

# BOOKWOMEN

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*Creating an Empire in Children's  
Book Publishing, 1919–1939*

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## Selling Books

*Bookshops, the WEIU, and  
Bertha Everett Mahony*

WHILE THE STRUGGLE FOR female professional identity took place in formal cultural institutions like the library, a similar process was underway in women's social organizations. The club movement of the late nineteenth century developed a new agenda for dealing with a long-recognized problem: women's economic and intellectual dependence on men. To engage effectively with these problems, women's organizations sought to manipulate urban landscapes by undertaking activities geared toward self-improvement and designed to strengthen women's relationship to the workplace. This was no simple rhetoric; clubs assisted women by offering employment bureaus, childcare centers, vocational training, and financial backing for causes deemed significant. Clubs also provided leisure activities for members that must be seen as both supportive and simultaneously intrusive, particularly where a class gap existed between leaders and the rank and file. Nonetheless, club culture offered access to invaluable networks with a range of benefits, including financial support, political voice, social vision, and friendship.

In the early twentieth century, however, women's organizations frequently remained closely tied to the service ideal. Attempts to reconcile these beliefs—economic autonomy and voluntary service—presented challenges to club members resembling those faced by library women. As in the library, clubwomen sometimes appropriated the traditional image of women as nurturers in order to achieve their goals. Like librarians, clubwomen brought private qualities to public space, but these qualities represented far more than a “home away from home.” While cooperation with the gender line was advantageous in some cases, cooperation with the

public/private line was not as forthcoming. Bertha Mahony's career provides a classic illustration both of the tensions that arose from balancing voluntarism and professionalism, and of the lasting influence of women's organizations on their members.

During the summer of 1919, while Anne Carroll Moore and Alice Jordan prepared for Children's Book Week, Bertha Everett Mahony was in Boston overseeing the construction of a large, custom-made vehicle known as the Book Caravan. Painted gray with its name lettered in orange along the sides, the Caravan was not, Mahony insisted, a lending library but rather a bookstore on wheels, able to carry some twelve hundred volumes at a time.<sup>1</sup> Mahony had hatched the idea as part of a community outreach program, designed to bring books to children in towns lacking ready access to libraries and bookshops.<sup>2</sup> The Caravan was to be an extension of her Boston-based business, the Bookshop for Boys and Girls, in operation since 1916.

Like Moore and Jordan, Mahony was a native New Englander. Born on March 13, 1882, in Rockport, Massachusetts, she was part of a close-knit family and a ninth-generation American on her mother's side. Her father, Daniel, was a passenger agent and telegraph operator at the train station in Rockport and a second-generation Irish Catholic, although he attended the Congregational Church with his wife and children. He was also a passionate lover of poetry. Three siblings followed Bertha: Daniel in 1884, George Everett in 1885, and Ruth Ellen in 1887. Their mother, Mary, was an accomplished musician who served as the town's piano teacher and gave lessons to her older daughter. She was an enthusiastic storyteller, in the habit of chanting nursery rhymes and fairy tales to her children, as well as telling them stories about her own childhood in New London, Connecticut. Filled with music, stories, and a small library, the Mahony household seems to have influenced the child's development substantially, and Mahony could read before her fifth birthday. The Mahony women, especially, exerted a powerful influence over the children, providing the girls with an early and strong sense of female community. When Bertha was eleven, her mother, frequently ill, died. The loss was devastating to the child.

Graduating from high school at nineteen, Mahony entered the normal school at Gloucester. In 1902, after one year, she moved to Boston to attend the School of Secretarial Studies at the brand new Simmons College. She would have preferred to attend the School of Library Science there, but lack of funds prevented her from doing so. Simmons offered two program options at the secretarial school: a four-year course of study or, for college

graduates, a one-year certificate program. The school's standards were rigorous and "utilitarian," preparing women to become office assistants, private secretaries, registrars, and teachers of commercial subjects. Mahony, an exceptional student, was allowed to enroll in the one-year certificate program.<sup>3</sup>

Inhabited by roughly a half million individuals, and struggling to recover from the severe nationwide financial disruptions of the 1890s, Boston had assumed, more or less, its modern outlines by the time Mahony arrived. Replete with a myriad of civic organizations, including the Boston Public Library, the city was in the midst of significant reshaping by middle- and upper-class women determined to help others perceived as less fortunate and to create for themselves a place at the city's political bargaining table. The Women's Educational and Industrial Union (WEIU), to which Bertha Mahony belonged, was part of this rapidly expanding web of organizations emphasizing women's economic success and particularly dedicated to the issues facing working women who, by the turn of the century, made up one-third of the city's workforce.<sup>4</sup> Begun in 1877 as the outgrowth of a project sponsored by the New England Women's Club to study the economic condition of sewing women in Boston, the Union was more than a charity organization. It was, rather, an investigative agency—one of many—determined to assist women working in the industrial workforce. The committee, instructed to focus its attention on the problems of female wage earners, quickly outdistanced its parent organization's membership and ventured out on its own.<sup>5</sup>

Founders Harriet Clisby and Abby Morton Diaz made it abundantly clear that they had created the WEIU for the advancement of members as much as for traditional charity work, consistent with other women's organizations after the Civil War. Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose *Women and Economics* rapidly went through several printings after its publication in 1898, Diaz viewed marriage as a "private charity" designed to provide security for women, but argued that true security was impossible without economic autonomy. Comparing economic dependence with prostitution, Diaz and others viewed charity, no matter how well intentioned, as a poor substitute for job skills contributing to economic independence. To say the least, however, gaining such independence was difficult in the context of the abysmal conditions under which many women worked; labor, therefore, was a major concern of the Union.

To rectify matters, union leaders like Diaz and Clisby envisioned a socially fluid organization resting on cross-class gender solidarity, an important

and frequently successful strategy of women's organizations involved in labor issues.<sup>6</sup> Authority, they believed, would derive from the traditional belief in women's aptitude for promoting positive community change, from the Union's ability to bargain effectively for women's betterment, and from the development of distinct programs to foster job placement and structured leisure time. Consequently, WEIU chapters typically established employment bureaus and domestic service bureaus, and secured arrangements for affordable housing at local boardinghouses. Union-backed day care centers and job training programs were among its most successful endeavors.

The consequences of the Union's attempts to structure leisure time were more ambiguous, in part because of class differences between leaders and the rank and file. Despite the vision of cross-class alliance, college-educated professionals were heavily represented in Boston's Union leadership and drew on a complex set of ideals and assumptions about class and gender to create an agenda for female working-class leisure. Three of its eight original members were physicians and others came to the organization with well-established literary careers, yet they were all working women. Thus, in Boston, Union leadership represented a mediating class of social reformers who both resembled and differed from rank-and-file membership, a significant fact in terms of its leisure programs. Middle-class reformers, fearing that working women were subject to the same temptations as their male counterparts, were concerned that women might compromise their moral integrity. Jane Addams lamented that "this desire for adventure . . . and the thrill of danger" affected "girls" who were interested in "being daily in the shops . . . and the glitter of 'down town.'"<sup>7</sup> The YWCA observed that, in the absence of appropriate alternatives, "young girls . . . are apt to grow noisy and bold."<sup>8</sup>

In response to such concerns, middle-class reformers regarded "innocent recreation" an appropriate means of avoiding moral "erosion."<sup>9</sup> For this reason, they created a host of institutional safeguards to shape the culture of working-class leisure and "encourage purity of life, dutifulness to parents, faithfulness to employers and thrift."<sup>10</sup> These institutional supports—often club-sponsored entertainment and activities—reminded women that home was the fundamental female institution, even for women temporarily living outside its boundaries.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, while Union leaders compared marriage to prostitution and supported cross-class alliances, entertainment programs often reflected, rather than challenged, class distinctions. Working women sometimes became the literal

as well as metaphoric audience for expounding the cultural values of the leisured class rather than equal partners in reciprocal relationships. Information about working women's response to Union entertainment efforts is slim, but not all women were as receptive to the scope of union activity as Mahony. Indeed, evidence suggests that working women frequently regarded such events either apathetically or suspiciously.

Within the broad concerns of work and leisure, Union politics played out prominently in two arenas: language and space. The organization normally displayed an avid interest in developing and expanding physical space for club activities. Such space was often noted for its "feminine" qualities, resulting, like children's rooms in public libraries, in a "home away from home."<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the Union reassured the public that it was a reliable reflection of charity and nurture. The "homelike" atmosphere of the Union's physical space, in fact, revealed that clubwomen had no desire to surrender their claims to domestic authority; indeed, as Sarah Deutsch has shown, they often imposed their own notion of "home" on others. But the important point is that it *was* public space and not home, however it may have resembled one. Like librarians, clubwomen challenged traditional urban geography, expanding their jurisdiction from home to include space—factories and streets—normally off limits to women. But clubwomen simultaneously interrogated the invisible but palpable line separating public/private: both were necessary, but wholly separating them was detrimental, both to individual citizens and to the perceived common good.

Importantly, therefore, the WEIU situated its "homelike" club space in the business and political heart of the city. Members understood the connection between location and political visibility, aggressively manipulating the urban environment to position themselves for interaction with municipal and corporate power sources.<sup>13</sup> The organization's presence near both business and politics was both unmistakable and intentional, reminding businessmen and politicians of the Union's importance in the urban landscape. In addition, organizational expansionism—both in terms of building space and programs—characterized Union development in Boston. The organization owned three buildings, which, by the turn of the century, made the Union an undeniable and forceful presence on Boylston Street.

Language, too, underwent change. Municipal alliance, not part of the original organizational plan, became crucial in persuading the city government to assume responsibility for WEIU programs. So, by the 1880s,

its leaders began shifting its organizational rhetoric from a transcendentalist emphasis on “unity” and “self-reliance” to a Darwinian language of efficiency. Moving toward the organizational goal of “justice, not charity,” Boston women replaced the language of kinship with a linguistic strategy that allowed them to negotiate effectively with politicians and businessmen. Individuals running for municipal office, for example, encountered aggressive lobbying from lawyers and college interns hired by the Union for this purpose. In short, in a city with literally hundreds of social service organizations, a distinctive voice was critical to success; the language of personal relationship could no longer be trusted to negotiate social reform. The Union was, as Deutsch describes it, “learning to talk more like a man.”<sup>14</sup>

Changes in language symbolized new, tough integrationist politics in the Union, in the process of moving from a woman’s reform organization to a businesslike agency in a large urban setting. The organization altered its way of doing business in the community by decreased reliance on voluntarism, thus allowing it to resemble the corporations with which it sought alliance. Indeed, by the early years of the twentieth century, the Union had more than a hundred staff members on payroll, performing a variety of functions, including lobbying. Moreover, its heterosocial nature was further indication of the organization’s desire for alliance rather than opposition. Recognizing that men had access to the financial resources required for its projects, the organization opened its doors to men by offering them associate membership in 1903.<sup>15</sup>

In part, the new fountain of the organization’s integrationist politics sprang from an old well. Clean government resulting from direct citizen participation was hardly new, and WEIU leader Mary Follett avidly supported both. To Follett, the organization’s participation in municipal negotiations was the logical expression of that “great spiritual force evolving from men”—the ever-widening democratic community. Community, she insisted, would be the hallmark of “all relations of the new state.” For this reason, Follett had no patience with class politics, envisioning instead a rationalized economy based on expertise and collectivism.<sup>16</sup> Thus, while it might be argued that the Union created its own political machine, jockeying with other organizations in Boston to realize its aims, this comparison must be qualified by understanding the importance the organization placed on cooperative relations.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the Union was not interested in the sort of competition that the term “political machine” generally implies; neither was it content to sit on the political sidelines, neutralized by

reliance on the tradition-bound but tired rhetoric of charity. In the early twentieth century, the negotiating table of social reform was located in city hall, and learning the discourse of municipal politics was a precondition for a place at that table. While the alliances the Union made with other organizations were frequently uneasy and while the shift from private to public space was far from linear, the organization became adept at interpreting the “map” of public culture, freeing Union members like Bertha Mahony to consider—and act upon—new employment options. When she was not occupied with school, Mahony made the quick walk to Simmons to attend Union activities.

For Mahony and other young women away from home, organizations like WEIU not only assumed mentoring roles but also represented a surrogate parent. Young women sometimes attached themselves to clubs in support of causes, but they also joined to make valuable social connections. Club membership was frequently a “badge of status” supporting broader class claims and providing social connections essential for young career-minded women. The Union thus served as a vital professional network for such women by helping them to secure these connections.<sup>18</sup> Mahony acknowledged the importance of union credentials by her persistent, life-long description of WEIU as her “university.”<sup>19</sup>

Club life also frequently provided insulation against the traditional claims of family life on women’s time as well as against the potential disapproval of society. In addition, club culture provided opportunities for what one historian calls “forays into public activism” by offering members a safe environment to practice public speaking, writing, petitioning, and—increasingly—budget management.<sup>20</sup> In the absence of formal participation in electoral politics, women’s clubs created a crucial base of informal but distinct power for women that provided class-crossing possibilities by allowing wider social opportunities with essentially little risk to one’s own position.<sup>21</sup>

In 1906, Mahony was positioned to make the kinds of important connections the Union offered, for in that year leaders rewarded her devotion to the organization by making her its assistant secretary; as such, she was the recording secretary for its key committees. This responsibility produced three results in Mahony’s life: it taught her organizational savvy, engaged her in the discourse of social issues, and put her in touch with some of Boston’s leading and influential citizens. Eventually, her responsibilities expanded to include oversight of Union publications from initial concept to print. These tasks connected her to Thomas Todd, the Boston

printer of the organization's documents who, significantly, taught Mahony the printing business.<sup>22</sup>

In 1915, Mahony read an *Atlantic Monthly* article urging women to consider bookselling a worthwhile and suitable profession. Young female college graduates, it suggested, often faced underemployment if they did not become teachers, librarians, or social workers, but careers as booksellers would provide women with a life useful to the community.<sup>23</sup> Unhappy with the prospect of teaching, Mahony took the advice to heart and decided to set up a bookshop, although doing so made her part of a distinct minority.<sup>24</sup> A young woman's determination to start a business carried the risk of social disapproval compounded by potential financial catastrophe. And the process of establishing a business was slow; even women with solid connections found their goal of self-employment before entering their thirties generally unattainable.<sup>25</sup> Despite such pitfalls, Boston had experienced a distinct increase in female petty entrepreneurs by 1900, although, lacking sufficient financial backing, the majority went into bankruptcy within a few years. Still, bookselling was a "respectable" way for women to make a living for many of the same reasons that made librarianship a "female" profession: bookselling involved culture, part of women's appropriate public domain. This attitude offered women like Mahony a career opportunity that fulfilled their carefully nurtured concept of service.

Women in business, simply because they *were* in business, confronted prevailing gender norms concerning space, but the confrontation could be muted, to some extent, by opening a business that seemed "natural" for a woman.<sup>26</sup> When Mahony decided to open a bookstore especially for children, she might have sidestepped competition from existing Boston bookshops, but she also avoided social criticism. Although she genuinely loved books, her decision represented a combination of risk taking and safety seeking, a variant on the tension between professionalism and domesticity. Like the female grocer whose store was a "kitchen," a shop for children's books seemed to be a "nursery" of bedtime tales with its bookseller resembling "mother."

Mahony sought advice and financial backing from her "university" on Boylston Street, and she had good reason to assume that the Union would provide it. Its reform agenda followed a distinctly pragmatic formula: programs were first incubated in intraorganizational pilot demonstration projects. Then, armed with statistics and demonstrated success, the Union

encouraged government or civic agencies to assume continued responsibility for replicating and administering project operations. But reform was also lucrative for the Union; by sponsoring business endeavors such as the one Mahony proposed, the Union grossed roughly \$500,000 annually.<sup>27</sup> The Union therefore agreed to support Mahony's plan, but with contingencies. Excepting a modest salary for Mahony, profits from the shop would funnel back into the Union for other projects. But while financial support was important to Mahony's success, its organizational reputation and credibility were also crucial. As one publisher's salesman later candidly remarked to Mahony, "We didn't think so much of you but you had the Women's Union in back of you."<sup>28</sup>

Mahony's decision to become a bookseller was fateful, placing her immediately in touch with an old profession steeped in traditional perspectives. Book production and bookselling, initially intertwined, had been separated by the end of the eighteenth century, largely due to the growing number of books.<sup>29</sup> That cleavage produced distinct and frequently antagonistic professions. Though their mutual aim of book distribution suggests compatibility, bookselling, once separated from publishing, was forced to defend its legitimate place within the book industry. Among those in the book business, booksellers were sometimes distrusted and sometimes embraced, viewed on a continuum ranging from naked profiteers to "family," from impediments in book distribution to selfless humanitarians. While Herbert Spencer, "champion of the reader," regarded bookselling as an "absurd anachronism" equivalent to "stagecoaches or mounted messengers," *Publishers Weekly* viewed booksellers as "family" who shared common aims with publishers: the "spreading of literature at a living profit." Likewise, the *Dial* argued that booksellers were an "important social influence."<sup>30</sup> A bookstore was, according to the press, "a civilizing agency of the highest importance. . . . It ranks with the public library and the local high school or college."<sup>31</sup> As the proprietor of one of Chicago's most prosperous bookstores, the famous bookseller Adolph Kroch regarded bookselling romantically, as one of the oldest and noblest professions with the power to "mold the mental requirements of the public."<sup>32</sup> William Darling, an English bookseller, declared it "the very kernel of the romance of Commerce."<sup>33</sup> Between these extremes, booksellers were generally regarded with grudging skepticism, acknowledged as important, though hardly indispensable, to the book trade. In the absence of an improved book distribution scheme—more than 50 percent of publisher's sales occurred through bookstores—booksellers maintained significance in the industry.

Those who viewed booksellers positively considered them, like librarians, essential as culture distributors since, as Kroch complained, "there is a vast difference between what the public is interested in and what it should be interested in."<sup>34</sup> Startling evidence of the need for more booksellers, advocates insisted, came from Americans themselves who, relative to Europeans, purchased abysmally few books. According to Earl Barnes, author of the article that had persuaded Mahony to become a bookseller, only one American in 7,300 purchased a book annually, while in Great Britain, the ratio was 1 in 3,800. Even more dramatically, Switzerland, with a ratio of 1 in 872, drastically outdistanced America in book buying.<sup>35</sup>

What accounted for this disturbing fact? Barnes rejected the typical argument that the rapid establishment of public libraries made book purchasing unnecessary, suggesting instead that broad social changes were at the bottom of the problem. By 1919, the small town version of the bookseller was surrendering to the demands of a vigorous marketplace. They had been replaced, Barnes complained, by department store salespersons interested only in a paycheck. Determined that changing markets should not foretell their professional extinction, therefore, booksellers contemplated their role in the expanding network of books. Above all, they were convinced that the American public, largely ignorant of good books, desperately needed the expertise that booksellers offered.

What, many wondered, would secure a place of prominence for booksellers in the eyes of the public? The argument in favor of training, frequently regarded as a means of enhancing professional status, was heightened by the existence of well-established European schools. In Germany, for example, the Leipzig School for Booksellers was founded in 1859, and by 1913 enrolled over four hundred students. In 1916, the year that Mahony opened her bookshop, some American cities took the initiative to create such programs. In Philadelphia the Girls' Evening High School offered a course in bookselling, and Cleveland considered a similar program; in New York, a committee of the Booksellers' League, under the chairmanship of B. W. Huebsch, established a booksellers' school that included lectures on such topics as the psychology of bookselling and offered a course in bookselling at the West Side YMCA.

These opportunities coexisted with continuing concerns about the role of women. In bookselling as in the library, gender became an area of debate as booksellers considered options for the survival of their profession. Approximately eight million women were part of America's workforce in 1916, and roughly seventy thousand women were enrolled in undergraduate

programs in America's colleges and universities. Although a study of nearly eleven hundred Bryn Mawr graduates revealed that somewhat over half had entered marriages or professions (generally teaching), about one quarter nonetheless remained both unmarried and unemployed. What, Barnes asked, should the growing numbers of educated but unemployed young women do?

Women had historically shied away from bookselling and, as in other professions, gained acceptance only after a struggle. Of a total membership of 343 in 1913, the American Booksellers Association (ABA) claimed only about a dozen women, largely because many booksellers, and frequently women themselves, agreed that females possessed little or no business aptitude. At an ABA meeting in Philadelphia in 1915, at which not one woman was present, members objected to the recruitment of more women into the field. Critics declared that women had "no financial skill and no interest in commercial life. Their whole tendency is to spend, and they are not only impatient of financial details but incapable of mastering them. . . . The most educated women in the community are probably doing less to create an intelligent public attitude toward property than any other equivalent group of people in our midst. Many of them look down with a kind of contempt upon the money getting which makes their own spending possible."<sup>36</sup> Because of its palpable relationship to business and money exchange relations, therefore, bookselling seemed less service oriented and thus insufficiently "natural" to qualify as an appropriate female occupation. The rapid influx of women experienced by the library was not thus the case with bookselling. Added to "naturalness," the cost of opening a bookshop was prohibitive, especially to young women. The financial costs and risks were substantial, and the necessary financial backing was hard to come by.

On the other hand, women's presumed predilection for culture and art seemed to argue on behalf of their suitability as bookstore owners, and, as with their sister librarians, would-be booksellers appropriated this argument when and where it suited their aims. By the second decade of the twentieth century, many determined women were willing to assume the risk, and had located the backing.

When women did venture into bookselling, however, they often legitimized their decision to do so by reinforcing their claims to traditional qualities. Mary Mowbray-Clarke, co-owner of the Sunwise Turn Bookshop in New York during the progressive years, related that one publisher asked: "What, you very inexperienced women are going to come into this highly

specialized trade which some people have spent their lives in learning! How are you going to do it? And we said the reason we were going to try to do it was because it seemed to us as outsiders that books were not being sold as works of art.”<sup>37</sup> Conceding that she possessed little knowledge about running a business, Mowbray-Clarke based women’s claim to the profession on her belief in books as “spiritual food,” meaning the presumed capacity of books to uplift, civilize, and enlighten. Selling books, Mowbray-Clarke suggested, was more a mission than a business.

Not all booksellers accepted the notion that women lacked the intellectual faculties to sell books effectively. “Surely,” Barnes concluded, “a college education does not destroy the executive qualities of a capable woman.” Clubwomen, often responsible for large budgets, had proven their ability to manage money, and in this way, club culture had helped pave the way for new employment opportunities. Advocates agreed that book-selling was compatible with women’s service ideal and, at minimum, would help make “some reasonable return to society for the food they eat and for the clothes they wear.” And, if financial security eluded a female bookseller, she would find consolation in knowing she had led “an interesting and useful life.”<sup>38</sup>

With the financial and ideological blessing of the WEIU, opening day for the shop was set for October 9, 1916. In preparation, Mahony embarked on a project of self-education about children’s literature. On a tour of several American cities, she met leading booksellers and librarians, including Alice Jordan, Caroline Hewins, and Frederic Melcher, who had a particular interest in Boston bookshops, having worked as a bookseller in that city several years earlier.<sup>39</sup> Above all, however, Mahony was impressed with the children’s room at the New York Public Library. Like Jordan, she imitated Anne Carroll Moore’s use of space in her own shop, giving it the ambiance she felt likely to appeal to children: soft colors, pictures, and mahogany antiques donated by the Union’s well-to-do members. Mahony contacted several Massachusetts women’s and professional organizations, describing the shop and offering to address interested organizations. Between November 1915 and March 1916, she visited twelve cities where she spread her message, co-opted from the library: “the right book for the right child at the right time.”<sup>40</sup> Mahony believed that by getting to know children personally, adults could evaluate their reading levels and interests and divine the precise book they needed at a particular moment. In addition to her arduous travels, Mahony authored “Books for Boys and Girls,” the first commercial list of children’s publications in America. Containing well over a thousand

titles in its 110 pages, the list identified books by age appropriateness and subject matter. The expense of creating the list prompted criticism from union members and skepticism from others in the book business but, despite such doubts, the list was published in time for the opening day of the Bookshop for Boys and Girls.<sup>41</sup>

When it was time to stock the shop shelves with books, Mahony turned to her friend Alice Jordan for counsel, placing her prominently on the shop's advisory board. Jordan's support was invaluable to the novice bookseller, who valued her self-discipline, discerning mind, and serene demeanor. As director of children's services at the BPL, Jordan also offered substantial expertise on the subject of children's books, and Mahony routinely relied on her.

Unlike Jordan, Moore was not immediately enthusiastic about the shop. She made no secret of her skepticism about the enterprise, fearful that, unlike the library, the Bookshop represented merely one more retail outlet for the purpose of profit, and that it might be "too 'precious,' too 'educational,' too much of the 'cult of the child.'" But on Christmas Eve, two months after the Bookshop opened, she went to Boston with Caroline Hewins. Moore had been particularly impressed with Mahony's purchase list, and had seen to it that all New York's children's rooms had copies. Now, she wanted to see the shop for herself. When Hewins asked Moore what she thought of the shop, she replied it was "a dream come true" and that librarians ought to realize the "animating force" behind it. To the ALA, she announced that the Bookshop was "a piece of idealism which has stood the test of realization in an era of educational experiments."<sup>42</sup> In other words, the homelike atmosphere of the shop resembled that of the children's rooms at NYPL, and Mahony carried books of which Moore approved.

The shop's homelike atmosphere, so impressive to Moore, was also a success with children, but resembled home so much that unexpected consequences frequently occurred during the early months of operation. On several occasions, visitors came to the bookshop not to look for books but to examine the furniture or to ask where Mahony had purchased the drapery fixtures or tapestries. Here too, the distinction between domesticity and profession, private and public, was blurred. These episodes annoyed Mahony, who felt that such visitors trivialized the true missions of the Bookshop: to get children reading and to sell books.<sup>43</sup> Both objectives were, in Mahony's mind, a matter of community outreach and collective action, strategies fully in line with Union politics. Mahony therefore enlisted the aid of allies in the book business—local English teachers, librarians, and

children's book authors—to provide workshops, lectures, and discussion programs at the Bookshop. Saturday mornings were devoted to book conferences, in cooperation with the New England Association of School Librarians. Professionals at these meetings reviewed books and made their book suggestions available to school districts. In addition to a program of more or less continual events at the Bookshop, Mahony lectured to any organization interested in her message.

Among Mahony's ambitions for the shop, significantly, was that it should achieve professional recognition. Specifically, she was determined "to be able to answer a roll call at [the ABA] in the year 1920."<sup>44</sup> As it turned out, she had that opportunity much sooner. By 1917, several women had braved the financial danger and social criticism of becoming booksellers to open shops of their own, and despite its hostility to female entrepreneurs, the ABA invited four of these women to address their next annual convention: Priscilla Guthrie of the Book-Shop in Pittsburgh, Mary Mowbray-Clarke of the Sunwise Turn Book Shop in New York, Catherine Cook of the Open Court Company in Chicago, and Bertha Mahony of the Bookshop for Boys and Girls in Boston. The ABA, which held its seventeenth annual convention at New York's Hotel Astor in May 1917, shortened the usual three-day conference to two, foregoing many of the usual social events so as not to seem frivolous during wartime. In his presidential address, Ward Macauley defined the particular service booksellers might offer to the nation, echoed so often by America's bookmen and -women in response to the war. "Quite aside from the profit involved, every bookseller should place real energy behind the effort to secure general reading for books which teach us to know our country better, to love more ardently the great principle of human liberty and justice toward which America must lead the world, books that inspire to devotion and to sacrifice. . . . Let us place the aims of this Association on the high ground of real service . . . Whether as publisher, jobber or retailer, may we be increasingly united, ready for the glorious future which awaits us if we but deserve it."<sup>45</sup> The afternoon session of the first day, entitled "New Channels in Bookselling," was set aside for the four women booksellers to address the membership. Each in turn spoke about starting her business, and, as they addressed the convention, common themes emerged. All the women minimized their knowledge of business operations, expressed a strong belief in the appropriateness of women as booksellers, and identified three characteristics they regarded as essential to the success of a woman-run bookshop. These characteristics—remaining small but distinctive, providing service, and becoming

experts—embraced both old and new ingredients for success, juxtaposing nostalgic ideals of the small town local merchant with the cosmopolitan, well-connected expert. Emboldened by such early business successes as Mahony and the others had shared with ABA members the previous May, twenty-one women met in New York on November 13, 1917, hosted by the Sunwise Turn Book Shop, to organize the Women's National Association of Booksellers and Publishers.<sup>46</sup>

Despite Moore's initial skepticism, the first two years of the Bookshop were so successful that Mahony became convinced that children outside Boston wanted to buy her books, and envisioned a caravan to haul them throughout rural Massachusetts. The idea of taking books to underserved areas had a history roughly fifteen years old when Mahony embarked on her project, but had typically taken the shape of mobile lending libraries. Unlike such enterprises, however, Mahony's venture was clearly for profit. The caravan was a bookstore, not a library, and Mahony was clear on this point: patrons should be prepared to buy, not borrow, her books.

Bookmobiles assumed different shapes, sizes, and routes throughout America, but their advocates shared one common belief: they regarded traveling libraries as "sowing seed" toward the goal of permanent libraries. The idea of sowing such cultural seed was attractive to clubwomen, who frequently offered both ideological and financial support for such endeavors in many regions.<sup>47</sup> For this reason, Mahony anticipated union backing for the Caravan, but leaders denied support unless arrangements could be secured to protect the organization from financial loss. Disappointed but certainly not deterred, Mahony convinced McGregor Jenkins of the *Atlantic Monthly* that such an investment would be profitable; Jenkins then persuaded a group of publishers to underwrite the project. In return for the group's financial backing, Mahony agreed to carry only books published by investors, although she might order books from any publisher at the request of the customer. In advance of its first journey, Mahony sent associates like Frances Darling, later a Caravan driver, to speak about the venture. Her friend Alice Jordan put her on the meeting calendar of the NERTCL at BPL.<sup>48</sup>

Even while under construction, the Caravan reflected Mahony's personality and beliefs. It bore not only its own name but "The Bookshop for Boys and Girls" and "The Women's Educational and Industrial Union" on two side panels. It had a door on each side and a rear window covered with orange curtains. The Caravan would be equipped with card tables and folding chairs that the drivers assembled and placed outside under a large

awning at each stop. The “William Henry,” as it was named, was regarded by its drivers as “one of America’s finest experiments in bookselling.”<sup>49</sup>

While enthusiastic about her dream of book caravanning, Mahony had to focus most of her attention on the Bookshop. When it opened in 1916, she had hired two assistants, both graduates of Smith College.<sup>50</sup> She now realized that more help was needed, particularly during the Christmas buying season, traditionally the time when the majority of children’s books were sold. In December 1919, at the urging of Alice Jordan, Elinor Whitney stopped by the shop in search of employment. Mahony was impressed with Whitney, a tall, slim woman with the kind of friendly, outgoing personality that she felt would be valuable to the Bookshop, and hired her on the spot.

Whitney shared Mahony’s New England heritage and educational background. She had, in fact, also attended Simmons. Born on December 27, 1889, in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Whitney was influenced greatly by her grandmother, A. D. T. Whitney, author of several girls’ books. Both of Whitney’s grandfathers were connected to the sea, either as merchants or shipowners whose vessels traveled throughout the world. She spent her early life in Milton, Massachusetts, immersed in books and steeped in imagination about other cultures; like other bookwomen, Whitney recalled her childhood fondly. After a year at the library school at Simmons and two years as assistant to the librarian at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, she returned to Milton where, for four years, she taught English to seven- to twelve-year-olds at Milton Academy, from which she herself had graduated.<sup>51</sup> By the time Mahony hired her as Christmas help in the Bookshop, Whitney was already quite knowledgeable about books and, when the season was over, gladly accepted Mahony’s offer of permanent employment.

By 1919, Mahony’s career path had already connected her to library leaders like Moore and Jordan, as well as her lifelong collaborator, Elinor Whitney. As a feeder pool for significant reform and career initiatives, the WEIU had provided the sort of crucial psychological and financial support that made these connections possible and made Mahony a typical product of America’s changing attitudes about women, work, and reform. While generally respecting—and even co-opting—conventional gender thought, club women viewed the demarcation between public and private as an invitation for confrontation. In other venues, such as publishing, change came at a much slower pace. In some ways the ultimate guardian of print, publishing was the zenith of conventional literary authority, and traditionally more immune, and more resistant, to change.