Issues in Vendor/Library Relations - Blackwell’s

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Years ago when I was new in this business on one of my early trips out of the Yankee Book Peddler office I connected through Nashville, probably on the way to Chattanooga. Airlines then used those colored strips of stiff paper to route your baggage and when I picked up my suitcase I was startled for a moment to see it tagged “BNA.”

That’s the airport code for Nashville, but it would be hard today to convey to anyone who’s more recently come of age in the library business the weight of those three letters in the mid-1980s in the mind of a new rep traveling out of Contoocook, New Hampshire on behalf of a small competitor of “Blackwell North America,” as that company was then known. I kept the tag, as a kind of talisman.

Now I live in Nashville and Blackwell’s is gone, or will be soon on this continent and others, acquired the week before last by YBP, as that company is now known. BNA had its start in 1975, when the UK firm Blackwell’s bought parts of the failing Richard Abel Company, which over the prior decade or so had revolutionized academic book selling in North America through innovations such as the approval plan. Before long BNA was the dominant academic library bookseller in the United States, not to mention most other parts of the western world.

The Blackwell’s business goes back to 1879, when the famous and eponymous bookshop in Oxford opened up with “an inventory of just 700 books,” according to the current Blackwell’s Website. How many times in how many library offices over these past decades did I look at color photographs of that bookshop, or of the Bodleian Library, framed in a Blackwell’s calendar hanging on the wall behind someone’s desk? Can’t count. Years before ever setting foot in it I felt as if I knew that bookshop. One of my sons, at age twelve or so, took a trip to the U.K. with a friend. When he came back, he told me he’d seen the store owned by the “bad guys.”

I didn’t know what he meant, not for a moment anyway. They weren’t “bad guys,” of course, although I guess years of my shop talk at home must have pegged them for him as “the bad guys” from my particular seat. In my very first months at Yankee, when I was strictly an inside guy, I remember our losing two accounts to BNA, Brandeis and Auburn, because we couldn’t supply weekly deliveries of cataloging records on tape. Blackwell’s could. Then when I began to travel, in a hurry I learned all about MARC tapes, about “the thesaurus,” about subject-based approval plans, and about U.K. publishers beyond the big ones like Oxford, Cambridge, Routledge, and a few others.

At Yankee we learned how to talk about all these things and we developed services to match as we could. I still remember a delicate customer service issue from the time, now an historical footnote, which was figuring out polite ways to suggest to customers that they might want to promptly return the tapes we sent them each week, so that we’d have enough tapes on hand to send them their next batch of MARC records. Those big round plastic cases housing spooled tape fitted easily into boxes of books, resting snugly on top of the books when the box was taped; but when libraries neglected to return their stash of them, we’d run short.

Blackwell’s seemed to have the edge on everything in those days. They had so many customers. It was hard to set foot inside an
academic library in the U.S. that didn’t somehow do business with Blackwell’s. Their conference receptions and hospitality suites were legendary. They had veteran reps you heard about all the time. A few years into my career they had an online database for customers to order their books. Later, they had tables-of-contents. And they always had that thesaurus, which subdivided so many subjects into so many parts.

But above all they had England. The name itself, Blackwell “North America” said that the United States and Canada were outposts of a sort. England was home base, and not merely England, Oxford, where the Blackwell’s bookshop and its neighbor across the street the Bodleian were a pair of world institutions. At Yankee John Secor used to say, only half joking I think, that maybe we needed to buy a cottage on Lake Winnipesaukee to counter the Blackwell custom of offering hospitality to visiting American librarians at the family estate, known to us only as “the castle.” How many American professors had visited Oxford, had spent hours in the bookshop? Once more, can’t count. How many were comforted to know that their own library bought books from Blackwell’s?

One whose library didn’t — this was my customer, and so his library’s books were bought in New Hampshire — a professor of English History and even a journal editor in New Hampshire — a professor of English who taught at a remote state university campus, used to write an annual memo to the University Librarian arguing that the library should buy them. Their reps came to seem not so formidable. In fact through mutual curiosity we got to know them, and they got to know us, at conferences over drinks. A tavern on King Street in Charleston, now gone, was a notable venue for these summits, where it was impossible not to get awfully friendly as we talked up on industry gossip and exchanged our best tales about customers and about other vendor reps who didn’t happen to be present.

One time at a Charleston reception, as I stood with Dan Halloran, Blackwell’s president at the time, a mutual librarian-friend walked up to ask what we were talking about. “We’re fixing prices,” I said. How we wished we could have. This must have been almost ten years ago, but it was clear even then as we fought for accounts in contests that frequently established new discount thresholds and higher service bars too, that our industry was spiraling in an unhealthy direction. Smaller companies were the first to pay the price. In the U.S., Blackwell’s acquired Ballen and then Academic, and in the U.K., Heffers and then W.H. Everett. Everett, until that sale, in 2003, referred to themselves as the world’s oldest independent bookseller, founded as they were in 1793 and until the end embedding an image of St. Paul’s Cathedral in their logo. YBP, in the meantime, had picked up Lindsay & Howes in 1998, and so finally had a U.K. foothold.

It became difficult not to think about Blackwell’s as librarians so often had. Friendships were common across company lines and respect grew in both directions. I’ll always remember a boss telling me, once we’d begun to seriously challenge them and we were feeling maybe a bit too cocky, “They’re a good company, believe me. They’ve survived world wars. They survived a depression.” At some point I visited the Oxford bookshop myself, and so had my own fine memories of time spent browsing the shop’s aisles and then, in a warm pub just doors away, inspecting the purchases.

So when the news broke recently, partly it was something everyone thought about in a business way, but partly in the vendor world it seemed a family affair too, one affecting friends. The phone calls and emails and conversations among people who’d been there across the years, in one way or another, began at once and haven’t stopped. The other day I was talking to Wendell Lotz, now my colleague at Ingram, who reminisced that he’d gotten his start in the business at Baker & Taylor by being put in charge of transferring into the B&T approval system the profiles of libraries who were caught when Richard Abel went under. In turn I reminisced to Wendell that when YBP was acquired by B&T, I’d been put in charge of a group transferring the remaining B&T profiles — most libraries had switched companies by then, but a lot of small to medium sized profiles were still active — into the YBP system. No doubt I’d had my hands on some of Wendell’s profiles.

What does it mean? Is the question everyone gets to at some point, us book vendors and no doubt librarians too in their conversations, as we all assess the new landscape whereby Baker & Taylor, the leader prior to Blackwell’s, now dominates the U.S. market again, and far more than ever before, via the new YBP, whose U.K. foothold Lindsay & Howes — renamed some time ago as a by-product of an earlier acquisition — Lindsay & Croft, is now swapped to Blackwell’s. A couple of lessons, at least, are clear enough. One is that nothing stays the same for too long. Last month at a library whose account my present company, Coutts, had just won, one of the collections coordinators asked a member of the vendor selection committee, “Why didn’t you choose Blackwell’s?” A week later, Blackwell’s was history. Which brings up the other lesson about the business of library book-selling: While the playing field may be the offices and meeting rooms of academic libraries, this is one tough game.