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"What is a Conger?": John Dunton and Scottish Booksellers

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

"What is a Conger?"
John Dunton and Scottish Booksellers

John Dunton (1659-1733), eccentric bookseller, publisher of The Athenian Mercury, and tireless traveler both in fact and in fiction, is best known for The life and errors of John Dunton (1705;1818), the fullest known catalogue of the booksellers of his day. He first showed a strong bias against Scottish booksellers in a little-known work, A voyage round the world (1691). Describing a former London bookseller of Lombard Street, Dunton calls him "a Pirate...a Cormorant,—Copies, Books, Men, Shops, all was one; he held no Propriety, right or wrong, good or bad, till at last he began to be known...and our Trade...spew'd him out." This traitor to the honorable trade of booksellers was "a Conger, and overgrown Eel, that devours all the Food from the weaker Grigs, and when he wants other Food, swallows them too into the bargain. A poor Fly can't stir upon water, but—pop, he's at him." There are, continues Dunton, congers in all nations, but the worst

...are of a North-country race, much about the Tweed mouth...But Scotland being a barren Country, others are rather for the Shannon or Boin, or not yet content, ramble further...so slippery withal, that no Hook can catch 'em, no Hand detain 'em, no Spear strike 'em, no Wear hold 'em. Nor will they ever be quiet, and leave plaguing all the little Fry in this (watry) World, till they tumble down through some Vortex or other into the grand Abyss.

Dunton's commercial travels to the large fairs in England, to New England, to the capitals of Great Britain, and to the Low Countries had brought him into contact with other peripatetic booksellers and created in him an antipathy for the Scots, partly because of the great numbers of them in the trade:

Look but how lofty and stately they bear themselves,—you'd think 'em all Leviathans, and there's no coming near 'em unless you slip into their Gills. Venus aetna maii is a good old Observation: For some of these same Fish are very waggish prolific—but there's room enough in the wide Sea to turn out as much Spawn as Nature has give 'em.

The earliest definition, aside from Dunton's, combining ichthyological and mercantile senses of conger appears in A new dictionary of the terms ancient and modern of the canting crew (1700):

1 III, 76-77.
2 Ibid., III, 77-78.
3 Ibid., III, 78.

[ 133 ]
a Set or Knot of Topping Book-sellers of London, who agree among themselves, that whoever of them Buys a good Copy, the rest are to take off such a particular number...in Quires, on easy Terms. Also that they join together to Buy either a Considerable, or Dangerous Copy. And a great over-grown Sea-Ed.

B. E., Gent., the author of this work, was not strong on etymologies; the implied identity between the two senses may have been accidental. An intentional connection is plain, however, in The universal etymological English dictionary, Vol. II, second edition (1731), by Nathan Bailey, where conger, congre signifies:

a society of booksellers, to the number of 10 or more, who unite into a sort of company, or contribute a joint stock for the printing of books; so called, because as a large conger eel is said to devour the small fry, so this united body overpowers young and single traders, who have neither so much money to support the charge, nor so united an interest to dispose of books printed; tho' (according to the tradition) the foregoing was the original of the name conger, yet to be a little more complaisant, you may derive it of congruere, L. i.e. to agree together; or...of congressus a congress.

If, as the editors of the Oxford English dictionary suggest, Bailey’s definition and doubtful etymology refer to a contemporary joke, there is evidence that Dunton was its originator. He was well-known along Grub Street, his books were popular, and his Athenian Mercury enjoyed six years of prosperity in the 1690’s, a long run at that time for a periodical. Most significantly, his sympathy for “the little Fry” was often expressed, in such works as his Religio bibliopolae (1691).

Dunton’s animosity toward Scottish booksellers is aired again and at much greater length in a “three-decker” work published in 1699: The Dublin scuffle...The Billet Doux, sent him by a citizen’s wife in Dublin, tempting him to lewdness...Some account of his conversation in Ireland. Although he could say of Scotland in this work, “that Country has labour’d under discouragements, as to Learning, for many Years, tho’ it does not want its proportion of Learned Men,” and “they are pretty well furnish’d with Books; and what they buy is generally of the best Sort,” the central theme of the book is the author’s quarrel with one Patrick Campbell, a Scottish bookseller-who lived in Dublin between 1687 and 1720.

Dunton attacks Campbell for having preempted the auction room in Dick’s Dublin coffee-house which Dunton had reserved before coming from London in June 1698 with “a Venture of Books.” A poem by T. B. in the volume encourages the aggrieved bookseller:

1 p. 114.
2 Henry R. Plomer A dictionary of the printers and booksellers...in England Scotland and Ireland...1668 to 1725 (1922).
3 The Dublin Scuffle, p. 1.
NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

You must go on, this scurvy Scot
Has broke the Peace, and the proud Loon
Insults, unless you take him down.¹

Campbell's additional crimes are his failure to pay Dunton for books sent him from London, unwillingness to meet for a glass of ale and a peace parley, and inability to spell, the last illustrated by one of Campbell's advertisements reproduced by Dunton.⁸

The Scottishness of the Scot is treated throughout as an expected concomitant of his rascally behavior in a trade which Dunton always praises for its honesty. "'Tis true," writes Dunton, "he calls himself the evn Mon of Coonslence; but I am afraid to tell you, what Persuasion he is of, seeing he has so very little either of Justice or Humanity."⁹ In a "character" of Campbell, the author dwells on his covetousness, pride, "Natural Aversion to Honesty," equivocation, and false piety. "He'll commonly say grace over a Choppin of Ale, and the same time be contriving how to over reach you."¹⁰ Dunton asserts that he has enough by him "to confirm every tittle of this character," by means of a history of Campbell's life sent him in London from Dublin. As a generous enemy, Dunton will say nothing of Campbell's humble beginnings selling "Thread-laces in Glasgow [sic], by the name of Patrick Ure, to the time that Patrick Campbell begged Pardon of the Company in Dublin, for his pretty Experiment of turning Hodder into Cocker, &c."¹¹

Ironically, the largest conger joined by the Scottish eel who swam up the Liffey included just two others. Together with Eliphal Dobson and Matthew Gun, Campbell published in 1694 a book by a Dissenting minister, J. Boyse, Remarks on a late discourse of William, Lord Bishop of Derry.¹² Patrick Campbell's little share of immortality has come to him chiefly through his enemy, John Dunton, who did indeed write a book.

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¹ Ibid., p. 11.
² Ibid., pp. 99-100.
³ Ibid., p. 23.
⁴ Ibid., p. 337 f.
⁵ James Hodder's Arithmetic had 20 editions, 1661-1697; Edward Cocker's Arithmetike, 22 editions, 1678-1700, none of either published in Dublin. Cf. Donald Wing, Short-titled Catalogue...1641-1700 (1945). The allegation was that Campbell switched title pages.

[135]