International Dateline -- Adventurers All

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**International Dateline — Adventurers All**

by Rita Ricketts (Blackwell’s Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk’) <Rita.Ricketts@ousls.ox.ac.uk>

The Blackwells played Ulysses: they were brave enough to take the risk of launching poets, at their own expense: “Come my friends, tis not too late, to seek a new world. It may be that the gulls will wash us down. It may be we shall touch the happy isles. Yet our purpose holds: To sail beyond the sunset.”

**Introduction**

Leafing through the Bodleian and Merton Blackwell Collections, *Adventurers All*, I was struck by the many female authors, a fact which strongly represented on the list of Basil Blackwell’s early endeavours, as it was when his father started out, the infant publishing house went from strength to strength. With his father still at the helm, Basil added names that would become famous. Wilfred Owen’s poems, for example, were first published in *Wheels* (1919). Whereas *Adventurers All* tended to follow the work of one writer, *Wheels* and *Oxford Outlook*, launched by Basil between 1916 and 1919, were edited by a “team,” although now by “team spirit.”

Among Basil’s teams of “moving spirits,” over time, were such writers-to-be as Graham Greene, Cecil Day Lewis, John Sparrow, John Betjeman, Harold Acton, Gilbert Hight, L. P. Hartley, Walter de la Mare, Eleanor Farjeon, Beverley Nichols, the Huxley brothers, Roy Harrod, Louis McNeice and the redoubtable Richard Crossman. They included the earliest published work of Stephen Spender, Dorothy L. Sayers, Louis Goulding, Edmund Blunden, A. L. Rowe, Guedalla, James Laver, Isaiah Berlin, A. L. Rouse and LAG Strong. They found themselves in the good company of poets such as Sassoon, Meyerstein, Powys Mathers, the Sittwells, and Christopher Morley, with his Eight Sin. Among these Harold Acton “was…very determined, as a poet, in those days.” “He was an exotic bird of plumage” and the “envy” of undergraduates when they looked in at Mr. Blackwell’s shop-window to see the multi-coloured binding of his first book of poems, *Aquarium*. Acton edited for Oxford Poetry, and Oxford Outlet, or *The New Oxford*. One of his contemporaries, Peter Quennell, another “Blackwellian editor” who would-be poet, reflected that Acton bought a cosmopolitan flavour to the proceedings: “An English household and the English educational system still limited our view of life…when the Oxford term ended, we were back to our prosaic English homes.” Harold, however, returned to La Pietra, with its cypress avenues, romantic garden statues, and his collection of original “Benvenuto Cellini coins,” designed for a “fastidious pope” who was probably as adept as Acton in knowing “just how far to go too far.”

With valiant intrepidity, Acton, and Quennell, “cast their net wide”: “our contributors included poets we had read and admired, and some we did not know at all, and of whom we never heard again. Our collection, whatever its merits may have been, was decidedly unorthodox.” The book critic of *Cherwell* pointed out: “The editors of this year’s *Oxford Poetry,…have fulfilled their difficult task with a somewhat surprising result; they have not taken the icing of the cake; they have given us a cross section of it. …Their selection has been admirably catholic.” On its pages were the “very funny” and “vulgar” poems of the “flamboyant” Brian Howard, Acton’s “rival aesthete and friend-enemy.” John Betjeman remembered one of his offerings, “with an enjoyable line,” in which he compared a piece of “furtive music” to the sound of “biscuits being rubbed together.” Aldous Huxley looks close to home: “…I look out of the window and find Much to satisfy the mind. Mark how the furrows, formed and wheeled In a motion orderly and said….”

Despite all Basil’s good intentions, to get as many writers as possible into print, (their voices being heard at his sister’s regular readings in the shop on Saturday evenings), the passage of his volumes was not always smooth. The vicarious time-traveller can only guess at the rivalry and in-fighting that must have gone on among the editors, “as they chose whose works were to be singled out for publication and those whose were not!” An inking of this wrangling can be gleaned from a letter from Stephen Spender to Basil Blackwell, where he describes some of the horse-trading. Spender speculated whether or not Wyndham Lewis would still publish his poems, in his next issue of *The Enemy*: “I daresay he won’t because he may have quarrelled with me.” Or was it to be “a quid pro quo for the four poems he (Lewis) had lifted from Oxford Poetry?” Spender rhythmically muted the legality of this: “did it breach copyright?” Spender, writing from Germany after the war, (he was living in Berlin at the time) sent along, with Shiner and Auden) and boasting of his sun tan: “brown all over!” he lamented that Louis MacNeice, who was a co-editor, had run off with the manuscript for the next issue of *Oxford Poetry*. The poems were, in any case, “rather depressing;” but he felt confident “we can choose the onlyacceptable one.” Thus the editor, “Poor” maybe viewed from Spender and MacNeice’s poetical heights, but Basil was not a man of so little faith. He was not part of the fraternity that ordered the ranking of poets; as he pointed...
out: “as one coterie became established, so another was on its way out.” He just wanted to get their selections into print; on the proviso, of course, that he judged them to be “worth the candle.”

Publishing worthwhile work, as was Basil and his father’s wont, was not enough to guarantee their publishing house. Added to which, many of their writers scurried to London as soon as they were recognized. Basil saw his “names” appearing in the lists of Macmillan, Cape, Faber, and many more: “Sic vos non vobis mollificatis apes,” he declared — “thus not for you, ye bees, names appearing in the lists of authors, we judged them to be “worth the candle.”

Our discussion raised no difficulties. He would revise his typescript according to my suggestions, and bring it to Oxford again in a week or two to meet the artist in my room, and to complete the preliminary plans for publication.

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He courteously excused himself from lunching with me, for he was anxious to be getting home. When was his train? He had bicycled. I thought that as a man he rode two of his two-wheeled contrivances hardly be amiss, but let it go at that, and proposed a day for the next meeting.

A look of pain came into his eye as he asked me, very gently, if the day after would be equally convenient, for his wife had just undergone a very serious operation of doubtful value, and the day I had offered was that on which he was to bring his wife home from Swindon hospital. So ‘the day after,’ and the hour of 2.30 was agreed, and Alfred Williams went his way.

At noon of the day appointed came a telegram: ‘Alfred Williams died in his sleep yesterday.’ It was signed by a name unknown to me, and there was no address.

Two or three days I was asked if I would see someone who ‘wished to tell me about Alfred Williams.’ But Alfred Williams was a man (as I soon learned) who had sent the telegram. He was stone-blind.

He told me that he had been Alfred Williams’s closest friend, and that he felt I ought to be told the whole story: He felt it was due to his friend and due to me, and as he sat before me with the strange stillness and slow speech of the blind, this honest man spoke words that made my ears tingle. ‘Heart failure? I supposed. ‘Well, that’s what the doctor said, but I’m afraid it was starvation. That and bicycling into Swindon every day, and then that hill up to the hospital to see her. You see, I found his bank book, and since Christmas he has spent only twenty-six pounds (it was then late June), and there was little left.’

Even so Alfred Williams had saved a bit, for we found in a drawer a pound note, on which he had written ‘for port-wine for Mary,’ and I fancy he was starving himself to give her comforts in hospital.

‘And she? Was her operation successful?’ It was a forlorn hope. It’s a cancer, you see, and she can’t last long. She had been looking forward to coming home, and her husband had promised to come for her early on Friday. She had put her head at the window looking out, and came to the hospital that he had been found dead in his bed. They did not know how to tell her, and she sat there waiting and waiting. Now she’s home, and so near gone that, when I sit by her bed, sometimes I strain my ears to hear if she is still breathing, and can’t hear a sound; and I’ll say gently, “Are you there, Mary?” and she’ll whisper, “Yes, Harry.” And so, bit by bit, came out the story of Alfred Williams and his wife Mary, a country boy, like Jude the Obscure, he was set to work in the fields, but his thirst for learning drove him to the town of Swindon, where after the day’s shift in the Railway Works, he taught himself Latin and Greek (and his wife Mary, too, had to adjust his sights. For just over a decade, he had indulged his love of publishing. But his publishing adventures were, to some extent, to be curtailed by the death of his father in 1924.

## Column Editor’s Note:

The next installment reveals Basil, despite his onerous duties as the incomparable Gaffer of the fast-expanding Blackwell empire, adapting in the rarefied world of fine printing through the medium of the Shakespeare Head Press. — RR

### Endnotes

2. *Basil Blackwell’s* “version” of *Tennyson.*
11. This list was compiled by Basil Blackwell, 18 May, 1977, mostly from memory as most of the books were lost.
13. Peter Quennell, ibid, pp57-58.