International Dateline -- The Bookseller's Apprentice

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The last installment delved into the boxes of the Merton Blackwell Collection, revealing the scholar-bookseller Will King. But King was never an apprentice at Blackwell’s. In this issue we find yet more tales of Blackwellian autodidactics, taken from the Merton treasure trove. We now go back in time to the days of Blackwell’s second apprentice, Fred Hanks, who had rung his whole adult life in the Broad Street Shop (1883 to 1945). Benjamin Hanks had taken on his first apprentice, Master Fred W. Chaundy, during his second year of trading in 1880, and eventually he left to run his own shop. Fred Hanks recalled the signing of his indentures: “the scene is a room in a house, No.36 Woodstock Rd., the date is July 1st 1883; present B. H. Blackwell, his brother Mr. F. J. Blackwell, my mother and a little boy – myself.” In this company he promised, on the Bible, “to serve faithfully for five years, not to waste the Goods of his said Master…not contract Matrimony within the said term nor play Cards or Dice Tables…haunt Taverns or Playhouses.” For all this he was to receive 3s. 6d. a week, rising to 10s in his fifth year. Wages being barely above subsistence level, it was the opportunity to better themselves that attracted young autodidacts, and more particularly, their mothers. At Blackwell’s, Hanks not only learned the art of bookselling, but much of scholarship too. And from the start, Basil Blackwell recalled, “he had a director’s pen in his pocket”; indeed, later on, he joined the Board. Earning the sobriquet “Father Hanks,” he was feted by City and University, and in recognition of his service to scholars he was awarded the honorary degree of MA. In this instalment we can “hear” him describing something of his life as a bookseller in bygone days (1883-1933) only barely recognizable in today’s “retail” world.

The Stories of “Father” Fred Hanks

“Some of you,” Fred writes, “may possibly be wondering how I happened to become associated with the firm of Blackwell.” Hanks explained that it came about because of a love of books and of church music. “I should first explain that my father died when I was five years old … and the only education my mother could afford was that provided by the elementary schools as 2d per week. It must have been when I was about eight years old that my dear old mother, anxious to do all she could to supplement my elementary school education (I don’t know that she had any idea of my becoming a bookseller) thought it would be good for me to learn a little French, and I remember accompanying her to a bookseller’s shop (I can’t remember which shop it was, but it certainly wasn’t Blackwell’s, for it was not then in existence), and there she purchased with her hard earned pennies and presented me with a French grammar. This was, so far as I remember, the first book I ever possessed. ... A year or two later S.Philip and S.James Boys’ School was opened, and here, under the extra mural tuition of my dear old friend Mr. Dermer, I learnt a little more French and some Latin up to the first book of Caesar…”

I must now take you back again a few years and tell you that at the age of nine I became a choir-boy in S.Philip and S.James church… Mr. Blackwell was a senior chorister, and I sat in the bench immediately in front of him. I suppose that like most boys I tried to make the most of my appearance by using some sort of hair lotion. This particular lotion (bless it!) must have had a rather offensive odour. Anyhow, one Sunday morning after the service Mr. Blackwell spoke to me for the first time, and I was taught that when unpacking parcels… We accomplished this by carefully cutting the string in such a way as to preserve as much of the most of my training, I was duly instructed as to the most useful and economical method of packing paper, too, had to be saved and used again. While on this subject I cannot refrain from mentioning that Mr. Blackwell himself, taught me how to pack a parcel. This, to some, may appear to be a trivial detail, but it was not so considered by him to whom tidiness and attention to small matters were characteristic, and I shall always remember with gratitude his instruction in small matters…”

Mr. Blackwell was also a man of hobbies, and “one of these was the steam engine, of which he possessed two models.” Fred recalls assisting him in taking them to pieces, “cleaning the parts and putting them together again, and eventually share the pleasure of seeing them working”. Another “holiday” occupation was the preparation of the educational catalogue, commonly known as the “potboiler.” “This was also the time to give the stock a thorough dusting. There were no such mechanical

Shown above is a photo of Hanks as Captain in the Boys Life Brigade (a more militaristic version of the Boy Scouts).
Within no time, as his apprenticeship continued, Hanks' abilities were put to more serious use: “I had not been long at Blackwell's before I saw that my little knowledge of French and Latin was going to be very useful. So far, I was able to cope fairly successfully with the titles of books in these languages, but when a customer asked for a German book it was necessary to produce a pencil and a bit of paper. This was a state of affairs I could not tolerate for long, so I began to look about for a teacher, and I don’t remember quite how it came about, but before long Mr. L. A. Sehby-Bigge, then a fellow of University College, came to my aid. I used to visit him once a week, after business hours, sometimes as late as 10 o'clock, and together we did a little German. He used to say, very kindly I think, that while he taught me to read, I taught him a little grammar. That may have been so, for at that time I was ploughing through Otto. I had a wish to go to Germany when I had finished my apprenticeship, but res augusta domi prevented this, and as the French proverb says eu la chèvre est attachée, mais qu'elle broute… But I was surprised and very much pleased when my dear old chief, anxious as ever to encourage, rewarded me by giving me a bonus on the turnover on the sale of foreign books and bookbinding. Please don’t assume from this that I was merely and only a foreign book assistant. I was this, of course, but it was not by any means my chief occupation. It really was my hobby, a good deal of the work which it entailed being done after ordinary business hours.”

Alongside running “Foreign” and the acquisition of “a little learning,” Hanks was expected to write letters as well as “keep the books,” a task that had to be written by hand, a state of affairs which we cannot imagine existing today… Previous to the introduction of the Lamson-Paragon system of book-keeping all credit sales were entered into a day-book, and later transferred to a ledger. In order to prevent errors of misposting, Chaundy and I spent a considerable amount of time checking the one with the other. One of us called out the items from the day-book, while the other checked the entry with the ledger. This not only helped to while away some tedious hours in the vacations, but seemed well worth doing, as it saved many errors appearing in the ‘accounts rendered’ at the end of term. An interesting feature which I believe I am correct in recording, is that Ledger No. 1 contains a good deal of Mr. Blackwell’s neat hand writing… But these daily routines were as nothing compared with the hustle and bustle of the beginning of the academic year. “As it approached there was always a great awakening… Travelers’ orders had a very regrettable habit of arriving one on the top of another at the last moment, and as all books had to be marked and put away in the shelves, so that we could start term in apple-pie order, overtime was essential… All new books had to have a little white label stuck in on the bottom right-hand corner of the front cover before they were put into the shelves. This practice, I regret to record has gradually been allowed to lapse, and a profitable means of advertising our books both at home and abroad has been lost.”

While on the subject of this “little white label,” Hanks recalled a story which was told to him by the late Mr. L. U. Powell at a luncheon given in his (Hanks’) honour at St. Johns College:

A certain Balliol undergraduate was spending a holiday somewhere on the Island of Papua. In the course of his travels he lost his way and wandered into a wild part of the Island, where he was captured by some natives and taken before the Chief. In the course of the enquiry, and just as the sentence of death was pronounced upon the young man, the Chief noticed that he held a book in his hand, and demanded that it be handed over to him. On opening it, his attention was attracted to the neat “little white label” which was stuck in the book.

“Hullo” said the Chief. “I see you deal at Blackwells.”

“Yes,” said the young man. “I do.”

“Then,” said the Chief. “I supposed you know Mr. Hanks.”

“Yes, quite well,” he replied. The Chief then ordered the young man to be liberated, and a banquet prepared at which he was given the place of honour!

A few days before the beginning of each term it was Mr. Blackwell’s custom to take a trip to London, in search of some fresh and attractive second-hand books for stock. His favourite rendezvous for this purpose was Stibb’s shop — alas! no longer in existence — where he generally managed to find a considerable number of books in nice bindings. These always provided an attraction for the first-week-of-term window show, and needless to say were quickly disposed of. It is a matter for regret that the interest taken in these old scholarly classical private presses has sadly declined. From careful observation it would appear that the study of Classics at Oxford, and I believe elsewhere also, is on the downward path. It has been suggested that the transformation of the study of the humanities to other more utilitarian branches of education is to be attributed to the last two world wars and their resulting effects. If this is so, tant pis for Milton’s conception of a “complete education”… But the time for reflecting on higher matters was scarce as preparations continued for the influx of new students and scholars, of whatever “new” disciplines.

“The beginning of term naturally put an end to early (6 o’clock) closing, and although 8 o’clock was the normal closing hour, little or no notice was taken of this, and the day ended only when the day’s work was done… It was a rigid rule that service in the shop was regarded of first importance, and attention to anything, however urgent, was generally regarded as a secondary consideration, to be dealt with after the shop was closed. The staff being still quite small we naturally turned our hands to anything… serving in the shop, packing parcels, and on very busy occasions, such as a few days of term, the checking of parcels on one’s back in order that they could be delivered at the porter’s lodge before the gates were closed at 9 p.m. I should explain that this was quite a voluntary effort… Those were the days before the invention of motor cars, typewriters and all the other mechanized apparatus now so necessary in our business… Instead of a business car Mr. Blackwell had what was known as a quadracycle, a type of cycle now obsolete, and I don’t wonder, for it was very hard work if, as frequently happened, we had to go any distance on it. When a library had to be bought we used to pack the bags on behind, and off we went on our expedition. Having bought the books (which as far as I remember we always did) we would pack them in the bags and leave directions for them to be sent by rail. As the purchasing of the libraries increased the available space became used up, and not unlike the present time, we were always troubled to find room. I would like to assure the members of the staff that this trouble is old as the hills — so cheer up!”

Writing of the age old problem of space, Hanks recalled the development of Blackwell’s premises. “After some years Mr. Blackwell purchased the adjoining premises, then a tailor’s shop (under the name of Lockwood), and you can imagine our delight when we drew up the blinds of No. 51 and exposed two windows to the public gaze for the first time. This gave us a very welcome extension as far back as the big window overlooking the backyard. It was not long, however, before we were crying out again for more room. The premises behind were then occupied by a young men’s club known as the Churchmen’s Union, a caretaker’s cottage, and a dispensary. In course of time the young men’s club fizzled out, and the Union Room was eventually added to our premises…” This room, before we had sufficient books with which to furnish it, was let out for various purposes. On one occasion it was utilized for a reading by Verlaine the French poet. The room was quite bare with no other lighting than that supplied by 2 candles. The only other person present was the late Prof. Yorke Powell, and both of them were seated round a very small table. I obtained this information by a peep through the key hole. Another and very different use was made of this Room when it was let to a professional boxer, who gave lessons to undergraduates. There were occasions when boxing matches took place in the evenings, and the state of the floor in the morning was evidence that much blood had been spilt.”

Fire, as well as blood, was associated with the Union Room, in Hanks’ mind: “on one particular day, by good luck, I happened to be..."
The physical building of Blackwell's is not so different, even today, from the one Hanks knew, but he never missed a moment to remind his colleagues of the benefits they enjoyed in the modern firm: “I sometimes wonder whether our young men of to-day realise and appreciate the changes and benefits that have taken place in business since the early eighties (1880s). They might reasonably be tempted to ask what happiness we get out of life. My reply is that we acquired a good deal of happiness and pleasure by having an intense interest in our work, which continued to increase as the business developed.” After his retirement Fred set out to record more of his stories: “now that ‘all is safely gathered in and shadows of the evening steal across the sky’ I hope to use these longer evenings by cajoling my brains in the endeavor to revive more old memories which, by the way, are very dear to me (and he turns his head to his memory of the days when BHB lived over the shop): On the few occasions when Mr. Blackwell had to spend the night out of Oxford, I was honoured by being entrusted to act as a sort of bodyguard to Mrs. Blackwell and the children. I remember the bedroom, which I occupied on the second floor back. It was when Mr. & Mrs. Blackwell were taking their summer holiday that other less important but pleasing duties fell to my lot. I refer to certain domestic trifles, such as watering the window boxes and feeding a much prized cat, in addition to taking charge of the shop generally.”

Overseeing the comfort of the Blackwells was as important to Fred Hanks as his beloved “Foreign and Oriental” department. A rival, Williams and Norgate, on the other side of the street, had for a while threatened Blackwell’s and Fred Hanks’ supremacy in the foreign field but all was well. “On the 26th of September 1901 I received a letter from Mr. Blackwell (Benjamin Henry), who was then taking a few days’ holiday at Princess Risboro’ dealing with the stocktaking books: ‘Messrs Williams and Norgate have now come to an end, and as I recognise the fact that you have done all you could in the way of fostering and developing our foreign and Oriental business so that no more than you could help went across the road I am sending the enclosed, just to show you that I am not unmindful of good service rendered in my interest.’ I might add that the ‘enclosed’ was a cheque, which, of course, was very welcome and useful, but that was transient: the extract which I have just read is imperishable in my memory.” Just as permanent was Hanks’ memory of 29 May 1889: “This day, although 44 years ago, still stands out clearly as if it were but yesterday. It was a beautiful day in summer term, and I well remember the many frequent and anxious visits which Mr. Blackwell made up to the second floor front, and his final reappearance with the announcement that he had a son.

“Much, of course, has been written and said about that once newborn babe,” Sir Basil Blackwell! But of “Father” Fred Hanks there is much less in the public domain. He died at the ripe old age of 89, still “hale and hearty.” He too, like Rex King, is a fine example of an autodidact who gained formal recognition during his lifetime. And his mother’s modest wish, at his “binding” ceremony, that ‘he should be a good boy’ has been more than fulfilled. A tangible example of his influence is perhaps the bookseller’s Bible he constructed for the training of apprentices. Advice includes: “do not confuse Beowulf with Brer Rabbit... The apprentice must master Stopford Brook’s Primer of English Literature...must be able to advise on available editions of a given book and to know its value in pounds shillings and pence and in the realm of scholarship... Do not direct a wealthy American to the Travel department when he asks for The Tours of Dr Syntax...” The latter entreaty was just as well, since as the business developed Blackwell’s saw the arrival of a considerable number of American visitors! And long may they come!