International Dateline -- Books for All: from Blyton's Secret Seven to Wittgenstein's Investigations

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“I take it that we all agree that books are the best presents...that very quality of permanence”

Introduction

In the last episode we followed the magnificent but short life of the Shakespeare Head Press. Parting with anything to do with Shakespeare Head was, for Basil Blackwell, very painful: it had prompted many new adventures in publishing and its “beautifully produced books, had wetted the public’s appetite for ‘finer fare.’” For the years following the Great Depression, the machines at Shakespeare Head would have lain idle had it not been for Basil’s determination to further expand the readership of the general public, especially the young. Thus the SHP name was preserved in the guise of children’s books; which included works by Enid Blyton. This was not motivated simply by profit, although this was a necessary ingredient in the longer-run, but by a passion for widening educational opportunity bred in him by his self-educated and high-minded Victorian father; who in turn had inherited it from his mother and father: the first “Oxford” Blackwells. Through the medium of books, they were “bold to demand a standing for the improvement of man, physically, socially, morally and intellectually.”

It is an illustration of the Blackwell paradox: they were “entrepreneurs,” and committed to private enterprise, but their life’s work was dedicated to improving the lot of the individual while promoting the general good. In this instalment we follow Basil as he sets out to review the entire publishing scene in the United Kingdom; his ambition was to fill the gaps with quality publications from his own House. In time this dream materialised: Basil Blackwell lived to see his firm become a world-renowned academic and scientific publisher.

“We Are Bold to Demand a Standing for the Improvement of Man, Physically, Socially, Morally and Intellectually”

Basil’s adventures in poetry, belles lettres, the popular novel and “affordable” SHP classics, were already being rewarded with an avid readership; many of them newly literate. Taking heart from this, and “affordable” publishing scene in the United Kingdom; his ambition was to fill the gaps with quality publications from his own House. In time this dream materialised: Basil Blackwell lived to see his firm become a world-renowned academic and scientific publisher.

Basil was never “dumb” but he was adept as a catalyst. Granted he didn’t try to compete with the “big boys” in London, but he made enviable inroads in specialist markets. While Penguin made their way, Basil, determined to widen still further the ever-increasing circle of new readers, focused on books for children and schools. His father had taken some tentative and successful steps in this direction, coinciding as they did with the Foster Education Act of 1870 which introduced compulsory elementary education. The devout Benjamin Henry was convinced of the importance for children of stories coming from the Christian tradition. His proudly produced The Friend of Little Children, told the story of the life of Jesus; it was introduced by the then Bishop of Liverpool and graced with coloured plates and the line drawings by the gifted illustrator Charles T. Nightingale. For small children he produced Picture Tales from Russia, published in 1914 before the Russian Revolution, with illustrations as exciting and vibrant as any of today’s offerings for the very young. To expand this side Benjamin Henry enlisted the willing help of his son Basil, newly out of “publishing finishing school” at OUP. A shower of books resulted, for children of all ages, with new and original work by such doyens as Eleanor Farjeon, Walter De La Mare, Laurence Housman, Hugh Chesterman, AA Milne, Hugh Walpole and Hilaire Belloc, to name but a few. Of particular note were their contributions to the children’s annual Joy Street, A Medley of Verse for Boys and Girls (1923). In line with his pursuit of fine printing, with the newly acquired SHP, the book set a similarly high standard. Edith Sitwell, too, featured with a series of poems, one shaped, albeit made palatable, by the First World War: March For a Toy Soldier; another offering was the, now, politically incorrect, but innocent, Dirge for a Gollywog who was much loved. And Hilaire Belloc, true to form, provided the cautionary tale of Maria who made faces. Also off the Press, in the early 20s, came a series of Babe’s book of verse, Farmyard Ditties, Nursery Lays and Boggarty Ballads.

In the last years of his life, Benjamin Henry encouraged his son to publish Poems Chosen, for children. The series, instantly successful, was collected in one volume in 1925. The poems in this anthology were chosen by “ten thousand boys and girls.” “Through an edition of Poetry an appeal was made to find out the poems which had given the highest delight, the deepest joy, to boys and girls.” The invitation received the support of the entire educational Press and from teachers in every type of school: “public and private, primary and secondary, urban and rural... who placed at the disposal of the editors the wisdom and experience of years.” Alongside the likes of Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Longfellow, the Brownings and Tennyson, the chosen poems included those by contemporary writers, many of whom had been en...
encouraged by Benjamin Henry Blackwell in the early days of his infant publishing house. Fortuitously, the Fisher Education Act, 1918, raised the school leaving age to fourteen and planned to expand tertiary education. Basil seized the moment to break into the market for “Elementary School books.” Basil decided that first a little market research was called for. “What were the current books like?” he asked. “I was wholly ignorant. I visited a local Educational Supplier and spent £1 on an armful of them for examination. It was a shocking experience.” He lamented that “the dominant consideration was one of cheapness, and to this were sacrificed the contents physical and intellectual.” Reacting to this morass of “hack work, shoddily produced,” Basil recalled that he thumped his desk and cried “only the best is good enough for these children!” But how was he to proceed?

Help was at hand for Basil from Appleton, a much-esteemed colleague, who introduced him to E.H. Carter, His Majesty’s Inspector for Education. “He encouraged us to enter the field, and undertook to advise us,” Basil recorded. “In publishing,” Basil explained, “the first requirement is to be right and apt,” but who was the best man to make it a reality? “With this mind in mind I discussed the project with fellow Blackwellian, Will Hunt, who recommended an approach to C. H. K. Marten, a long-standing friend of Blackwell’s and Lower Master of Eton, whose histories for public and grammar schools were outstandingly successful. I made the journey to Eton and opened my mind to him. He caught fire and so did the Headmaster, Cyril Allington, who gave him ‘sabbatical leave’ to set the work in motion.” There were four volumes in the series, Marten and Carter’s Histories, 1928. Their intention was “to explain the present rather than to set the British story in the past…and to set the British story in the public world.”

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something useful to contribute." Basil though, was a team player. His ambitions were inclusive. He was an enthusiastic member of the Society of Booksellers, Hugh Walpole's innovation, and the National Book Council. Unwin's brainchild. Such contacts provided “days out” to London for Basil, and late nights back on what was, jokingly, called “the fornicator’s express.” These halcyon days were, temporarily, interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, when B & M was seventeen years old. Inevitably the War brought change. Basil wrote, “and some things were sacrificed.” To his deep, almost everlasting regret, it had put the brakes on fine printing, and poetry offerings were dwindling. Basil commented ironically that “somehow the poets who had been so vocal about the Civil War in Spain became strangely silent when the really big one started.” More worryingly, opportunities had dried up on the bread and butter front of schoolbook publishing, too. In its wisdom, the London County Council, a very important customer, stopped buying books at the outbreak of war. Their schools had all been evacuated; there was, at the outset, no compensating increase in sales elsewhere, and turnover fell by a third. Basil recalled that “it survived… and fared no worse elsewhere, and turnover fell by a third. Basil was reprieved.”

On a more pragmatic level, the War had clearly shown Basil that there was the need for more and better scientific research in all areas from physics to electronics and medical science and for its publication. He turned then, with the help of Henry Schollicl, to developing the “seriously academic” side of publishing, extending the range of Blackwell’s publishing, in 1939, to cover scientific works. “Here was an endeavour that may have seemed pre- sumptuous, being undertaken as it must in the very shadow of the largest and most learned publishing house in the world — Oxford University Press… If David were not to stay Goliath, but to live in prosperity with him, how might it be done?” Basil asked. Outside of the War, intervention came when, after the fall of France, in 1940, it became impossible for the universities to import European books and this provided “an entry into the select preserve of the set books formerly produced by the university presses.”

The academic side of Blackwell’s was a venture that was to go on bearing useful fruit to this day. It included coups of the magnitude as the one pulled off by Henry Schollicl, when he had the foresight to secure the world rights for the posthumous publication of the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Basil Blackwell admitted to no surprise: “this went hand in glove with our main bookshop activity in serving the needs of scholars and scholarly librarians the world over.” Such a ready market of authors and students had existed from the early days at Blackwell’s when former Oxford graduates went out to serve as professors, lecturers and librarians and, remembering their happy times at Blackwell’s, relied on the connection to get their books published and to furnish their shelves. Catalogues from B. H. Blackwell, bookseller, had found their way to the US as early as 1846, as did those of his son from 1879, and by the beginning of the 20th century Empire and Rhodes scholars started coming to Oxford. They too had carried back, especially to the United States, “an affection for the Firm which expressed itself in their seeking to obtain from us their needs in books.” And so began a long and happy connection between Blackwell’s and the academic world in America and the Commonwealth, a link which is still as strong today; demonstrable at international conferences, such as at Charleston. Tied and committed as he was to Oxford, Basil Blackwell claimed that his own contribution to this world was limited and modest in scope. But then “there comes a side to Sir Basil which he kept dark, and deserves a bright light shone on it…his capacity as a writer — and not only of factual letters,” John Betjeman announced at Basil’s 70th birthday. 13 Like his father, Basil was a frustrated writer, who knew only too well how difficult it was to make a mark. His father had written local travel guides and Basil published poetry from a young age. The next instalment will reveal something of Basil as a writer. But even this was a means to a publishing end. By telling writers’ stories Basil sought to help those whose contributions would otherwise remain obscure. 

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**Endnotes**

1. Merton Blackwell Collection, BLK/3/6 articles/notes by Basil Blackwell.
5. Blackwell’s centenary issue.
8. Mary Coleridge, Poems no 121, 1907.
11. Sir Adrian Mott, hand-written notes found, by his wife, after his death, in preparation of a speech on the history of B & M, October 5 1954, he was then sixty-five.
15. Ibid.

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