"There wouldn't be any danger of his smashing the atom with this, would there?"

The New Yorker, December 8, 1945.
Drawing by Carl Rose; © 1945, 1973 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

The Publishing History of the "Smyth Report"

BY DATUS C. SMITH, JR. '29

SOMETIME in the early summer of 1945, probably in June, I had a telephone call from Dr. Henry DeWolf Smyth with a very odd question. I was at that time Director of Princeton University Press and Harry was a friendly professor of physics working on something that took him out of Princeton frequently, but of course I did not know at the time what it was. According to my memory, the dialogue went something like this:

HARRY: I have been wondering if you are going to close the Press down for two weeks this summer, as you did last year, instead of staggering vacations.

DATUS: I think we'll have to. Our departments are all so shorthanded we would be absolutely shot if *anyone* were out. Why do you ask?

HARRY: I was just wondering . . . if the occasion should arise would you consider renting your whole plant to the U.S. Government for that period?

DATUS: Do you mean just the plant? None of our people?

HARRY: Just the plant.

DATUS: Well, if we could do it at all I think we would have to insist on having our maintenance engineer around.

HARRY: Maybe some special arrangement could be made for him, but the work would have TOP SECRET classification, and I'm not sure we could get that high a clearance for him soon enough.

DATUS: Do you know what equipment they would use?

HARRY: I don't know those technicalities, but I do know there would be only one thing printed—a kind of book in a quantity of about 5,000.

DATUS: Gosh, Harry, do you really mean that? It sounds crazy to print 5,000 copies of a TOP SECRET item.

HARRY: Well, I suppose it might be one of those funny cases where something is TOP SECRET one day and in newspaper headlines the next.

Discussion ensued about how we could be sure of getting back into our plant when our 75 or so printers returned from their vacations. That worried us not just in terms of administrative convenience but especially because of the legal and patriotic priorities on the jobs already in the plant. We feared that—no matter what the Government might have agreed to in advance—if they ran into production delays with an uncompleted TOP SECRET job inside the plant they would keep us out by *force majeure*, no matter what the lease agreement might say.

My colleagues and I decided that, in fairness to our priority customers, we just could not risk it; and I think I told Harry that informally. At any event the subject was not raised again, though I naturally kept wondering what it was that Harry had in mind.

In August of that year Dorothy and I and our two girls had planned on a one-week vacation—I believe our first since 1941—and we had reservations at Branford, Conn., on Long Island Sound. We had husbanded our gas coupons for months, and figured we could just make it there and back.

We got to Branford on a Saturday, and it was the following morning, Sunday, August 12, that I was lying on the beach going through that day's *New York Times* which carried the first published atomic energy information from what subsequently became known as the Smyth Report.

Suddenly everything clicked! I realized what it was that Harry and I had been talking about on the phone some weeks before, and it came over me that he had in his hands the greatest science story of the century.

My girls loaned me some of their Coke money and, in a wet bathing suit, I called Harry from a beachside phone booth. He agreed to talk with me that evening. I suspended my vacation and thumbed a ride into New Haven (we feared Dorothy would lack gas for getting the car home if she should drive me in) and after a trip of some hours involving a train mishap I got to Princeton that night.

When I talked with Harry at the Smyths' house that evening he explained that the Press did not need anyone's permission to go ahead with book publication of the Smyth Report. The copyright notice on the Manhattan District's lithoprinted typewritten edition in effect put the work in the public domain. It stated that reproduction in whole or in part was "authorized and permitted" in spite of the fact that—by General Groves' desire—

the work was copyrighted in Harry's name (to prevent anyone else from copyrighting it).

But both we in the Press staff as well as the Editorial Board members we had been able to consult felt that—especially because of Harry's Princeton connections—we should not go ahead unless he was prepared to let us treat the University Press book as "his edition." Harry stipulated, from the beginning, incidentally, that he should receive no royalities; and I have figured out recently that the royalty we would have paid him under the kind of contract we would have been willing to execute would have totaled $26,305 for the paperback and hardback editions together.

Harry was cordial from the start, but he felt that, as a matter of public duty, he had to test the interest of America's leading technical publisher, McGraw-Hill, which, according to the conventional wisdom, should have been able to achieve much wider circulation than would be possible for a university press.

Because Harry would not be reaching a decision until talking with McGraw-Hill on Thursday, August 16, I went back to Branford for two days with the family, and we were there at the time of the Japanese surrender and the V-J Day celebration.

On August 16 Jim Thompson, the McGraw-Hill president whom I did not know at the time but of whom I became a good friend later on, told Harry they did not want to do the book. He said they would be interested in a rewritten version of the Smyth Report for a popular audience, but they did not think publication of the Report as such would be justified. He also pointed out that the work was in the public domain, and that the Government Printing Office would be bringing out an edition at a price with which a private publisher could not compete.

I believe Harry phoned that evening when he got back from the McGraw discussion. In the meantime I had reached by phone most of the Board members of the Press (including Curtis W. McGraw, known as "Hack," treasurer of both McGraw-Hill and the Princeton University Press!) and gained their informal assent to a bypassing of our normal procedure for authorizing publication. (*Ex post facto* approval was formally granted at the next Board meeting on October 19. I might mention, also, that upon my request Harry secured from General Groves—via a letter written on his behalf by Lt. Col. William A. Consodine on August 25—the General's blessing on our publishing project. We were anxious to have that

because of Harry Smyth's double connection with Princeton and the Manhattan District.)

It was on Friday, August 17, that I received what we called "Harry's manuscript" (i.e. a copy of the lithoprinted typescript with hand markings and corrections Harry made for us). P. J. Conkwright, the Press typographer, had started designing the book from another copy of the manuscript several days earlier, so that end of the operation was finished before we knew we had the book! And Irving Updike, plant superintendent, and his assistant, Herbert Hinkel, had been phoning all over the United States trying to find idle plant capacity. The Press's own composing room and pressroom were overloaded with priority jobs which we could not honorably push aside.

Herb Hinkel, a native of York, Pa., found that the Maple Press there, with whom we had done occasional printing in the past, was moved by the history-making importance of this one book, and agreed to take on the job. (Hack McGraw was not amused when, after our book was out, he learned it had been manufactured by Maple which, according to Hack, was way behind on its McGraw obligations!)

I stayed up most of the night of August 17 copyediting the manuscript. There were a few queries for Harry, and I left the manuscript at the Smyths' house the morning of the 18th, while I went to the Princeton University Press Annual Outing, and picked it up there that evening. The manuscript went to York by messenger Sunday the 19th so that work could start first thing Monday morning. We asked Maple to put several operators and proofreaders on the job and to use messengers for delivery of proof.

Mary Smyth's diary shows that she and Harry read the first "take" of proof the night of August 23 and the last on August 26. I went to York the following day with the corrected galleys, and stayed at the Maple plant for several days to clear page proof and press proof to avoid transportation to and from Princeton. I also posted page numbers on the index slips I had prepared from the galleys, so the index was set right after I got the page proof. The index was printed as part of the last form.

It is difficult to recall, at this distance, the production troubles we all faced in those days, with both plant capacity and paper being in such short supply that needs had to be anticipated months in advance, and even then publishers' production schedules for

most books stretched to nine months or a year. We had finished reading galley proof on the whole book six days after production started!

Even after we had the Maple Press commitment to manufacture the book we still faced the ghastly problem of paper. The popular hyperbole at the time was that with luck you might find a few sheets of gold lying around but never a sheet of paper. That was the reason I made sure of going to the Princeton University Press Annual Outing on August 18 in spite of all the other pressures on my time. I knew that the officers of the Central Paper Co., one of our chief suppliers, always turned up on those occasions to socialize with our plant crew over beer, softball, and poker—in part for fun and in part for company public relations.

The Central Paper people were indeed there—Manny Relles, the president, and Leonard Relles, later vice-president but at the time assistant manager. I detached them from the poker table and told them the whole story of the Smyth Report and its meaning in history. I put it to them that the most memorable achievement in Central Paper's career could be delivery of thirty tons of paper to Maple Press in York, Pa., in twelve days. (I thought that would be the earliest we could conceivably have page proof okayed and the book ready to roll, though we and Maple beat that by three days.) Manny Relles thereupon agreed to give up *his* scheduled vacation until our paper problem was solved. He told me later that he believed he and Leonard had made something like a hundred telephone calls trying to track down uncommitted paper anywhere, even west of the Mississippi. They ultimately found a car of paper somewhere in New England. They delivered that to York, and those tons of paper were enough for producing about 30,000 books. We wanted to print 60,000, and Central finally discovered paper for an additional 30,000, but not soon enough to get the second shipment to York before the first lot had gone through the press. I was at the Maple plant as the last of the first shipment was going through, and I felt pretty certain that, once our forms came off the press, even Maple's great good will would not enable them to put our book back on press again for many days. So I pleaded with Maple and (after a friendly railway dispatcher determined that our incoming car was on the tracks not very far from York) Maple agreed to hold our main form on their 128-page Perfector press for three idle hours while our car completed the last few miles to the York siding

and the paper was unloaded and trucked to the printing plant. By the skin of our teeth we got paper in time for producing 60,000 books in two printings that were handled as one.

We held bound copies of the book in our hands on September 7—three weeks to the day after our receipt of the manuscript. Copies were delivered to booksellers on September 10 and publication was September 15.

The first three printings of the book were manufactured by Maple, but their oldest publishing friend and biggest customer (McGraw-Hill!) became more and more restive about the way Maple was indulging Princeton, and Maple finally had to ask us to please go away. So we got on the telephone again and called every printer we could think of east of the Mississippi. The Smyth Report printing plates became very well travelled. After the first three printings in York, the fourth was in Chicago, the fifth in New York City, and I do not remember where the remaining four printings were done. The last of the nine printings was in 1957. Incidentally, beginning with the 4th printing we added a 42-page supplement with statements by the Canadian and United Kingdom governments.

As far as we could tell, there were four typos in the first printing: two that were called to our attention by dozens of readers and two others that were noted, or at least mentioned, only by my 75-year-old mother. In addition there was an item that looked like a typo to many semi-informed readers—the word "photon" in Par. 1.44 which lots of people wanted to change to "proton," and which entailed so much correspondence that the wording was changed a bit for some later printings.

From the moment we knew we were going to publish the book, our sales manager, Norvell B. Samuels (later president of the American Book Co.) started spreading the word in the book trade. Any University Press staff member who was not under other compelling obligations became an ad hoc assistant on Sammy's staff. All of us phoned bookstores where we had personal connections, attempting to explain the book—scarcely any layman at that time understanding what atomic energy was, let alone guessing that "a government report" could provide the fascinating reading material that we knew the Smyth Report contained.

Sammy was fit to be tied as one after another of the largest bookstore buyers declined to order a single copy or—if moved to be courteous because of their liking for Sammy—said they would

"watch it carefully and perhaps order later on." The general attitude was like what Jim Thompson had expressed to Harry Smyth: that the public would not be interested in a government report on a technical subject. I recall that Scribner's was the only large New York store that saw the light quickly. Brentano's, New York, was not only one of the non-buying skeptics but berated Sammy for trying to argue with them. But our old friend Joe Margolies at Brentano's, Washington, F Street store performed as those who knew him would expect: he gave Sammy an instantaneous order for 1,000 copies and doubled it a few days later.

Little by little, as Sammy and his gang kept plugging, the news began to spread. Not only was the first printing sold out on publication date, but for two months we never had an unsold copy in the house. Because of booksellers' delays in catching on, and their consequent failure to stock the book, we had vastly more single-copy orders from individuals than with any normal book. Sammy set up a special operation that looked like Santa's workshop. The performance in handling unfilled orders set a mark for both speed and honorable dealings that I think few publishers with a runaway book could have equalled. We claimed that, with the exception of a couple of days, every order was acknowledged on day of receipt, with a postcard not only stating what the delivery date would be but also telling the customer that a much cheaper edition was available from the Government Printing Office.

The most interesting challenge for the sales department related to the potential customers in the "atomic energy cities" of Oak Ridge, Richland, and Los Alamos. No one in the New York book trade had ever heard of them, and those cities in Tennessee, Washington, and New Mexico are in areas that were traditionally "unbookstored" anyway. Sammy's indignation meter hit the top of the scale as he tried to stimulate jobbers and wholesalers to an interest in trying to tap those markets. I can still hear his imprecations upon returning from New York where he had talked with Harold Williams, vice-president of the American News Company, which at the time was the largest book jobber with nationwide outlets. Williams was unmoved by anything Sammy told him. When Sammy asked him to phone the Tennessee News Company (the branch nearest Oak Ridge), and finally offered to pay for the phone call, Williams said "No, I don't want to waste your money."

By good luck Sammy and I learned something that same evening

that gave a solution to the problem of sales in the "atomic-energy cities." Hugh Taylor, Chairman of Princeton's Chemistry Department, Press trustee, and one-time acting co-director of the Press with Hack McGraw during the interregnum between Joe Brandt and myself, supplied the key. Hugh put us in touch with a young Princeton chemist who had just returned from Oak Ridge and happened to know a lot about the administrative setup there. He told Sammy whom to call in order to enlist participation of the employee-welfare organization in the plant. Sammy arranged by phone to have the welfare organization act as our sales department in Oak Ridge, with posters, local advertising, stuffers in pay envelopes, sales booths in plant recreational areas, and on one occasion a sound truck. We sold about 8,000 copies in Oak Ridge and a couple of thousand each in Los Alamos and Richland through somewhat similar arrangements.

From beginning to end the book sold over 125,000 copies in the two bindings, with an almost equal division between paper and cloth editions. According to Press records, the figures from the beginning until the book went out of print in 1973 were as follows (with the figures for the first year by itself on an estimated basis, though the figures for the first and second years combined are actual):

Fiscal Year	*Paperback Edition ($1.25)*	*Hardback Edition ($2.00)*	*Total both edns.*
1946	55,000	48,000	103,000
1947	3,340	3,911	7,251
1948	1,811	2,886	4,697
1949	908	1,615	2,523
1950	854	1,618	2,472
1951	524	870	1,394
1952	175	1,018	1,293
1953	—	619	619
1954	—	501	501
1955	—	478	478
1956	—	369	369
1957-61	—	1,005	1,005
1962-66	—	462	462
1967-71	—	622	622
1972-73	—	155	155
Total	62,612	64,129	126,741

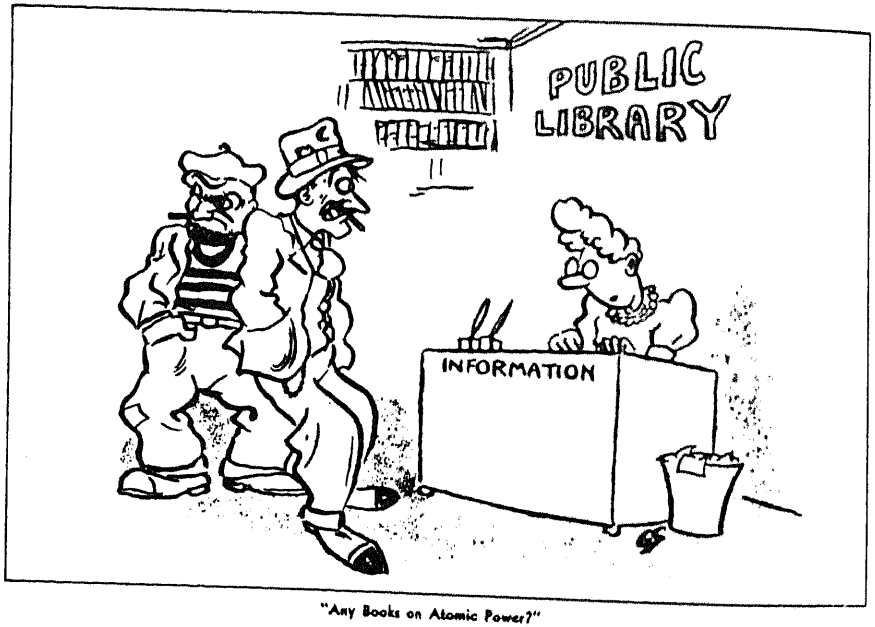
In retrospect—and I guess it seemed so even at the time—one of the most interesting aspects of the whole experience was the book's public-domain status. We had no copyright protection, and anyone who wished could bring out a perfectly legal rival edition. The only way we could preempt the field was by our own activity.

We learned from Colonel Consodine's letter that the *Infantry Journal*, which had become an important book publisher during the war, planned an edition of the Smyth Report. Assuming that was in ignorance of our own plans, we told their editor, our good friend Col. Joseph Greene, what we were doing. They immediately withdrew from the field without asking any *quid pro quo*. We were able to reciprocate the courtesy by offering them an edition of their own printed from our plates, and that is the way it was handled. As far as we know, the only other complete American edition besides that one and the official Government Printing Office book was a special issue (October 1945) of *Reviews of Modern Physics*.

The matter of translation rights, likewise, became peculiar because of the public-domain angle. The people who wanted to translate simply could not believe it when we responded to their requests with the information that they could translate to their heart's content without permission and without having to pay either Harry Smyth or the Princeton University Press for the rights. Because there were thus no contractual arrangements relating to translation, however, neither Harry Smyth nor the Press had any systematic way of keeping track of translated editions. I seem to recall that we had some kind of evidence of translations into about 40 languages. The late Dr. Vikram Sarabhai (sometimes called "India's Vannevar Bush") told me a few years ago that he thought there had been a translation of either sections or the full book in each of India's major languages.

I realize that the speed of the operation and the numbers in the sales figures are not as impressive now as they seemed to be at the time. But it nevertheless continues to look like quite an achievement to have got the book out that quickly at a difficult time, and to have sold that number of copies of a title with no copyright protection. And the achievement was by the Press as an institution. Because so much in the above account depended on personal recollections and records, the first-person-singular appears in the story with unattractive frequency. But my own part in the events would have been completely impossible without the tireless work

of all my colleagues. I have never seen finer teamwork in any publishing organization, and I want to end this statement with my warm salute to that whole body of people at the Princeton University Press.



"Any Books on Atomic Power?"

The New York Times Book Review, November 18, 1945.

Cover of the Swedish edition, Stockholm, 1946.
Courtesy of Henry DeWolf Smyth.