Alec Craig, Censorship and the Literary Marketplace: A Bookman’s Struggles

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Alec Craig (1897–1973) was a passionate and committed campaigner, widely published, and embedded in a diffuse movement of progressive societies for over four decades. Undoubtedly his deepest commitment was his opposition to literary censorship, and he distinguished himself from contemporaries in this debate with a depth of knowledge and suspicion of established, bivalent discourses concerning the obscene and the valuable. Craig is now largely forgotten, often merely a footnote in histories of censorship. To an extent, he foresaw and understood this outcome, suggesting that he made “ever diminishing demands with ever diminishing hope.” ¹ Craig sought to shape debate by pushing at the extreme edge of demands for reform, pragmatically stating of his arguments that “I am well aware that the suggestions . . . will satisfy no one.” ² Whatever his achievements, this chapter does not seek primarily to reclaim Craig as a major literary figure, but will explore his writing as a critique of, and a case study in, the convoluted attitudes to the cultural and commercial handling of books. In the process, many of Craig’s arguments (as well as his seeming failures) will emerge as prescient pathways to a more informed, less legalistic handling of the culturally uncomfortable.

Craig’s first published work was Sex and Revolution (1934), an ambitious attempt to describe and champion what he saw as a fundamental attitudinal change towards sexual morality that he branded “modernist.” In many ways a cri de coeur foreshadowing all of his later work, the volume embraced a diverse range of social causes, all united by Craig’s perception of the cultural inability to discuss sexuality. For example, it sets forth a programme of reforms including easier divorce, legal abortion, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the abandonment of legal restrictions on the illegitimate and the promotion of nudism. His idea of the “modernist” is idiosyncratic, but he suggests that such a figure “sees human desire and looks on it with kindly eyes.” ³ Craig’s first

prescription for an ailing society was the abandonment of legal restriction on sexual expression, so that society might rejoice in lovers' "reciprocal fulfilment if this can be brought about without injury to human life." The second recommendation he urged was the education of all men and women in sexual matters. In a culture bristling with pamphleteers and campaigners he found supportive institutions and with one such body, the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals, Craig organised a series of lectures for the young. These were held in the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1935, entitled "Elementary Sexology." This attempt to rebuild society, one lecture theatre at a time, speaks loudly to Craig's immersion in a moment of utopian social optimism in the decades after the First World War, with his own libertarian instincts arguably shaped by trauma on the Western Front in 1917.

Emerging from this crusade was The Banned Books of England and Other Countries (1937), by far Craig's most influential work, and that which achieved something closest to commercial success. This was a historical survey of, and manifesto against, censorship. As Craig himself pointed out, "there is no literary censorship in England in the true sense of the word," but rather a complex legal agglomeration around the concept of 'libel' which he set out to critique and hopefully dismantle. Drawing on the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 but also various other legal instruments, the state and its organs could prosecute, destroy or seize books in a perplexing variety of ways, from confiscation and burning by Her Majesty's Customs to summary banning by magistrates. Craig's objections were manifold, but one of the most pressing was "the deprivation which the community suffers" as a result of literary suppression. As a cause of such suffering, he saw publishers' fear of prosecution as more significant than the direct effect of the law itself: "it must not be thought that the number of prosecutions is a measure of the amount of literary suppression... many books never reach publication for fear of the law."

The public debate over censorship, or rather as Craig put it the "conflict between liberal and authoritarian ideas," had not subsided since the prosecution of Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness in 1928. As Alan Travis remarks,

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4 Ibid., p. 63.
6 Craig, Banned Books (see above, n. 2), p. 19.
8 Craig, Banned Books (see above, n. 2), p. 43.
9 Ibid., p. 208.