures to such an audience as this. You know how they range from two books per year per inhabitant of New York City—isn't that correct?—to what is considered a very high of six or seven or eight books per year per person in especially enlightened and civilized communities.

That's not brilliant; but even so, until Dr. Waples' grimly realistic research work, a rosy haze

hung softeningly over those figures. People interested in advancing the cause of civilization in the United States thought—I've heard them think this aloud a good many times—"Well, now, six or seven carefully chosen, substantial books read every year—that's not too bad." They were evidently bringing to mind which six or seven books they themselves would choose to read studiously and attentively, if they were to be limited to a few.

Then came Dr. Waples' bulletins of information to the general effect—which you all know—that the relatively-speaking small number of books in public libraries read by American citizens, were not spread over the whole community, but were concentrated in a relatively-speaking very small percentage of the population. Of this small percentage, a large percentage was made up of children reading juvenile books. . . .

AS THESE dismayed facts were brought out, they troubled me so deeply that I was almost glad my dear father was not here to see such an unexpected turn in the road he was so happy to have his share in opening. I was not the only one thus dismayed in the world of authors and publishers which, instead of universities and libraries, became the background of my life as a writer.

I soon found that publishers are as much interested in the problem of getting books into the hands of American readers, as librarians or educators. If we believe in the profit motive as the real mainspring of human activity, probably a good deal more so. I remember my first publisher, old Mr. Henry Holt, standing toe-to-toe with this baffling mystery of why literate Americans don't read books as Danes and Germans and other literate modern peoples do, and slugging it out, year after year, with various publishing devices. He was, at first, absolutely certain that the reason why Americans did not read more was because books cost too much in this country. This theory in fact has been the first obvious one to be held by most intelligent and conscientious men who go into the publishing business. Not only Mr. Holt but many and many other publishers have tried to solve the problem by presenting cheaper books to the American public. The names of some of these may come readily to your minds. Yet compared to the total number of the population of the United States the numbers of these books were still negligible, twenty years ago. If it had not been for those disconcerting

figures about the numbers of books read in other modern civilized countries, we might have thought this inevitable—inherent in human nature. But the figures seemed to show that it was, to speak unscientifically, considerably more inherent in U. S. A. human nature than elsewhere.

S CAPEGOATS were looked for, as always when something runs badly. Everyone here probably remembers the years when the teaching of English in the high schools was blamed for the situation. It was said that high school English classes forced young people to read so-called classics far beyond their interest, till they hated the sight of a book. Or else that high school teachers of English were so dull and literal that they took the life out of all books they touched.

Librarians were another scapegoat often presented as an explanation. People came into the children's room of a library, finding it humming with sunny, enchanted interest in books shown by the children swarming around the pleasant, smiling librarian. My father's generation had seen that enchanting spectacle. What could they think save that as those children grew older they would as a matter of course swarm in exactly such a sunny, active interest in books into the adult part of the library? Yes, I am rather glad my father did not live to see the strange difference between the happily animated children's room in an ordinary public library and the adult lending room, usually silent and without life, save for a few elderly people slipping in and out, speaking in hushed voices. . . .

As far as I can make out, and I am an outside observer, quite disinterested, both teachers of English and librarians are working their heads off trying to improve the situation. Both professions are poorly paid for highly skillful professional work which they do with all their hearts. Wherever I go, in this country, I always step into the local public library, taking its condition as more or less an indication of the more or less civilized plane of living of the community. I never tell the librarian that I have a special interest in the world of books. I just say that I am a visitor in town, and would like to see the library.

What I see on these observation visits is, to me, touching, at times touching almost to the point of tears. I have never encountered a librarian who wasn't instantly electrified, nervously so, at times, comforted, encouraged, and startled that any ordi-

nary person should take an interest in her library. I am shown everything there is to see. I am told the same story, of too much work for the few workers to do, of the sad realization of how vastly more could be done with a larger, better paid, better trained staff. There are projects to make the library more useful to the community at large—if only the community would wake up to the possibilities and provide a little more of the financial and moral support needed. The few (relative again to the total population of the town) borrowers of books who come in are, in my observation, eagerly served, treated like honored guests.

CUTTING DOWN ON SALT

Suppose a family's budget for food looked like this:

Meat, per month . . .	\$12.00
Milk, per month . . .	5.00
Groceries, per month . .	35.00
Salt, per month10

WHAT would you think of the brains of the head of the house if he said, "Strict economy being necessary, let us cut down on salt"? But to cut down on the relatively tiny amounts a community spends on its public library service is to cut down on the intellectual salt which gives savor to most of life; which brings out the flavor and meaning of many of life's happenings; which, especially in times of material hardship and privation, can do more than any other one factor to make life palatable. Don't cut the salt out of your budget!

* * *

A statement by Mrs. Fisher written for and distributed by the ALA in 1933, when contributions to libraries were at their lowest ebb.

TO MAKE the library profession a scapegoat for the use of few books of decent quality by our total population, is shockingly unjust. It is relevant here only because all of this gives the background of deep concern about the necessity for a wider distribution of books among the citizens of a democracy, which had been in my mind, all my life long, when twenty-two years ago I received a letter from a New York office signed by two names I had never seen before. The letter described the workings of a book-club—an organization of which until that moment I had never heard in my life. I was asked to be on a committee of selection, the other members of which were Henry Canby, an old friend of mine, William Allen White, a former student of my father's, Christopher Morley, everybody's friend, and Heywood Brown, whom I had known from the time he had been a high school boy at the Horace Mann School. The idea of distributing books through a book-club was to be tried out. Would I accept membership on the Committee of Selection?

There seemed to me to be a good many reasons for not accepting membership. I live and very happily in Vermont, in a remote green valley from which the communications to New York are difficult and inconvenient. My life was crammed with all sorts of activities and interests, my writing, my family, public speaking, all sorts of good causes. Anyhow I didn't like the name very well—The Book-of-the-Month Club. As if there could be a book of the month which would suit all readers. It sounded to me (as it has sounded to many another person since) as though there were something presumptuous in the idea of assuming to choose other people's reading for them.

On the other hand it was frankly an experiment. The door was left wide open for escape in all directions for everybody concerned, in case the experiment didn't go well. I asked for time to consider the matter, and went on about my business with this new and unexpected question in the back of my mind.

In the midst of that period of waiting till I could decide what I thought of the idea, I had occasion to come to New York to do some shopping. It was a Saturday afternoon on a fine clear day in spring. Not realizing what this would mean for the shopping industry, I got myself transported to Macy's, stepped inside and asked for the counter where sheets and pillow cases were being sold—that being

my prosaic errand. The big shop was alarmingly (to my eyes) crammed with milling crowds of bargain-crazed women. There must have been some sort of a bargain sale going on in the sheet and pillow case department, for a frenzy of the purchasing mania surged five or six deep around the counter where I wanted to go. I was literally afraid to risk my small person amongst them. I gave it up, decided to send by mail for what I needed, and made my way, very precariously, to a door through wildly swirling eddies of impassioned shoppers.

OUT on the sidewalk, the situation was no better. It was the first warm spring afternoon in New York, and everybody was out. I crept along as best I could, hugging the side of the building closely, turned at 34th Street, found the crowd just as great there, and when I reached Fifth Avenue, stopped, really thunder-struck. For Fifth Avenue was by far the most crowded of them all. The sidewalks were full, crammed with human beings to the curb, the street itself was full of automobiles, bumper to bumper. One could have walked without falling, from roof to roof of the automobiles, and from head to head of the people on the sidewalk.

A bus came along — this was in the days of the double-decker buses on Fifth Avenue. The seats on its high open roof looked to me as a floating henhouse would look to a person swept away by a flood. I struggled across the street and up the steps of the bus to the top, sank down in a seat and from this safety looked up and down on that thoroughfare of commerce. For a Vermonter, to see, as far as the eye could reach, nothing but people closely packed together, all of them bent on either buying or selling, was startling.

I sat there, safe from the crowd, looking down on that throng of rushers-along and remembering an elderly Vermonter on a visit to Boston, taken to see the crowded center of that city. He gazed long at the Niagara of humanity pouring past him on the streets, on the sidewalks, and finally said, "Don't anybody ever try to tell me all those people know where they're going." He would not say that here, I thought, for everybody knows exactly where all such people as those around me are going — they are going either to sell something or to buy something. "No wonder," I said to myself, "that businesses try to get themselves established

in New York. This must be now the greatest buying and selling center of the whole world. You could sell *anything*, with so many buyers stepping on each other's heels."

AFTER a few blocks, I remembered that my daughter, then in college, had asked me to buy a Spanish dictionary for her. Brentano's was in the neighborhood. I decided to stop there as we passed, buy the dictionary and have it sent. I saw the familiar bookstore front show up; I rang the bell, climbed down the steps; fought my way across the street between the crowding automobiles; fought my way across the sidewalk between the crowding people; flung myself on the swinging door — and found myself in a slumberously peaceful atmosphere like that of a remote country churchyard on a sleepy summer afternoon.

I had been wrong in thinking that you could sell anything here. Not books. Piles of beautiful new books lay on the counters. Sedate salespeople stood behind these piles. The silence was exquisite. The impression of passive repose was like a spell. A dignified person approached me asking if he could be of use to me. In a hushed voice I inquired where the dictionaries were. He motioned me courteously up the steps to the mezzanine. When I arrived on that floor, I found that I was the only customer visible.

Well, I went home to Vermont and wrote an acceptance to the people who were trying to organize a new method of selling books — the mail-order method, which had worked well in other fields. It looked as though it would be worth while to try almost any other possible method, in addition to the methods then in use, to distribute more books to the American reading public. It began to be obvious to the eye that the generation to which my father and Melvil Dewey belonged, had made a grave miscalculation, not about libraries and books but about human nature. They had assumed a spontaneous, lasting, continuous interest in books and intellectual life, which doesn't seem to exist, any more than a spontaneous interest in being good seems to animate human nature. They had assumed that to have books freely accessible would be enough. Evidently the distribution of books of decent quality to an adequate percentage of our population is a wheel which can't be rolled forward and up hill, unless all kinds of shoulders are set to it with determination and much ingenuity.

Now that I have got myself and you inside the Book-of-the-Month Club office, perhaps the next step is to tell you how that organization runs.

It has been a matter of tentative exploration, because the work was entirely new to all of us, to the literary members of the Committee of Selection as well as to the business men trying to invent new forms of business organization to fit an undertaking which cannot be run in harmony with any of the mass-production systems, since each single person whose name is on the list of readers must be taken care of separately, in accord with his personal wishes.

I WAS really disconcerted at that first meeting by our total ignorance of what the American reading public will read. All five of us had been in active literary work all our lives, yet we found we had only the dimmest notion of the tastes of the bigger American reading public, and that dim notion turned out to be quite inaccurate. You may be interested to know that, making a few fumbling attempts at prediction, we all thought that it might be possible to send out, in addition to plenty of readable and agreeable novels, perhaps one or two non-fiction books a year. Our guess — at that first meeting — was also that it would certainly be necessary to send out a number of detective stories every year, or the reading public would turn away.

That's all we knew! The fact is that the non-fiction books selected are as numerous as the novels, and in many years more numerous. . . .

I won't tell you anything more about the beginnings or give you any history of the developments of the administration of the organization, because we haven't time today, and anyhow this detailed story of pathfinding by trial and error probably wouldn't be very interesting to you. . . . I can't tell you about the business end of the enterprise except that it must have been very well run indeed to have survived and grown as much as it has.

FROM the very first meeting, we were told by Mr. Scherman and Mr. Haas, then a partner, now at Random House, that what was asked of us literary people, was a purely literary effort. We were to put our heads together to try to agree on which book of all those we had read in the month preceding the meeting, we had liked and

enjoyed most. We were not to try to guess which book the reading public would like — because that has proved to be a sphinx-question to which no Oedipus has ever found the answer. But here we were, five very differing American readers, with all kinds of special interests, with widely differing personalities. If there were some book or books which struck us all as superior to the others, there was a reasonable chance that the book would strike other readers as superior.

The part which we five members of the Committee of Selection play has always been the same — we read the books and give our opinions of them.

But of course not all the books. We would have dropped by the wayside long ago if we had tried that. There is a very large corps of readers of many different kinds, who read the books first. They perform two necessary functions. First, to keep the judges from having to read too many books. Second, to guard against overlooking any that the judges ought to see.

To perform these two functions, there are five full-time preliminary readers on our staff, working in the office, and — depending on the influx of books — from fifteen to twenty outside readers. Most books are read by two or three readers originally, and as far as possible this is done in the office, because these are our best readers.

THEY read the books independently, and none knows what the others think until the reports are written. The reason for this is that we know that it is possible for the reader to have idiosyncrasies which can throw us off. We get to know their weak and strong points and can make allowances for them. . . .

If any single person, judging from the readers' reports, thinks that a book should go to the members of the Committee of Selection — and of course he makes up his mind from anything at all the reader says or from what he knows about the author or from what the publisher may have told him — the book is then sent to all the judges; that is, it is made an "A" book.

This freedom of *anybody* to put a book in Class A takes care of one of the two first conditions — namely, to guard against missing any book that might possibly be considered suitable for a Book-of-the-Month choice by the five members of the Committee of Selection.

Frequently, as might be expected, it is hard to tell about a book. Many of them are border-line. In that case a book is put into Class B, which means that it goes at least to two and sometimes three judges. The reason for this is that we have all found that judges too may make a mistake about a book. On the other hand, if two of them say that a book has no chance of being picked, obviously that chance is slim for the whole committee.

You can see, if you've kept your ability to count through this statement, that most books of decent quality are read by nine readers. The books which are reckoned to be important are read originally by three readers. If they get to be "A," they are then read by the five judges; in addition, either Mr. Wood or Mr. Scherman reads them, sometimes both, so there you have nine or ten readers.

One of the first questions always asked me by people who want to know how a book-club works, is "How many books do you have to read every month?" So I assume that you too will be interested in knowing that we usually read perhaps six to ten books with a view to their perhaps being chosen as the Book-of-the-Month, and perhaps five or six others, of good quality but with some special interest aspect which makes them unsuitable for the larger reading public, and then perhaps a sprinkling of three or four others. Perhaps fifteen books a month. . . .

THEN, having prepared our home work, as we often virtuously call it, we go to the monthly meeting of the Committee of Selection, primed for discussion. This monthly meeting takes place as we eat, lunch being brought into one of the rooms at the Book-of-the-Month Club office. We sit down to this at one o'clock, and sometimes if the going has been particularly complicated we don't disperse till half past three or four. And every minute of that time is concentrated on the Book-of-the-Month. . . .

A very large majority, I should say almost all our choices, are unanimous—after discussion has had plenty of time to modify our ideas by second thoughts suggested in the lengthy talk about the books. One of the rather interesting discoveries about human nature we have made, is that out of six or eight books, or ten books, in the month's

list of possible choices, we five entirely differing American readers practically always agree on which three are the best. This unanimity in eliminating all but a very few, happens before we meet. It surprises us. We had not expected such agreement. We had at the beginning considerable scepticism as to whether there really is, objectively, concretely, reliably, to be counted on, anything like literary standards. Were such standards, in the long run, anything more than personal tastes? Apparently they are. For more than twenty years, we have, practically always, agreed on the same three books, and often on the same two, as the best of that month's reading. No discussion. Instant agreement. Before ever we see each other. Hence, the number of books which we discuss seriously as possibilities for the choice of the month, is not six or eight, but two or three.

But our agreement ends there. The discussion which follows is passionate, and often long. What precisely, concretely, do we discuss with such passion? Here are some of the topics which recur with every book. What are its literary and human merits? What are its defects, for of course every book, like all things done by men and women, has defects? Reasonably complete and easy agreement so far. How do its defects weigh, compared to its fine qualities? Here the fireworks begin. How much does an ending, notably poorer than the start (alas, a common defect in a novel), cast a sallow, tarnishing back-flung shadow on the rest of the book? Analysis must be honest in talk about this point! Or perhaps the love story is not as true, vivid, deep, interesting as other elements in the novel (from Shakespeare to Balzac, storytellers have often been perversely more interested in a cranky, pathetic old father than in whether his sons or daughters get the mate they want). Or perhaps there is in the book a social or economic thesis, dear to the author's heart, by no means so dear to the reader's.

Or the style and manner of telling the story may be so shimmeringly beautiful that it takes an effort to see that the conception of character, the construction of the plot, the motivation of the action is poor, meagre, false. All people who write books themselves are especially apt to fall victims to the lure of beautiful description and to mistake its presence for real value, as prospectors for gold mistake the surface glitter of iron pyrites for the real thing.

There is another fool's gold with a blinding glitter. This is fashionableness—that tyrant over human taste and good judgment. When a book is written exactly in the literary style prevailing, it looks smarter, made of better materials, like something more valuable than it is—like a hat. Like a dress. Such is human nature. This is one of the worst and most treacherous pitfalls we help each other not to fall into.

This first part of the discussion which rages (there is no other word for it) around the table in the Book-of-the-Month Club office, is concerned entirely with truly literary matters. But the next phase must take in other considerations, such as, for instance, how does this book compare with that one? This is a question which brings the blood rapidly to the brain, which flushes faces with the effort of holding many factors in the mind at the same time. The clamor of earnest voices rises. For here is a demand for an impossibility which, nevertheless, must be met. For how can you say that one book is "better" than another? As well try to give a categorical yes-and-no answer to the question of whether a pork chop is "better" than a dish of ice-cream? Or a bathing suit better than a fur coat?

In the discussion of the relative value of two or more books (unless one book is of such outstanding superiority as, for instance, *Seven Gothic Tales* or *John Brown's Body*) other than literary values come in. Have we, perhaps, recently sent out several books on the subject, so that a change would be desirable? Have there been indications that the subject of one of the two books is seriously distasteful to intelligent American readers? Of two books, fairly equal in quality, there is no point in choosing the one which most readers will not accept. Will the distribution of one be socially desirable, that is, influence readers towards a more civilized attitude towards human life? Yes, other things being equal such a moral consideration has weight, of course. Or, on the contrary, have we been sending out a series of very very serious books calculated to have a civilizing influence on any reader, and is it perhaps time, if the right book can be found, to choose one, well—like *Mistress Masham's Repose*, which is purely delightful, not socially significant?

You can see that the stuff for discussion is piled in heaps, on any one of these points. I have said that our discussion is passionate, but not contro-

versial. Our situation is the fortunate one of belonging to that rarest organized unit, a group of human beings whose aim is not to triumph in a discussion over the people they are talking with—not to put something over on somebody else—but to use the contact with others to try to get deeper into the truth, into reality.

IT IS almost with surprise that we discover that this intimate intellectual co-operation with others can shed light, not heat, on a problem. It took us some time to realize that if you keep your mind open, you often can be genuinely influenced by considerations brought up honestly by people who do not agree with you. Prejudices are not so all-powerful in mental efforts as despairers of the human mind would have us think. If you can stop trying to beat somebody else, if the element of competition can be eliminated, the act of taking counsel with other human beings can be something quite different from the effort to conquer and to wield power, which the cynics tell us is the inveterate basis of all human activity, even in the effort to co-operate.

Perhaps one of the reasons which makes it possible to eliminate from these long, intensive, concentrated discussions the impulse to get your own way, rather than to do the wise thing, is because they are not conducted in public. It may be the audience which arouses that cantankerous desire to score a point on the person you are talking with, rather than with his help to get farther into the rights of the case, which spoils so much public debate, even forum discussions. Another element, undoubtedly, is that the mental associations of twenty years are now very thick, of course, and the mental association which most molds our relation to the matter in hand, is the (humanly speaking) astonishing discovery that it is possible, even when somebody begins to say something quite opposed to your own particular opinion, to listen. I mean to listen. As a rule in a public debate or forum discussion, you know, the people who are not speaking are not listening; they are just waiting for their turn to speak, and getting set to refute whatever anybody else may say. Possibly this ability to weigh and consider on its merits what somebody else is saying comes simply from the fact that there are only five of us. So far in the history of humanity we have learned how to function much better in small groups than in large ones.

I don't pretend to understand what has emerged from twenty years of close intellectual co-operation. But I know you here are all interested in intellectual processes and in literary matters, so I pass on to you my personal report on what happens.

The result of its so happening is that time after time, when we stand up at the end of a long meeting, we are pretty tired, because prolonged and intense mental application takes it out of you as much as a hard set of tennis and maybe more. But we often have the intellectual satisfaction of realizing that some problem which has seemed insoluble has been dissolved to nothingness by the application of the earnest, not to say ardent, desire to get honestly at the truth about a book. We are tired, but I assure you we are often quite reassured by the proof in which we have been involved that aggressive, non-reasoning partisanship is not quite so incorrigibly a part of every effort to act, as the cynics would have us believe.

I can't tell you, from first-hand observation—what happens after we stagger away from one of those long discussion meetings. But I know that plenty must happen. The amount of detail involved is overwhelming to my imagination—I know it only in imagination. For one thing there must be a perfectly terrific set-to of speed and accuracy in preparing the little booklet, the *Book-of-the-Month Club News*, which goes out each month, very shortly after the meeting of the Committee of Selection.

THE position which this small booklet plays in the Book-of-the-Month Club distribution of books is for me literally all-important, because it represents the vital fact that nobody is obliged to accept the book picked by our Committee of Selection. If this were not so, I don't think any of us would wish to serve. . . . [The *News* also gives] the titles and some description of from seventy to a hundred other books, which [members] can send for if they prefer.

These titles are chosen, like the month's special book, by the Committee of Selection. At least most of them are. Not all. Of course we five people can't possibly read every one of the many books sent in every month, in proofs, from the publishers. Those in the *News* have been picked either by one of the five Committee members or have been liked by some of those numerous first readers, all of them competent. They are considered of good quality, but perhaps too special in some respects to interest

a very large number of readers. This list and description of some seventy to a hundred books reaches the subscribers to the Book-of-the-Month Club service, a month in advance. If they don't like the sound of the book we have chosen at such an expenditure of intellectual blood, sweat and tears, they don't have to take it. They just send in a blank that has been provided saying they would like in place of it either no book at all or some one of the other books listed. I think you will be glad to know—I certainly am glad of it—that about half of the enormous number of subscribers, do not accept our choice, do take the trouble to specify some other book or none at all. . . .

In the beginning, twenty years ago, one of the sorest places of friction between the older methods of getting books into the hands of readers and the new idea of the mail-order sale of books, was the idea that fewer books would be sold by bookstores and circulated by libraries, if many people went in for the book-club service. Nobody knew beforehand what effect it would have. How could anybody know? There was some uneasiness about this among writers of books. But I am happy to report that the years have proved quite the opposite from what was feared. The choice of a book by a large book-club actually increases the sale of it in bookstores. Also actually increases the circulation of it from libraries. Vastly more books are sold, and more books are read, because of the Book-of-the-Month Club and other similar organizations. . . .

I HAVE been fairly factual till now, in speaking of book-clubs. Will you let me, just before I sit down, be a little more my idealistic father's daughter, and speak from my heart about how the relation between books and a great democracy looks to me? I hope you will not find me too excitable if I say that it looks to me as though modern life were sneaking up on democracy from behind, in an attempt to wrest from it a tool without which a free country cannot survive—the book. This attack on the book is not carried on openly; not even, probably, with awareness of what is involved. It is camouflaged in a great variety of ways, one being the claim, open or implicit, that books are not needed as they were formerly, before radios, before the movies. College professors find that undergraduates often sincerely feel that listening to a radio commentator or two, occasionally, makes them informed citizens quite as well as reading,

marking and digesting well-planned, coherent, thoughtful books on politics, sociology, geography and economics. Such students are ready to stop short in their intellectual development before the point even of getting a conception of what intellectual maturity is. Before they have any experience of what understanding is, they are ready to give up struggling with the hard mental labor of reading intellectually responsible books filled with the qualifications, the careful accuracies, the rounded views inconceivable to the fifteen-minute snippets of the radio. Such people, who are letting books quietly slip out of their lives, never think of the one deadly lack in all statements made over the radio, the lack of opportunity for the listener to reconsider what he has been told, to reread a page he is not sure of, to let it sink in and read it again. They don't realize that such mental discipline is necessary before forming an opinion; they have had little or no experience of how it can be obtained with books or by definition with books alone. And this country's life is on a lower, poorer plane because they do not properly use or know books.

THEY go to see a movie made out of a noble, searching novel like *Anna Karenina*, and are not aware of really hideous lacks in the screen version—for instance, the total absence of those infinite shadings from one human emotion to another which are the work of the passage of time in a human life, and which it is the triumph of a Tolstoi to suggest in a novel. Not many read that novel, or any other which is a serious, responsible attempt to portray human life and interpret it; they don't know what they miss. Their country's culture is on a lower, poorer and more meagre level.

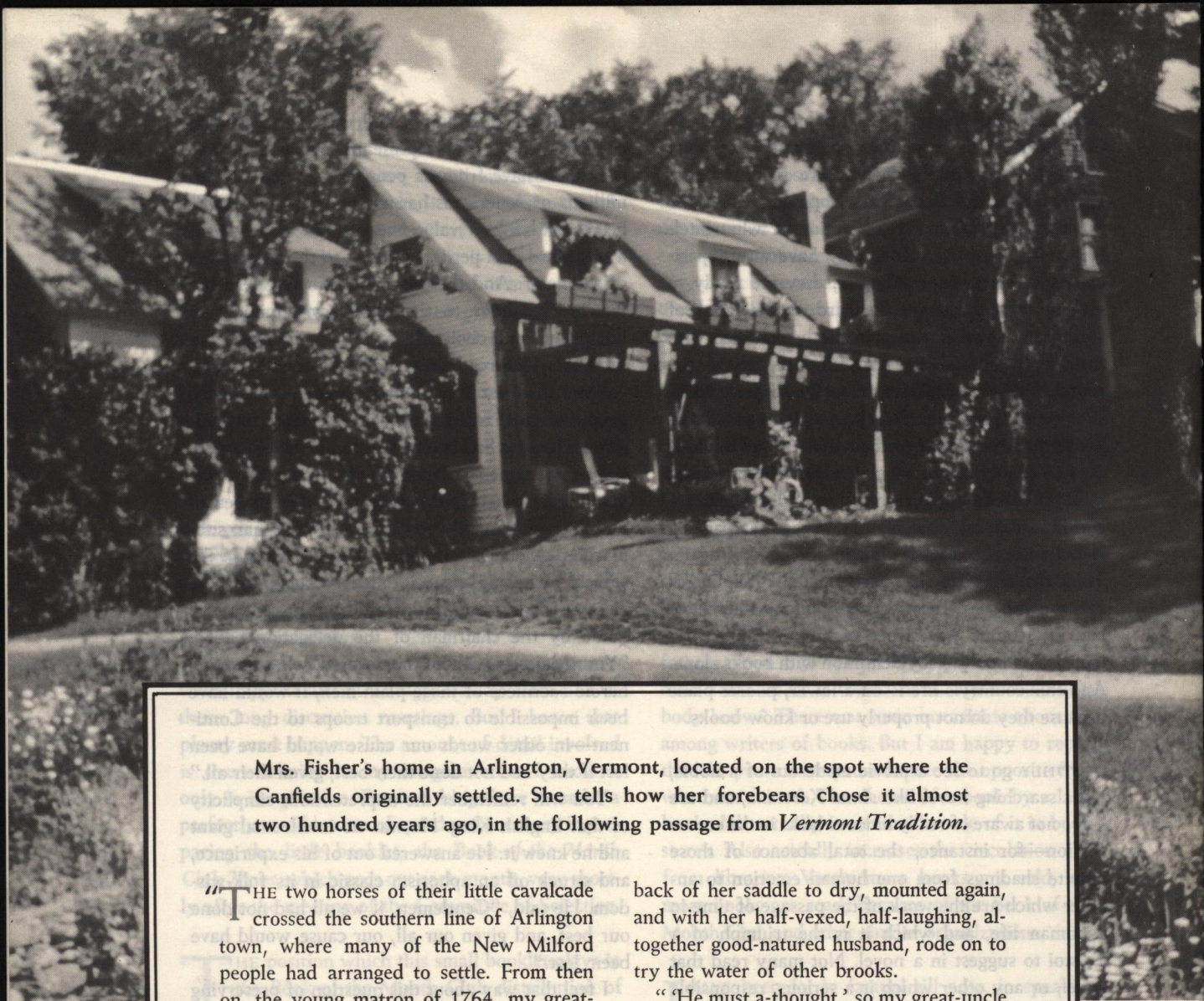
Now, in our times, when the complexity of the human situation on the globe needs the best thinking human brains can achieve, one of the surest tools for thought—the book—is under attack, an attack the more dangerous because indirect, and, for practical purposes, invisible. All those books pouring from the presses—it looks to the unthinking mind as though the country were being flooded with books. But in comparison with the total population of our country, the number, the quality,

above all the distribution and use of those books comes nowhere near representing what a democracy must have from its people. Every one of our millions of Americans has a vote every year. Does he read a book of value every year? That vote is a safeguard or a peril, according to the personality of the voter. And there is no shaping modern human personalities to the necessary minimum of intelligence and civilized standards, without a continuous, widespread use of books of decent quality.

After the First World War, a number of English people of good will felt that not sufficient recognition and praise had been given to the men—largely simple fishermen—who had, day after day, for years risked their lives to clear the North Sea of the mines continually sown there by German submarines. A delegation approached the King on the subject of having a special medal struck for these anonymous heroes. The carefully prepared appeal made by the chairman of the delegation ended, "Your Majesty, without the devoted, self-forgetting heroic sacrifices of those plain men, it would have been impossible to transport troops to the Continent—in other words our cause would have been lost if they had not done their best, given their all."

You will remember the unpretentious simplicity of that English King. He was no intellectual giant and he knew it. He answered out of his experience, and struck off an aphorism classic in its folk-wisdom. He said, "Gentlemen, if we all had not done our best, and given our all, our cause would have been lost."

I feel that way about this question of preserving alive, in full activity, the use of books among a sufficient number of the enormous population of our huge democracy. To do this is going to take every one of those aware, as we are here, of the irreplaceable value of the book. Every variety of approach will be needed. Every mechanism that can be devised should be put into action to keep up the book-habit among our people, and to distribute in numbers comparable to the need, books of civilized quality. Librarians, teachers of English, university professors, authors, book-clubs, bookstores, book-wagons, experts in semantics (to make sure the books are readable)—if we do not all do our best, our cause will be lost.



Mrs. Fisher's home in Arlington, Vermont, located on the spot where the Canfields originally settled. She tells how her forebears chose it almost two hundred years ago, in the following passage from *Vermont Tradition*.

"THE two horses of their little cavalcade crossed the southern line of Arlington town, where many of the New Milford people had arranged to settle. From then on, the young matron of 1764, my great-great-grandmother, washed her way, mile by mile, northward. She had a piece of homemade soap in the pocket of her riding skirt. Wherever the trail crossed a brook, she slid from her saddle, stooped over the clear water, wet, soaped and rubbed her handkerchief.

"But the water was hard. Most Vermont water still is. It runs over the abundant marble and other limestone rocks, later so valuable to Vermont. To this day the tea-kettles of most Arlington houses are coated thickly with a deposit of lime. Not a hint of foam did she get from her soaping. She wrung the handkerchief out, hung it on the

back of her saddle to dry, mounted again, and with her half-vexed, half-laughing, altogether good-natured husband, rode on to try the water of other brooks.

" 'He must a-thought,' so my great-uncle used to mimic the old rustic vernacular, 'she were a-goin' to land 'em clear up in Canady.'

"They did not need to go as far as that. Close to the northern boundary line of Arlington, almost seven miles from where she began her quest, the brook beds change by a quirk of geology from limestone to slate. In this water the New Milford soap foamed up blithely into a lather fit to delight the heart of any woman who loved good linen—are there any who do not?

"Holding out the good news for her husband to see, 'Here's where we'd better settle,' she said. So they did."

BOOK-OF-THE-MONTH CLUB, INC.

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