

Journal of the West
Volume 8. 1969

B O O K S
FOR THE WESTERN LIBRARY

D. E. Livingston-Little, *Editor*

ALAN SWALLOW:
Platten Press Publisher

By Donna Ippolito and Shirley Kopatz

ALAN SWALLOW died at his typewriter on Thanksgiving day, 1966, at age fifty-one. After being virtually a single-handed publisher for twenty-six years, he left behind a list, awesome in its integrity, of some four hundred titles. The books were almost evenly split in emphasis. Half the titles — poetry, literary criticism, fiction — seemed incompatible with the other half — books about the West.

Although intensely dedicated to giving poetry and, especially, young poets, a chance, Swallow had given *one-half* his list to volumes on railroads, Western history and biography, Indians, guidebooks, regional folklore. The involvement with poetry and *belles lettres* is easily traced.

He early became an avid reader, wrote poetry himself, and had done formal studies in literature through his doctorate degree. Believing that the number of publishers who prized their literary qualifications had nearly disappeared, Alan Swallow considered his principal editorial task to be his faith in his own unaided judgment. The books would be tested by his own standards, not by sales, reviewers or the opinion of the New York publishers. Rather than being contradictory, Swal-

JOURNAL of the WEST

low's equal intensity for books about the West becomes clear upon looking at his independent Western origins.

Perhaps like so many born west of the Mississippi, Swallow never ceased to identify with his native region. His roots were in the difficult early life on his father's farm in Wyoming located near to what was still a frontier. However, as an adult, he was hardly the cowboy of our popular stereotype.

Alan Swallow was a literate, even scholarly man. Quiet, slow to banter, he never outgrew the habit of solitude. Yet he lived with a kind of violence exemplified in his attraction to speed. He loved fast cars and motorcycles and drove them with skill and daring. An ordinary day must have been very like a frantic drive through the Colorado plains. What he did, he did fully. As his involvement with speed and cars was total, so was his involvement in publishing. Up to his death, Alan Swallow was designing, in part printing, packaging, addressing, and shipping books under his Sage and Swallow imprints to customers all over the country and in Europe. In 1960 he mailed out a peak 70,000 books from his garage workshop in Denver and, by 1965, he was publishing fifty titles a year. But his phenomenal success did not arrive overnight; the impetus and the preparation had begun thirty-five years earlier.

At age sixteen Alan Swallow ran a filling station in Gardner, Montana, where his family was then living. The hours were long and business spotty; during slow periods at that summer job, the boy filled time devouring the Haldeman-Julius classics. These little Blue Books sold for \$1.00 and he read at least two hundred fifty in those months. Through the Haldeman-Julius books and other reading at that time, Swallow also became aware of the "little magazines." He was influenced the rest of his life by the idealism behind both the Little Blue Books, so inexpensively priced, and the "little" magazines which were putting out quality work without consideration for commercial success. Within the next few years Swallow had begun writing poetry himself and was receiving his first acceptances from two or three of these little magazines. By his sophomore year at the University of Wyoming, he was mimeographing his own literary magazine, *Sage*. *Sage* disappeared when Swallow dropped out of school for a year, but Swallow's interest in magazines did not flag. Upon returning to finish his studies, he was also simultaneously doing editorial work for three publications, *College Verse*, *Wyoming Quill* and a student body magazine. Multiple interests and activities were to be the pattern for the whole of his life.

In 1937 Swallow and his wife, Mae, packed off to Louisiana State University where Alan was to do his graduate work with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. In 1940, near the end of his studies, Swallow made up his mind to publish a collection of student writings, despite

Books for the Western Library

his having neither the necessary knowledge nor the equipment at the time. For Alan Swallow, however, an idea was always a call to action and soon he had purchased a one hundred dollar Kelsey five-by-eight press, type, paper, and had set up shop in a garage. It took some intense library work to learn the laborious technique of operating his handpress, and how to put together a book, but by April, he had published not only *SIGNETS: An Anthology of Beginnings*, but a pamphlet of poetry, *FIRST MANIFESTO*, by the then unknown fellow-student, Thomas McGrath.

After earning his doctorate, Swallow turned west again to the land of his roots. Though he was returning to accept a teaching post, in his own words he was also “ready to launch a serious [publishing] effort.” That summer Swallow worked slowly at printing a book of poetry by Lincoln Fitzell — a page at a time — finished it by the fall and had it bound when he arrived to teach at the University of New Mexico. This was followed immediately by some additions to what he had newly christened the “Swallow Pamphlet Series.” Both the book and the pamphlets were done with the idea that fine writing should be available at the least cost. From 1940 until 1954 Swallow taught full-time. This first post at the University of New Mexico brought the acquaintance of Horace Critchlow, a graduate student attracted to independent publishing. Critchlow purchased some more efficient second-hand equipment, and the partners went to work in a rented garage. Much of their time was spent printing for hire as Big Mountain Press in order to help finance their own publishing effort. During this time, besides doing poetry books, Swallow and Critchlow became committed to the problems of the literature of the West, resulting in two titles on which the reincarnation of the word “Sage” appeared. These first Sage Books were *THREE SPANISH AMERICAN POETS* and *MOUNTAIN STORIES*. In 1942, when Critchlow was called into the army, the partnership was dissolved down the middle. Alan Swallow kept his hand-press, the type and the titles. Critchlow took the larger press and the other equipment he had purchased. Before serving in the army himself in 1943, Swallow, with his hand-press, was able to issue a few more titles.

During the next fourteen years he continued at various posts as a university professor. At the same time, he continued his own publishing business, served as poetry editor of the *New Mexico Quarterly Re-view*, founded and edited several magazines, acted as director of the University of Denver Press, and, from 1946 to 1950, published jointly with William Morrow and Company of New York. Despite the multiple channels he found for his energy, Swallow was nearly sprouting new books to the extent that in 1954 he left teaching to become a full-time publisher. It was to the third of his garages, this time in Denver, that he would arrive for work at 10:30 a.m. and was apt to work on and off until 4:30 the next morning.

He prided himself on being a “little” publisher which indicated

JOURNAL *of the* WEST

attitude rather than size. Swallow wrote: "The analogy is that book publishing should be informed by the same non-commercial dedication as characterized at least by the best of the little magazines." His position was simple. By throwing in his own labor without cost against the cost of the book, he reduced out-of-pocket expenses to the extent that sales would back all that expense plus a royalty for the author. As the list built, the average sales increased so that dependency on his manual work grew less. However, he knew that "in a pinch I could get out a book with almost no out-of-pocket expense. I have not taught myself to make paper, but I could do so; but I have, with the help of friends at the bindery, done every other process of getting materials and of preparing a book."

In the course of his publishing career, Alan Swallow several times felt "compelled" to rescue a work which for some reason was not being taken up by the influential publishers. Among the many to his credit are the books of Frank Waters. In the case of an ignored though fine writer, Swallow felt a "little" publisher had the advantage. Being devoted to the work, he is prepared to dismiss the lack of immediate re-action which is so crucial to the larger houses; he is more able to assert his judgment on a long range basis. When Swallow first issued *THE MAN WHO KILLED THE DEER*, by Frank Waters, there were practically no sales. At the time of Swallow's death the book had already gone through several editions and numerous printings and was more and more recognized as the profound story he knew it to be. The book has been adopted in college courses on the novel, on the American Indian, on sociology. Just this year the book was sold to the movies. And now, with the Blue Lake Bill (H.R. 471) before the House of Representatives, *THE MAN WHO KILLED THE DEER* has even more interest than before.

Alan Swallow was a practicing visionary, and the example of Frank Waters is more than a particular instance of faith. Swallow believed he had inherited a pioneer "tendency to act upon one's beliefs and ideas. ...It means that I would be compelled by my own character to *act*. ... I would do what I felt should be done and those things were informed by idealism...." He not only saved from oblivion works by critic-poets Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, J. V. Cunningham, but he saw the finesse that made books by Vardis Fisher and Harry Chrisman, Janet Lewis and Frank Waters, companions rather than strange bed-fellows.

Swallow was ready to stake money and his own hard labor on the poetry of unknowns as well as knowns. But dedication to poetry has, after all, always been a respected, if unprofitable, occupation. This same determination to give serious Western writing a place will prove, perhaps, to have been even more visionary. Swallow once characterized writers from the West, like himself, as "mavericks." Though he imagined them as a group, it was not a homogeneous school or movement. Instead,

Books for the Western Library

these writers resembled each other in being “almost without exception at odds with all evidence of intellectual dominance of the past two decades” and he saw that they shared a “rooted rational approach.”

A practical, active man, Alan Swallow wasted little time on idle prophecy. Yet he once hazarded a courageous prediction that has in many ways already come true:

I believe, just as a matter of cultural direction, that the next two decades ... shall see a gradual dominance... come to our intellectual life, and particularly to our poetry and fiction, from the West....The yeoman work has been done already by persons who will in the next decade be recognized for much more than they are now. The movement is on.

After Alan Swallow’s death, Mae Swallow, his wife, and Martin Miller, his attorney, tried to run the company and retain the fine image Alan Swallow had built. They did not want what Alan Swallow lived for and believed in to stop but they felt they could not do the books justice themselves. Several large New York publishing houses were interested in absorbing part—perhaps even all—of the backlist; many individuals were eager to try their hand at it but could not raise the capital or were not suited to continuing Alan Swallow’s concept. To sell to either would have been too much like selling out; what was Alan Swallow’s life (and proved to be his death) would have been lost.

By chance, Morton Weisman (then president of A. C. McClurg’s, a wholesale book distributor) was teamed with Martin Miller on a golf course in Las Vegas one spring day in 1967. Weisman, vacationing from Chicago, and Miller, attending a lawyer’s convention, struck up a conversation. When Miller learned of Weismans’ involvement with books, he asked his advice; to whom, of the many who had offers to buy the publishing business from the estate, should he and Mae sell. Weisman was familiar with the Alan Swallow publishing enterprise and, although he had never met him, respected and admired Swallow. Before the end of the round, Miller and Weisman had reached a gentleman’s agreement: Mort Weisman would purchase the company from the estate himself with some friends who had the same love of books as he.

Upon returning to Chicago, Mort contacted: Durrett Wagner, then dean of Kendall College, an American historian from El Paso, Texas, with a deep-rooted interest in Western Americana; Robert Robin, a lawyer with a strong interest in scholarly books; Robert Weisman, Mort’s brother, then president of Carl J. Liebel, the West Coast division of A. C. McClurg’s, who had a love of fine literature and particular interest in art. Morton Weisman, Durrett Wagner and Robert Robin went to Denver to meet with Mae and Martin. Their enthusiasm and sympathetic attitude to the business of books appealed to the managers of the estate. By July the negotiations were finalized and the contract was signed. Durrett resigned as dean of Kendall College and took over the

JOURNAL of the WEST

management of the press. As of August 1, 1967, the books and business were officially transferred to Chicago.

The first year the newly-organized Swallow Press (with only Durrett Wagner active full-time) met many unexpected difficulties. Many of the Western authors and book stores distrusted the “new” press. They felt, perhaps, that the new ownership would eventually leave the Western regional literature behind. Many of the poets and poetry outlets were worried that the press would turn away from poetry to some more profitable publishing. Wagner had an enormous task to disprove this. Unfortunately the estate omitted to list the Swallow and Sage titles in Books-In-Print and many bookstores, libraries, schools, et cetera, assumed that the publishing enterprise of Alan Swallow died with him and they no longer sent in orders.

A catalog seemed the perfect way to inform the book world that Swallow Press, and the Sage Books imprint, were alive, well, and now in Chicago. Beset with numerous obstacles, Durrett Wagner set out to create the catalog. It was virtually impossible to glean from the stock received from Denver and from the paucity of records, which books were in print, which were out of stock, which of the many imprints were active (Alan Swallow, Publisher; Swallow Press; Swallow Pamphlets; Big Mountain Press; Sage Books; Experiment Press; and others), which out-of-stock books should be reprinted and, therefore, included in the catalog. Unfortunately much of Alan Swallow’s record-keeping was in his head or in a form, that was undecipherable.

That first year Wagner was besieged with questions he could not answer. The letters between Chicago and Denver were many and were often unanswerable. Authors had to be contacted, contracts had to be mulled over, costs had to be reevaluated. By June, 1968, the first catalog of the new Swallow Press was somehow completed. Only four new books were brought out by that time. *FORMS OF DISCOVERY*, by Yvor Winters, and *BOOM TOWN BOY*, by Edwin Lewis Bennett and Agnes Wright Spring, had been in advanced stages of progress when Swallow died. *CHICAGO REVIEW ANTHOLOGY OF CONCRETISM*, edited by Eugene Wildman, and *AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE FOR AMERICA*, by Robert Theobald, were totally new books. In reviewing the last catalog done by Alan Swallow, titles turned up that were still in manuscript form. And where were those manuscripts? Boxes of manuscripts had been forwarded from Denver, some unread; new manuscripts were piling up. Wagner took on two outside editors to help him catch up, Michael Anania and John Jenkin, handling poetry and Sage Books respectively. It is only now, two years after the inception of the new press, that they have managed to catch up and keep abreast (although delays are still longer than Wagner would like them to be).

But the business of the press was overwhelming. In April, 1968,

Books for the Western Library

Shirley Kopatz left Basic Books in New York to join Swallow Press full time. Her background in books stretched back to undergraduate days when she did free-lance editorial work, evaluations, and indexing for college professors. Her experience in advertising and promotion, as well as in small business operations, helped to alleviate some of the burden from Wagner. Things got better but some problems persisted. As orders came in Durrett and Shirley learned about titles they were not even aware Swallow had published, books either out-of-print, out-of-stock, or not yet published. To this day they hesitate to put "NOP" on an order. They have been trying, with limited success, to develop a library of at least one copy of all books and publications done by Alan Swallow during the twenty-six years he published.

In August, 1968, Morton Weisman sold his interest in A. C. McClurg's and joined Swallow Press full time in January, 1969. As president and production manager, Weisman manages the business as a whole; Durrett is vice-president and editor-in-chief; and Shirley is secretary-treasurer, in charge of advertising, promotion, publicity and sales. There is now a small staff as devoted to the press and to books, and to the idea of books, as any people anywhere. Despite the apparent expanded organization, Swallow is still a "little" publisher, operating out of a loft south of the loop in Chicago, Alan Swallow's vision has come full circle with Swallow Press. Peter Michelson, a new author on the Swallow list, is picking up *Sage*, the first publication begun by Alan Swallow, and will begin production at the University of Wyoming in Laramie this fall. In 1969 Swallow will be publishing thirty-seven books, all titles they are proud to add to their company. The reviews of the books done since Wagner's editorship began to speak highly of his abilities and insight. All the books published to date by the new Swallow Press have been welcomed and lauded by the reviewers and critics.

Although not sycophants to the New York reviewers and the New York "scene," Swallow does some advertising and sends review copies regularly. They are actively seeking more authors and planning new books. Continuing in the tradition begun by Alan Swallow they devote half their list to "literary" works and half to Western Americana. With the new organization and follow-through, more and more people are becoming aware of the press, and through the press, of the amazing Alan Swallow.