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International Dateline -- On the Point of a Needle

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“Unlike medieval historians...who used to speculate as to how many angels could stand on the point of a needle...Blackwellians, although not angels, did indeed stand on the point of a needle,” asserted Sir Basil Blackwell: “It was Nancy Blackwell’s skill in embroidery that led to the founding of ‘Blackwell’s of the Broad.’”

Introduction

In this latest article Rita Ricketts introduces us to the Blackwellian women. It is perhaps through their lives that we can gain an insight into the creative genius of the Blackwell men, which transformed one small room into an empire. That the firm was ever re-established, after the death of Benjamin Harris, is largely due to his wife Nancy (Anne Nancy Sterling Blackwell) who was determined to see the name “B H Blackwell bookseller” revived in her elder son, Benjamin Henry.1 On New Year’s Day 1879 her wish was fulfilled; her son opened the door to a small one-roomed shop, above which the name “B H Blackwell’s” was painted, at a central site in Oxford’s Broad Street. Sir Basil described his grandmother as “being in the right tradition of great Victorian women, who thought more of their duty than of their rights.” With these qualities she endowed her son, and seeing him established was reward enough. But that she had been able to see her son through school and an apprenticeship as lengthy as Jacob’s was to Laban could indeed be said, as Sir Basil later wrote, “to stand on the point of a needle.” It was indeed his “grandmother’s skill in embroidery which made what she did possible.”

Warrior Women

Left to fend for her family at the age of 32, Nancy moved to cheap rented quarters at 1 Jews Mount, subsequently called Bulwarks Lane, looking down on the terminus of the Oxford and Birmingham Canal; now the site of Nuffield College.2 Henceforth she made a living plying her dressmaking skills and teaching embroidery.4 Her good craftsmanship brought her to the attention of the Conventual Sisters of St Thomas, whose habits she helped to make. And her fine needlework, in the best traditions of the Oxford Movement, embellished many a ceremonial ecclesiastical vestment.5 But her skills also caught the attention of a secular and more lucrative market, where she captured a corner with her elaborately spangled waistcoats. The vague notion of Victorian undergraduates at the time, they were to be seen on “young Pendennis, who, during his time at the university, was rather a dressy man and loved to array himself in splendour. He and his polite friends would dress themselves out with as much care in order to go and dine at each other’s rooms, as other folks would who were going to ensable a mistress... but what follies will not youth perpetrate with its own admirable gravity and simplicity?” And the Blackwell’s were to profit from their “folly.” As the family fortunes picked up, Nancy moved the family, together with a boarder-apprentice and a servant, to larger, more spacious, quarters at 46, Holywell Street, in 1874; a house large enough to let lodgings in term time.6

Within a year of the opening of the Broad Street Shop in 1879 Nancy went to live with her son “over the shop,” as his diary records.8 There she remained until she died aged 64, on the 4 June 1887. “Her mission in life abundantly accomplished,” Anne Nancy Sterling was buried among her kinswomen, the weavers and fullers of the old medieval village of the Holy Wells, beside the church of St Cross. Thus she rejoined her husband, Benjamin Harris:

“Some natural tears they’d drop’, but wiped them soon; The world was all before them, where to choose Thir place of rest, and providence their guide: They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, Through Eden took this solitari way.”

Their way had not been so solitary, and they are not forgotten. But for all Nancy Blackwell gave the firm it’s spectacularly successful new start, neither she nor her descendant Blackwell women played any formal role in the bookselling and publishing businesses. They too earned their laurels, but elsewhere. Nancy’s daughter Matilda went as a missionary to South Africa. Lilla, wife of the second B H Blackwell, was a teacher and organist. Her daughter Dorothy was a hospital matron, nursing during two world wars. Christine Blackwell, wife of Basil, was a successful classicist with a First from London University. She worked for the Greek scholar Gilbert Murray; an avid and eloquent champion of women’s rights. That Christine was a classical scholar should not come as a surprise when you know that her three daughters were named Helen (of Troy?), Penelope (the faithful wife of Odysseus?) and Corinna (Corinna: the ancient Greek poet alleged to be the teacher of and rival to the better-known Theban poet Pindar?). All three daughters inherited, and exhibited, the radical and individualistic traits of their father’s side.

To this day, Corinna, an avid environmentalist, fights the Blackwell cause of academic book-selling and is as iconoclastic as ever were her father and grandfather. And it is Corinna who had the energy and foresight to preserve the Blackwell archives. Dame Penelope followed her grandfather’s and father’s interest in Liberal politics, gaining prominence in the Party; she too brought up children alone after the death of her journalist husband. Their father always professed ignorance “as to how they could juggle so many things.” And while he admitted that “half his self was lost” at the death of his “peerless secretary of forty years,” he retained a very heavily reinforced glass ceiling within the firm. As a student at Merton he lamented that “female undergraduates were remote mysterious and chaperoned creatures.” But while he rejoiced in the success, elegance and grace of one woman in the Greats School, whose name he discovered from a scrutiny of her bicycle, he recorded that this “Phoebe W. had her reward when she married her history tutor.” For Basil, this was “a proper ending for a clever girl!” It is not on record what Basil’s mother Lilla thought of this chauvinism!

Like Nancy Blackwell before her, Lilla had had to take on the role of bread-winner. It is interesting that the Blackwell men seemed to have a penchant for choosing women who could weather adversity! Basil’s sister Dorothy saw her mother as a latter day Boadicea “because she was a fearless fighter against injustice,” while Basil described her as having “something of the country air about her.” As a free spirit, he recorded, she found it “difficult to adjust herself to the stratified society” of Victorian Oxford.9 She inveighed against the gulf that existed between the Townsfolk and Gownsfolk of Oxford, a stance which appalled and dismayed her husband, who had grown up to regard the two as “irreconcilable and fixed.”10 To occupy her two small children in the confined space above the shop, Lilla would tell stories of country larks on the Norfolk farm where she grew up.12 Among these stands the indelible image of Lilla as a small village girl, always showing off in front of her peers, dressed up as the village zany (idiot). Taking no pains to conceal her jest, she was discovered by the real “village zany” who gave chase: a chase Lilla never forgot! Other stories brought to life the harvest home suppers. When the hard work was done: “the hay cart was brought round filled with clean straw, and the little children laid in and covered with a tarpaulin ... the horses back with sweat in the stable, the small kegs of brandy, … and the townie cousins, visiting from London, to be ‘initiated’!”

“All sang, (and after sixty years) The singing lingers in my ears From wagon-tops, while bearing back The end of harvest to the stack;”

Lilla, together with her four sisters and one brother, Jack, enjoyed a carefree and happy early childhood. They lived in a roomy and pleasant farmhouse, “with French windows opening onto the lawn, and hanging creepers.”11 Lilla loved to recall the one outstanding, and rather dramatic, feature of the Taylor children’s childhood home: “the huge crater before the front door where a thunderbolt had once struck.” Typically it was this image that had stuck in the mind of the continued on page 81
imaginative Lilla. But her image of her father was equally clear. John Taylor, as she had told her children, was a strong, thickset man “with a golden spade-beard and kind blue eyes.” Her father, owning and farming his own land in the Norfolk village of Blo’t Norton, “was much respected as an honest and upright man.” Guided by his grand-daughter’s written record, it is not difficult to “see” John Taylor “with his square bowler hat set askew, walking through the lanes on the way to market at Diss.” On rare but memorable occasions, Lilla was allowed to accompany her father to market. Here she would wander off from the din of stock auctions, and the farmers haggling over prices, to be tantalised by the colourful displays of wares on the general stalls. Lilla’s memories of these halcyon days were, alas, soon to be overlaid by those of tragedy.

Despite the cheerful demeanour of the Taylor family, the livelihood of rural England, and small farmers in particular, was being threatened by the reform of the Corn Laws. This reform changed the face of rural England forever; in its wake came the destruction of so many small farms who were unable to contend with the influx of cheap corn from Canada. Sadly, John Taylor, along with hundreds of others, suffered this fate. Dorothy Blackwell recorded her mother’s poignant account of the day their farm went under the hammer. Down below, in the farm courtyard, in front of his eyes, John Taylor saw the whole disastrous spectacle where “his horses and possessions were all being sold.” John was broken-hearted. His death was untimely, and his good strong life largely unrewarded. Lilla, on the other hand, like the husband she was to meet, was determined to find a means to overcome the family’s tragedy. Typical of many dutiful daughters, and sons, of the time, Lilla put aside any thoughts of marriage and stayed on at the farm to care for her mother. By becoming the village schoolmistress, and playing the harmonium in church, her daughter Dorothy recorded, Lilla was able to maintain her mother in the old farm until she too was laid to rest next to her husband in the village graveyard, in the company of other faithful old servants who had succumbed to cancer “the scourge of that part of Norfolk.”

Lilla’s sense of fun was matched by her sensitivity and telepathic leanings, wrote her daughter: “In a dream my mother described the tossing manes and red nostrils that were the portents of disaster. At some much later date she woke my father up at 2 am to say “I have been in the horse fair and Jack (her brother) is dead.” And truly news came that Jack had died at that time, tragically, from an overdose of laudanum. Dorothy added that her mother’s telepathy may have been passed on. In 1928, as Lilla lay dying, Basil Blackwell was telephoned from Blo’t Norton by an old pupil of hers asking if all was well with Mrs. Blackwell as she had been compellingly aware of her all day! Lilla’s stories of her brother Jack, riding high on his horse across the wind-swept fields of Norfolk were also the stuff of myths for her children. Not content with the cramped rural life, Jack sought his fortune in Canada as a “trapper.” Here, according to Lilla, “he was in his element … and he was a wild one.” Yet in his native village, many years after his death, his fine horsemanship was still legendary, as was his reputation as “an amateur vet” and “one who would lift a horse off the ground.”

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The Ghost in Hamlet, when he invented a story to deceive the theatre manager to “help” the audience. “And, pray, how do you know that, Basil?” Christine asked. Basil parried “that he knew it exactly the same way the Catholics knew the Virgin went to heaven in the flesh — through the imagination.” “And I hope you told Mr. Knight that,” came Christine’s swift rejoinder.

The Blackwell women were renowned for having the last word, and Christine was no exception; her often-heard tart rejoinder of “Rubbish Basil!” was not far removed from Dame Alice More’s
“Tilly Vally Master More.” A skilled tactician, she let Basil have his head, or let him think he had it anyway. And so this partnership continued until they could be likened to Matthew Arnold’s “bright and aged snakes.” Christine termed this period “injury time.” They agreed that “be this long or short, this time was to be reckoned as a bonus.”

Shortly after their sixty-second wedding anniversary, Basil wrote, “my beloved was gradually withdrawn from us as life ebbed… Her courage remained invincible… Now the tide is in full flood, bringing the numerous treasures of precious memories. Laus Deo.” Her garden remains as a tribute:

“While by the rosebed gay you stood, and Revelled in the multitude of blooms with unfamiliar names, and tints Not like the myriads known before, and hasted in Appleton.  Designed around the principles of William Morris, their house appeared modest and bare.  Furnished with heavy unpolished oak tables and chairs, it had the look of a rambling cottage.  It must have been a haven of freedom for the young Blackwells. While Christine allowed her children considerable freedom; they were often observed romping barefoot down the lanes, Basil referred to them as “the Philistines.” Christine’s father disapproved of the children’s “local accents” and they were, according to her own accounts “in need of a good deal of disciplining.” But Philistines, the Blackwell children, were not. They inherited their parents, and grandparent’s, love of books, and provided a testing-ground for Basil’s developing interest in children’s literature. Just as Benjamin Henry had taught his son and daughter to read the classics, so Christine and Basil encouraged their three daughters and two sons. Christine took a deep interest in education and her contacts with local schools helped to find promising recruits for the firm. Her judgement, according to her husband, was immaculate. One or two of the girls recruited in this way, and much admired by both Christine and Basil Blackwell, have only now come up to retirement. Their stories provide a living memory of Blackwell’s and Blackwellsians.

Christine, as much as Basil, gathered around her a host of literary and bookish friends who would she often cox out of shyness and reserve. Most memorably, as Basil recorded, was the way she broke the spell that bound May Morris so firmly to the past and to the ghost of her father (William Morris). Another of Christine’s converts was Dorothy L. Sayers (DLS), who was a regular visitor. DLS writes of her debut at seeing Christine with “a sweet baby on he knee.” But unlike Christine she managed to wangle a formal place in the firm. By 1916 Basil had enough work to justify the employment of an editorial assistant. Interviewing DLS in his father’s workroom he was confronted with a “tall, very slim young woman, dressed in a formal blue serge costume with informal yellow stockings.” It soon emerged that the youthful, and very bright, DLS was more interested in gaining an entrée into publishing than in the detailed and meticulous work required of a trainee editor. Within a year she managed to add her own first volume of poems to the Blackwell list. The volume was published in the Adventurers All series, and at number nine she followed in the footsteps of Elizabeth Rendall and Ester Lilian Duff, with other women appearing in Oxford Poetry.

Similarly women made their mark in the Blackwell poetry series Wheels: 1916 Edith Sitwell, Nancy Cunard, Helen Rootham; 1917 editions, Lucy Hawkins, Marian Ramic, Emma Gurney Salter, Doreen Wallace, Beatrice Llewellyn Thomas, Marion Pryce, Vera and Margaret Larminie and in 1918 Eleanor Deane Hill, Susan Miles. Soon after DLS’s departure from Blackwell’s came Dorothea Still’s Poems of Motherhood and Gladys Mary Hazel’s The House. Of the former, Edith Sitwell is of particular note. To provide “passing-bells for these who die as cattle” Basil Blackwell’s 1919 volume (number 6) of Wheels, edited by Edith Sitwell, was dedicated to Owen’s memory and contained seven of his poems, bringing him to public attention for the first time. Edith Sitwell also prepared the first edition of his poems (1920). But it was DLS who had burst through the male portals

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