
American Jewish Personalities

Thomas Seltzer: Publisher, Fighter for Freedom of the Press, and the Man Who “Made” D. H. Lawrence

Alexandra Lee Levin

During the summer of 1919, the controversial English writer D. H. Lawrence changed publishers. The following year the new firm of Thomas Seltzer, Inc., brought out Lawrence's play *Touch and Go*, plus a privately printed edition of his novel *Women in Love*. The latter work did not appear in Great Britain until six months after Seltzer's American edition, and the New York publisher came to be known as “the man who made Lawrence.”

Born in Poltava, Russia, on February 22, 1875, Thomas Seltzer was brought to the United States at an early age. He started life in his new country as a sweatshop worker, but his older sister insisted that he attend high school. After winning a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, he worked his way through and graduated in 1897. He then did postgraduate work in modern languages at Columbia. As a result he was conversant not only with Russian, but also with Polish, German, Yiddish, French, and Italian.

When Maxim Gorki, the Russian writer who had actively participated in the unsuccessful 1905 Russian Revolution, landed in New York in the spring of 1906, he named Seltzer his official interpreter and translator. Gorki was touring on an anti-czarist campaign. Seltzer translated Gorki's *The Spy: The Story of a Superfluous Man*, first published in 1908, and his proletarian novel *Mother*.

Seltzer's journalistic experiences included reporting for three Pittsburgh newspapers, and writing for various magazines, including *Harpers's Weekly*. He was also associate editor of *Current Literature* and the *Literary Digest*. As first editor of *The Masses*, of which he was a founder in 1911, Seltzer drew heavily on the works of social reformers and on European fiction.¹ *The Masses*, a name proposed by Seltzer,



*Adele and Thomas Seltzer,
New York City 1907.*

(Courtesy of Alexandra Lee Levin)

List of Works of D. H. Lawrence

Published by THOMAS SELTZER

WOMEN IN LOVE <i>A Novel</i>	\$15.00
<small>Limited Subscription Edition Only</small>	
THE LOST GIRL <i>A Novel</i>	\$2.00
AARON'S ROD <i>A Novel</i>	\$2.00
SEA and SARDINIA <i>A Book of scenes and night-visions full color by the artist</i>	\$2.00
TORTOISES <i>A Book of scenes</i>	\$1.25
TOUCH and GO <i>A play in three acts</i>	\$1.25
THE WIDOWING OF MRS. HOLROYD <i>A play in three acts</i>	\$1.50
PSYCHOANALYSIS and the UNCONSCIOUS	\$1.50
FANTASIA of the UNCONSCIOUS	\$2.00

THOMAS SELTZER, PUBLISHER
6 WEST FIFTIETH STREET, NEW YORK

protested against the genteel tradition in American letters and the Puritan tradition in American morals. It was designed, according to the publishers, to help improve the condition of the working people.

A tiny person, short and slim, Seltzer's mental acumen compensated for his size. An apologist for the working class, he was physically incapable of doing a day's work of manual labor. A socialist theorist addicted to endless glasses of Russian tea, cigarettes, and stimulating conversation, Seltzer was referred to as one of the intellectual giants of Greenwich Village.

Early in his career, while on the editorial staff of the monumental twelve-volume *Jewish Encyclopedia* published by Funk & Wagnalls, Seltzer met Adele Szold, an independent young woman. Adele, pronounced in the German manner A-day-la, translated articles written for the *Jewish Encyclopedia* by foreign scholars, and contributed one of her own.² Born in Baltimore on October 26, 1876, to Rabbi and Mrs. Benjamin Szold, Adele had received a good classical education followed by a year at the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Szold was a strong advocate of education for women. Adele, irked by Baltimore's "stiffness," moved to New York, where she met Seltzer. She and Thomas were married on October 21, 1906, in Baltimore. But unable to afford a honeymoon, the newlyweds went directly to their small Greenwich Village flat.

Since Thomas made but a fitful living from writing and translating, Adele took on two jobs. In the morning she was social secretary to Therese Loeb Schiff, wife of financier Jacob Schiff, at her palatial Fifth Avenue mansion. Her afternoons were spent at one dollar per hour as executive secretary of the Federation of Child Study. In her spare time Adele reviewed books and did translations.

Meanwhile the war overseas raged on. "Out of the trenches by Christmas" was the slogan being ballyhooed by industrialist Henry Ford. On December 4, 1915, some ten thousand persons gathered on the pier at Hoboken, New Jersey, to bid bon voyage to "the flivver king" and the giant delegation of ninety peace pilgrims who had joined him aboard the Scandinavian-American Line's *Oscar II*. Thomas Seltzer was a member of the Ford Peace Party's executive committee, and like the rest of the idealists aboard hoped the war would end before the United States could be drawn into it.

Nearly one-half of the Ford group was made up of writers. William C. Bullitt of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, later U.S. ambassador to

Russia and France, was aboard, as was S. S. McClure, editor of *McClure's Magazine* and the *New York Evening Mail*. Newsman Louis Lochner was a chief organizer of the expedition, while Rosika Schimmer, Hungarian pacifist and feminist, was attached to the delegation as "expert adviser" but antagonized almost everyone by her autocratic behavior. Another member was Burnet Hershey, author of *The Odyssey of Henry Ford and the Great Peace Ship*. He wrote that Thomas Seltzer was considering writing a biography of Nobel at the time and "was full of the subject." Henry Ford wanted to know how much money a Nobel Prize winner received. Hershey recalled that according to Seltzer, Ford was not impressed by the \$35,000 figure. "It was Seltzer's recollection that he heard something which sounded like a characteristic Ford reaction: 'Me get this peace prize? Heck I'll give one of my own.'"³

After a rough, wintry crossing in a submarine-infested ocean, the peace-seekers disembarked at Oslo, where Ford, ill with influenza, left the party and sailed for home. Norway was cool to the delegates, Sweden and Denmark were cordial, and the Dutch viewed them with mixed feelings. Seltzer sailed for home with a contingent of his colleagues on January 15, 1916. The strongest impressions he brought back were of the ever-present high silk hats worn by the European dignitaries who greeted them, and the feeling that the expedition's leaders had been too small for the idea behind it. It had been a well-meaning but disorganized attempt to bring sanity to a war-mad world.

In 1917 Seltzer joined the new publishing firm of Boni and Liveright as vice-president and editor of their Modern Library series of world classics. Seltzer, Albert Boni's uncle, bought a third interest in the firm. Among other works, Seltzer compiled and edited *Best Russian Short Stories*, and wrote introductions to Fedor Dostoyevsky's *Poor People* and Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. But the disparate natures and aims of the firm's directors led to disagreements both editorial and financial. Albert Boni, after losing the flip of a coin, pulled out, leaving Horace Liveright the majority owner in July 1918. Seltzer left about four months after his nephew's departure.⁴

Next Seltzer formed in July 1919 a brief partnership with English-born Temple Scott, an experienced writer, editor, and agent. Their first offering was Stefan Zweig's *The Burning Secret*, for which the Austrian writer used the pen name "Stephen Branch." This was followed by

A Landscape Painter, a collection of four stories by Henry James, printed for the first time in America in book form. Early in 1920 Temple Scott decided to withdraw from the firm, and Seltzer took over his interests. Although the partnership lasted but a year, its list of seven books was distinctive. Adele Seltzer wrote to her sister, Henrietta Szold, on March 21: "The firm is no longer Scott & Seltzer, Inc., but Thomas Seltzer, Inc."⁵

But an experimental publishing firm could not have been launched at a worse time financially. Adele wrote on June 15: "There's a business panic; the book trade is dead." Ten days earlier Seltzer had published *Touch and Go: A Play in Three Acts* by D. H. Lawrence. The writer's financial affairs had gone from bad to worse after the suppression in England of his novel *The Rainbow*. In November 1921 Seltzer brought out Lawrence's *Women in Love* in a limited edition of 1,250 copies "for subscribers only." Seltzer's name did not appear on the title page, which stated that the book had been privately printed. Douglas Goldring, a young English writer, stated in *Life Interests* that the manuscript for *Women in Love* had been lying around without a taker for about three years, and that undoubtedly Seltzer's "enterprise in regard to it started the ball rolling again" and put Lawrence across in America.⁶ *Women in Love* did not appear in Great Britain until six months after Seltzer's edition. In 1922 Seltzer published it in a regular edition. As mentioned earlier, he came to be known as "the man who made Lawrence." Adele wrote to her sister Henrietta about her husband and his business: "He's really having a *succès d'estime*, even if not a financial success. One paper referred to him as a 'publisher noted for the remarkable books he issues'—I suppose if one can't have a financial success, the other sort is the next best."⁷

The book trade was currently undergoing a depression of serious proportions. Large solvent concerns held onto their money; Brentano's owed Seltzer \$1,800. This made it hard for him to operate, since he, as a small publisher who took chances on his writers, had to pay as he went along in order to get any work done. The Seltzers were never far from insolvency.

In October 1921 Seltzer published a limited subscription edition of *Casanova's Homecoming* by Arthur Schnitzler, the Austrian physician, playwright, and novelist. That same month Seltzer brought out a regular edition of an anonymous work by a young Austrian girl, *A*

Young Girl's Diary, with a preface by Sigmund Freud. Trouble began when John S. Sumner, executive director of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, decided to go after Seltzer. Sumner, self-appointed guardian of New York's public morals, wielded enormous pressure on the police and other authorities to suppress works he considered pornographic. On July 7, 1922, Sumner visited Seltzer's offices at 5 West 50th Street and carted off all copies of the three books he considered obscene. These were *Women in Love*, *Casanova's Homecoming*, and *A Young Girl's Diary*. In addition copies of the latter book were taken from the shelves of Brentano's and another bookstore, where a saleswoman was arrested.

Seltzer accepted Sumner's challenge and retained a good lawyer, Jonas Goldstein. With battle lines drawn, diverse forces across the country rallied to Seltzer's defense. At the trial, *People vs. Seltzer*, held on July 31 before Judge George W. Simpson of the 54th Street Court, several physicians and prominent educators, including G. Stanley Hall, first president of the American Psychological Association, testified on Seltzer's behalf in regard to *A Young Girl's Diary*. Prudish Sumner had found the book distasteful because it described the curiosity of a child concerning puberty and her growing awareness of sex. Carl Van Doren, literary editor of the *Nation*, testified that *Casanova's Homecoming* was the best piece of fiction "published in the United States in 1921."⁸ Judge Simpson, in rendering his verdict, said: "I have read the books with sedulous care. I find each is a distinct contribution to the literature of the day."⁹ Lawrence's *Women in Love*, he said, was a serious attempt to "discover the motivating power of life." The trial was called one of the most widely discussed cases of book censorship that had ever been before the courts. The *New York Times* for September 13 declared: "Book Censorship Beaten in Court."

Adele wrote to her sister Henrietta on October 6:

So Thomas has come out with colors flying, you may say tricolors flying: a color for vindication, a color for courage, and a color for the excellence of the books he had made it a practice to publish. It was a regular *cause célèbre*. Clippings have come pouring in from all over the country. Everybody is rejoicing. We are getting congratulations from all sides and the weak-kneed publishers are delighted that Thomas has fought their battle for them.¹⁰

Turning his back on the England that had rebuffed him, D. H. Lawrence, accompanied by his wife Frieda, had sailed for the United States. Mrs. Mabel Dodge Sterne, a wealthy patroness, had invited them to live at Taos, New Mexico. After less than three months at Taos, Lawrence felt stifled by Mrs. Sterne's attempt to monopolize his life and retreated to Del Monte Ranch, Questa, some fifteen miles distant. Adele wrote to Henrietta on December 6 that she and Thomas were going to Lawrence's log cabin to spend two weeks with him and Frieda. "You know what I think of D. H. Lawrence—that he's Chaucer, Piers Ploughman, John Bunyan, Fielding, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche rolled into one, modernized and added to," Adele commented. Visiting him would be the "crown and apex" of her entire existence.

Three days before Christmas the Seltzers started for the West. Adele was surprised to find no conveniences in the five-room cabin occupied by the Lawrences. They chopped their own wood, hauled water from holes broken in ice near the house, and made their own fires. Lawrence liked to cook, and part of the program was a daily horseback ride. Adele was thrilled to gallop across the open country with their host. "I think Lawrence means to be absolutely loyal to Thomas," Adele wrote to her sister. The writer was noted for an abiding distrust of publishers. "I simply cannot get over the wonder that we are the publishers of this greatest genius of our age and that we are his publishers, not by having snatched him away from somebody else, but because he really needed us, because we came at a time when he could not get any other publisher."¹¹ *Women in Love* had sold 15,000 copies in the United States in a relatively short time.

Censorship trouble again rose for Thomas when Justice John Ford of the New York Supreme Court came home one evening and found his daughter reading *Women in Love*. The judge organized in March 1923 a Clean Books League with a committee to read and condemn questionable works. Although the Clean Books Bill failed in May, Seltzer was indicted by the grand jury three months later for publishing "unclean" books. In midsummer Seltzer was released on \$1,000 bail.¹² *Publishers' Weekly* ran an editorial in the July 28 issue stating that one gain had been made in the new Seltzer trial in that it would be by jury and not merely by a magistrate.

D. H. Lawrence and Frieda arrived in New York that July. Since Lawrence disliked the city, the Seltzers rented him a cottage in a remote section of the New Jersey hill country near Morris Plains. The Lawrences asked Thomas and Adele to join them there, so for a month the two couples shared the secluded cottage, which they dubbed "Birkindale" after Rupert Birkin, a character in *Women in Love*. Birkin was obviously Lawrence himself. At the cottage Lawrence was occupied with proofreading, while Adele translated a novel by Arthur Schnitzler.

Lawrence occasionally accompanied Thomas when he commuted to his New York office via the Lackawanna Railroad. Although Lawrence disliked city crowds, he enjoyed good company. Thomas arranged a luncheon at which Lawrence met fellow writers William Rose Benét, Christopher Morley, and Henry Seidel Canby.¹³ At another luncheon he was introduced to critic Lewis Gannett, writer John Macy, humorist Franklin P. Adams, and Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the *Nation*.¹⁴ In addition, the Seltzers gave dinner parties for the Lawrences at their New York flat, and entertained them at the Algonquin Hotel, a popular rendezvous for artists and writers.

Later, Lawrence, who had followed Frieda to England after a violent quarrel, tired of Europe and decided to return westward. When the Lawrences, accompanied by the Hon. Dorothy Brett, daughter of an earl, arrived at New York aboard the *Aquitania* on March 11, Thomas was waiting in a near blizzard to welcome them and take them to his flat on 100th Street. Since the small apartment could not accommodate five persons, the Seltzers camped at the office, Lawrence slept at a nearby hotel, while Frieda and Dorothy Brett occupied the flat for a week. Then the Lawrences and Brett left for Taos and the Del Monte Ranch. Although hampered by a chronic lack of operating funds, Thomas scraped up as much as he could to pay for the Lawrences' trip west. He still hoped to be able to pay Lawrence all royalties due him.

Lawrence's suspicions about the shaky state of Seltzer's business had been growing for some time. The writer had turned against previous publishers for one reason or another. Certainly Seltzer was unbusinesslike, unable to do anything on time. That anything got done at the office was due largely to Adele. But despite his problems—he had lost \$7,000 during the year—Thomas managed to publish a sizable list.

Early in 1925 the court case against Seltzer was finally settled. Plagued by financial losses and the prospect of additional expenses, Seltzer felt unable to face prosecution. After copies of *Casanova's Homecoming* and *A Young Girl's Diary* were taken out of circulation and the plates destroyed, Sumner withdrew his suit.

On April 16, 1925, a testimonial dinner was tendered Thomas Seltzer at the Plaza by "The Committee." This group of forty-five friends included Oswald Garrison Villard and Mark Van Doren. The toastmaster was Glenn Frank, editor of *Century* magazine and later president of the University of Wisconsin. A souvenir booklet, *Thomas Seltzer: The First Five Years*, contained thumbnail sketches of seventy-four of his published authors, laudatory letters from prominent persons unable to attend the dinner, and "Books On Our Table," a column reprinted from the *New York Evening Post*.¹⁵

About this time D. H. Lawrence began to break with Seltzer, leaving him for Knopf. Seltzer's long-drawn-out litigation, fighting against censorship, had left him financially drained, unable to pay his authors what he owed them. The year 1926 was the last in which he published regularly. Despite the business break with Lawrence, the Seltzers again entertained him and Frieda in September 1925, just before Lawrence left America for the last time. For the Seltzers the visit was an unhappy one. Dangling on the brink of bankruptcy, they were hurt that Lawrence would leave them in their hour of need. Thomas felt betrayed.

Scott & Seltzer and Thomas Seltzer, Inc, had published some 219 works. Thomas had published more Lawrence first editions than any other firm before or since. After its collapse, the Seltzer business was taken over by Thomas's nephews, the Boni brothers, Albert and Charles. The *New York Times* for September 29, 1943, printed a long obituary column about Seltzer, who had died at age sixty-eight.

A great and eclectic lover of the literature of all nations, Thomas Seltzer, in spite of overwhelming odds, had sought to educate the American public to meet his standards. Many of the authors Seltzer promoted, today important names in the fields of literature and criticism, were then not yet established. Thomas Seltzer lost money on most of his writers, but in the process gave them a foothold to fame. In a short time he compiled one of the most brilliant lists in twentieth-century publishing, which left its distinctive mark on the industry's history.

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Notes

1. Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, Ill., 1964), p. 422.
2. Vol. 3, p. 95.
3. Burnet Hershey, *The Odyssey of Henry Ford and the Great Peace Ship* (New York, 1970), pp. 16 – 17.
4. Walker Gilmer, *Horace Liveright: Publisher of the Twenties* (New York, 1970), pp. 16 – 19.
5. Adele Seltzer’s letters to Henrietta Szold are in the Henrietta Szold Private Archives, Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
6. Douglas Goldring, *Life Interests* (London, 1948), p. 86.
7. Undated, but Henrietta Szold noted on it that it was received at Jerusalem about April 5, 1921; Szold Private Archives.
8. *New York Times*, July 19, 1923.
9. Quoted in a publicity advertisement of Thomas Seltzer, Inc., and enclosed in Adele’s letter of October 6, 1922; Szold Private Archives.
10. Letter of October 6, 1922; Szold Private Archives.
11. January 16, 1923; Szold Private Archives.
12. G. Thomas Tanselle, “The Thomas Seltzer Imprint,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 58 (1964): 398 – 401.
13. Henry Seidel Canby, *American Memoir* (Boston, 1947), p. 325.
14. From an interview with the Seltzers by reporter Anne Whelan, *Bridgeport* (Conn.) *Sunday Post*, February 27, 1938.
15. Copy owned by Alexandra Lee Levin.