

Charles Scribner Jr., Who Headed Publishing Company, Dies at 74

By ERIC PACE

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Charles Scribner Jr., the longtime head of the Charles Scribner's Sons book publishing company, died on Saturday at the Mary Manning Walsh nursing home on York Avenue in Manhattan. He was 74 and lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan for half a century.

The cause was pneumonia, and he had suffered for a decade from a degenerative neurological disorder, said his son Charles Scribner 3d.

Charles Scribner Jr. succeeded his father in 1952 as chief of the family publishing house, which had been founded by his great-grandfather in 1846. Charles Scribner Jr. oversaw its operations until 1984, when it was acquired by Macmillan, another American publishing company.

He was also Ernest Hemingway's personal editor and publisher in the last portion of Hemingway's career. "He once gave me some rules of life," Mr. Scribner recalled a few years ago. "Among them: 'Always do sober what you said you'd do when you were drunk. That will teach you to keep your mouth shut!'"

Mr. Scribner held the titles of president of Charles Scribner's Sons from 1952 to 1977, chairman in 1977 and 1978, and chairman of the Scribner Book Companies -- of which Charles Scribner's Sons had become a unit -- from 1978 until he retired in 1986.

He was also a trustee of Princeton University from 1969 to 1979, president of the Princeton University Press from 1957 to 1968, a trustee of the press from 1949 to 1981 and president of the American Book Publishers Council, an industry group, from 1966 to 1968.

In his volume of memoirs, "In the Company of Writers: A Life in Publishing" (Scribner, 1991), Mr. Scribner said that he would rather have had a career in academic life but that he had "thought it would break my parents' hearts if I didn't go into the firm." He also observed that when he became president of the house, "I was no more prepared at age 30 to take over Scribner's than to land on the moon."

In that 1991 work, which was based on an oral history by Joel R. Gardner, he also recounted various mistakes he had made as a publisher. What they amounted to, the New York Times critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote, was that "he held too long to a past

ideal of gentlemanly publishing, when a handshake was a deal and writers looked upon their publisher as a friend."

In that book's pages, Mr. Scribner voiced his belief that the family company, known for publishing fiction by Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe and James Jones, had been weighed down by the tradition begun in an earlier era by its famous editor Maxwell Perkins. "We were top-heavy with novels," Mr. Scribner observed, and he said the house had neglected to do enough with other kinds of books.

But, Mr. Lehmann-Haupt wrote: "Gradually, Mr. Scribner did get his company moving again. He streamlined his operations. He put out his own soft-cover editions. He started a successful line of reference books."

In 1978, Charles Scribner's Sons acquired another publishing house, Atheneum, and the corporate entity changed its name to the Scribner Book Companies to reflect that acquisition.

After the publishing operation was acquired by Macmillan, the Charles Scribner's Sons name continued to appear on some books published by Macmillan.

Later, Macmillan was bought by the parent company of the publishing house Simon & Schuster, and now the Charles Scribner's Sons imprint, shortened to Scribner, is used by Simon & Schuster on many new general-interest books. The reference book division of Simon & Schuster now publishes some books under the Charles Scribner's Sons imprint.

Bookstores that had been founded by the Scribner family were also sold during the era in which Mr. Scribner was at the helm of the publishing house.

The first disabilities that his neurological disorder caused were the loss of his abilities to read and to write. Nonetheless, he became the author of two books in that period, "In the Company of Writers" and a collection of writings by him, "In the Web of Ideas: the Education of a Publisher" (Scribner, 1993), which also won critics' praise.

Mr. Scribner was also a trustee of Skidmore College and of Blair Academy, in Blairstown, N.J.

He was born in Quogue, L.I., grew up in Far Hills, N.J., and went on to graduate from St. Paul's School in Concord, N.H., and to receive an A.B. degree summa cum laude from Princeton University in 1943. He was a Navy cryptanalyst during World War II and the Korean War.

In addition to his son Charles 3d of Manhattan, who is an editor at Scribner, he is survived by his wife of 46 years, the former Joan Sunderland; two other sons, Blair Sunderland Scribner and John Scribner, both of Manhattan, and two grandchildren.

Photo: Charles Scribner Jr. (The New York Times, 1984)

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