4
Rivals of Tillotsons

As was suggested in the previous chapter, although W.F. Tillotson could claim to be the creator of the first major fiction syndicate in Britain, others were planning to enter the field almost before the ink was dry on the agreement with John Maxwell. By the mid-1870s there were at least three other organizations selling serial fiction to provincial newspapers nationwide. From the middle of the following decade the Bolton firm was forced to modify its business strategies significantly in response to the activities of its rivals. It is important to distinguish here between narrower and broader definitions of the competition Tillotsons faced. Like all agents, Willie Tillotson was a middleman, first buying the serial rights to fiction from authors and then selling them on to a number of other newspaper proprietors. From Leader and Sons in 1873 to the Northern Newspaper Syndicate 20 years later, throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century there were agencies being created which tried to do more or less the same thing. But these direct competitors proved less of a threat to the Fiction Bureau than the indirect rivals who began to emerge after 1880. Some were the new professional London literary agents who normally did not buy and sell at all, but took a commission from the price paid by a wide range of publishers or further middlemen to the author. Others were a new generation of large-circulation metropolitan weeklies, which began to purchase serials by popular novelists at top prices. In this chapter, we will look at the different bodies competing with Tillotsons under three headings: ‘Direct competitors’; ‘A.P. Watt and the literary agency’; and ‘W.C. Leng and Co. and the metropolitan weekly’. The activities of A.P. Watt and W.C. Leng and Co. will receive rather more detailed attention, and not only for the reason that more...
detailed evidence has survived in these cases. The two are of par-
ticular interest because both began in direct and predatory competition
with Tillotsons, but soon evolved into even more threatening indi-
rect competitors.

4.1 Direct competitors

Of course throughout the Golden Age of the major fiction syndi-
cates it was still possible to by-pass the middlemen altogether. As
they had been in the 1850s and 1860s, authors were free to make
direct approaches to individual provincial newspaper publishers. This
still seems to have happened commonly in the case of local writers,
like the Revd W.M. Philip who in 1878 was offered £20 for the
publication of a short serial novel in the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*
(Finance Committee Minutes, 4 October, AJR). There were also co-
gent ideological or economic motives on the part of certain editors
and novelists for avoiding the syndicators. Some of the most suc-
cessful provincial city newspapers with large circulations, like the *Glasgow Weekly Herald, Glasgow Weekly Mail* or *Manchester Weekly
Times*, obviously considered that they were above the necessity of
joining ‘coteries’ and were sometimes prepared to pay for exclusive
rights to the work of established writers. Alexander Sinclair, editor
of the *Herald*, suggested that the use of syndicated fiction by an
established newspaper was ‘apt to give readers the impression that
they are being asked to pay for matter which is cheap common
property’ (184).

As already noted, the *Weekly Herald* began to feature serials by
members of its own editorial staff at the end of the 1860s, but
appears not to have accepted material through the syndicators until
1880, Wilkie Collins’s *The Black Robe* from Leaders perhaps being
the first (Law, ’Wilkie’, 257–9). But during the 1870s, alongside
anonymous works by local writers or members of the editorial staff,
readers had the exclusive privilege of reading the latest works by
authors with established metropolitan reputations. These included
the Scotsmen William Black (*A Daughter of Heth* in 1870) and George
MacDonald (*Malcolm* in 1874), as well as George Meredith with
*The Egoist* in 1879–80 (under the title *Sir Willoughby Patterne, the
Egoist*). Similarly, the Manchester weekly seems to have accepted
material from the syndicators only occasionally until the 1890s,
but exclusive arrangements were nevertheless made with a number
of well-known authors: most notably Jessie Fothergill (*Kith and Kin*