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 **Hotten: Rotten: Forgotten? An Apologia for a General
Publisher**

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

**Hotten:
Rotten: Forgotten? An Apologia for a General Publisher**

Simon Eliot (bio)

John Camden Hotten (1832–73) has had a very poor press from both his contemporaries and later historians. At best, his actions have been regarded as shady and, at worst, positively criminal. All the best stories concerning Hotten involve dubious deals, exploitation of writers, violent arguments, and even hints of blackmail.¹ It may well be that most of the stories are true or, at least, true enough to justify the publisher's Machiavellian image.

It was certainly the case that less egregious publishers—who, nevertheless, were not always above the occasional dubious deal or mild piece of author exploitation—would welcome an almost comic character whose excesses made their sharp practice seem blunt. At a time when British publishing was undergoing a period of rapid and sometimes painful transition, when new and pushy firms were beginning to hustle, it was comforting to have someone to remind authors that, however unhappy they were with their current publisher, there was always Hotten to confirm that things could be worse.

In histories of the exploitation of contemporary texts unprotected by copyright, Hotten had always been a useful British counterweight to all those examples of unprincipled American reprinting. If the British cried, in accusation, “Dickens, Eliot, and Thackeray!” the Americans could retort, “Artemis Ward, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain!” all of whom, at one time or another, Hotten had liberated into the British market.

Even Hotten's death, like a Christmas cracker, could provide a joke and a moral. Swinburne—whose *Poems and Ballads* (1866) had been rescued and published by Hotten when its original publisher Moxon had got cold feet—commented, “When I heard that he [Hotten] had died of a surfeit of **[End Page 61]** porkchops, I observed that this was a serious argument against my friend Richard Burton's views on cannibalism as a wholesome and natural method of diet.”² There is another apocryphal story—many of the stories about Hotten have a mythic quality—concerning George R. Sims (alternative sources suggest that it was Ambrose Bierce), who, having finally got a check out of the publisher, was unable to cash it because of Hotten's death soon afterward. In his frustration, Sims was

said to have coined the epitaph “Hotten: rotten: forgotten.”³

With such a patently flawed and sometimes farcical figure, it is tempting never to go much beyond the prescriptive. In Hotten’s case, however, that would be a mistake. If, for just a moment, we could suspend judgment and conduct a straightforward exercise in descriptive history; if we could stop prying into the process and instead observe the product, we might be rather surprised at what we discovered.

John William (later changed to “Camden”) Hotten was born of Cornish parents on 12 September 1832 in Clerkenwell, London. In 1846 he was apprenticed to a bookseller, John Petheram, of 71 Chancery Lane. Only two years later, Hotten left for the West Indies with his brother. Mark Twain, an author who had suffered a number of unauthorized reprints at the hands of Hotten, claimed that this was because the apprentice had been found running a bookselling business on his own account and with some of his master’s stock.⁴ From the West Indies the two brothers moved on to the United States, where Hotten acquired some experience as a journalist. He returned to the UK in 1856 and set up as a bookseller in a small shop at 151B Piccadilly. By 1858 he was also publishing in a modest way. In the 1850s and 1860s he contributed to a number of journals and wrote a string of books. As his activities expanded, he moved into a larger shop at 74–75 Piccadilly, where he continued bookselling and publishing until his death on 14 June 1873. Andrew Chatto, who had worked for Hotten since 1856—latterly as his general manager—bought the firm from Hotten’s widow, Charlotte, with the help of his sleeping partner, the (very) amateur poet, W. E. Windus, one of whose collections of verse had been published by Hotten.⁵ In 1873 the firm founded by Hotten became known as Chatto...



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