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Censorship and *A Farewell to Arms*

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Studies in American Fiction

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 1991

pp. 85-93

10.1353/saf.1991.0026

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

CENSORSHIP AND A FAREWELL TO ARMS Scott Donaldson The College of William and Mary Most of Ernest Hemingway's books were banned in one place or another, at one time or another.¹ A Farewell to Arms was banned in Boston, or, rather, the second installment of a six-part serial version of the novel running in Scribner's Magazine was banned there on June 20, 1929, by police chief Michael H. Crowley, who brought his wide expertise in such matters to bear and pronounced the book "salacious." Though his ruling barred distribution of the magazine by Boston booksellers and newsstands for the run of the serial over the next four months, it had little or no effect on the overall circulation figures of the magazine and undoubtedly served to stimulate sales of the book when it was published on September 27. But the police chief's action did help resolve an incipient dispute between Hemingway and his publishers in the latter's favor and to shape the final version of the novel. The most idiotic censorships often have unfortunate consequences. Maxwell Perkins rarely laid a glove on Hemingway's prose, once the author had become a property Scribners (the book publishers) could both market and be proud of. But in the early years he and Hemingway

were often at odds over the language of his books. Perkins was thrust into the position of mediator between his old-guard conservative publishers, as personified by the strait-laced figure of Charles Scribner, and a young writer who took it as his duty to set down the way people talked, even if that led him into the realm of obscenity. If it is true that Perkins was an "editor of genius," as his biographer A. Scott Berg calls him, it was in this capacity of middleman, quieting the outraged sensibilities of old Scribner while soothing the outsized ego of young Hemingway. "Do ask him for the absolute minimum of necessary changes, Max," Fitzgerald had implored the ir editor in connection with *The Sun Also Rises*.² That was sound advice, for Hemingway early and late resisted any change in his copy. But at the same time, Perkins worked for a man who "would no sooner allow profanity in one of his books than he would invite friends to use his parlor as a toilet. . . ." Faced with this dilemma, Perkins first persuaded Scribners to publish *The Sun Also Rises*, dirty words and all ("We took it with misgivings," he reported after the editorial conference) on the grounds that the firm would suffer if knowledge of their rejecting *Sun* got about among young writers.³ Then he started working on Hemingway to eliminate some of the objectionable verbiage. Out came even the suggestion of shitty, in Bill Gorton's *Irony*⁸⁶ Scott Donaldson and Pity jingle. Out came the bulls' balls, to be replaced by more acceptable horns. Out came the explicit reference to Henry James' bicycle. It was some trick, this balancing act between author and publisher, and in the context it became clear that Perkins' own sensibilities often lay close to those of his employer. People were now attacking books on the grounds "of 'decency' which means words," he wrote Hemingway. "In view of this, I suggest that a particular adjunct of the bulls referred to a number of times ... be not spelled out, but covered by a blank."⁴ Hemingway might write openly of the bulls' balls, but Perkins could not bring himself to put the word on paper. Three years later, editor and author were once more engaged in the same kind of charade. On a February 1929 visit to Key West, Perkins read the script of *A Farewell to Arms* between fishing excursions on the Gulf Stream. He liked the book very much, but recognized the problems it might pose. "BOOK VERY FINE BUT DIFFICULT IN SPOTS," he wired New York. Later, in a letter to Charles Scribner, he expanded on the point: "It is Hemingway's principle both in life and literature never to flinch from facts, and it is in that sense only, that the book is difficult. It isn't at all erotic, although love is represented as..."

CENSORSHIP AND A FAREWELL TO ARMS

Scott Donaldson

The College of William and Mary

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