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## International Dateline -- Adventurers All

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# International Dateline — Adventurers All<sup>1</sup>

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@ouls.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 newer world. It may be that the gulfs will wash us down. It may be we shall touch the happy isles. Yet our purpose holds: To sail beyond the sunset."*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Leafing through the *Bodleian* and *Merton Blackwell Collections*, *Adventurers All, A Series of Young Poets Unknown to Fame*, stands out. This series, along with others such as *Wheels* and *Oxford Outlook* and with the kind permission of **Wiley Blackwell**, is to be housed in the Blackwell Hall of the new **Bodleian Library** and will compliment the archive material held at **Merton College** (*Merton Blackwell Collection*).<sup>3</sup> It was **Basil Blackwell**, supported by his father, who was the inspiration behind these series. In the previous instalment of the **Blackwell** story we followed **Basil Blackwell** to **Oxford University Press** where he gained "an insight into publishing." His sojourn all too soon over, **Basil** joined his father in the **Broad Street Shop** in 1913. But for over a decade, until his father's death in 1924, **Basil** was able to indulge his love of "the gentle art of publishing." **Rita Ricketts** continues to chronicle **Basil's** early adventures in publishing as he becomes the steed who, allusively, bore on their poetic "flights" writers "known and unknown to fame"; **A. P. Herbert** had used the allusion to **Pegasus** in his 1912 poetry volume for **B. H. Blackwell**. Here we encounter writers and series that have become household names.

## Play Days with Pegasus

*"The constant discovery of the unknown, the encouragement of talent, or even the finding of genius; the excitement of the calculated risk and the vindication of judgement..."*<sup>4</sup>

Fresh from London, with his legs immediately under the table, **Basil** oversaw the publication of the first volume of *Blackwell's Oxford Poetry*. Its publication was the fulfilment of plans **Basil** had hatched before ever going to **Amen Corner**. Selecting from verse written by undergraduates from 1910-13, the volume was edited by the great Fabian economist **G. D. H. Cole**. **Basil** admired **Cole's** ideas on guild socialism, and his 1913 major work *The World of Labour*, were as attractive to him as those of **William Morris**. **Sherard Vines** was also an editor, and it contained early work by **Philip Guedalla**, **Ronald Knox**, **Michael Sadler**, **E. H. W. Meyerstein**, **Eric Shepherd** and **A. P. Herbert**. Such became *Oxford Poetry's* reputation that, later on, it survived even the privations of the Second World War. **Basil's** support for poetry was symbolic, passionate, idealistic and personal. Having, like his father, tried his own hand he knew something of the difficulties of getting a hearing let alone publication. Above all **Basil** wanted the voices of *his* time to be given full vent, "lest they be washed away as storm clouds broke over Europe..." and civilisation convulsed by World War would "usher in an era of new barbarism."<sup>5</sup>

The gathering storm is hardly sensed in **Basil's** first 1913 volume, published by his father. **Basil** judged it to contain poetry which was "formally correct, graceful and melodious, with occasional examples of brilliant parody and occasional lapses into sentimentality." Much to his surprise, it met with success, and was reprinted. But, for **Basil**, it also marked "the end of an era in poetry." Thereafter, he argued, "poets were quick to see that the old order was giving place to the new, and that rhymeless utterance, in broken rhythm, sound best to express the shaken spirit of the age." "So began," **Basil** wrote, "the new poetic cult to which we are heirs today; austerity and pregnant phrasing reign; content prevails over form, melody is banished." Looking back, six decades later, he asked: "how many poets now submit themselves to the disciplines of the sonnet?" But he was ever contrite and conciliatory; even if modern poetry did not satisfy **Shelley's** prescription, **Basil** was loath to condemn the entire genre.<sup>6</sup> He masked his dislike behind a cloak of ignorance; "I am ashamed to have dropped out of the current of modern poetry," he, later, wrote, but "the fault, dear **William**, is not in your verse, but in myself that I can't understand... I am suckled in a poetic creed outworn, and cannot catch up now."<sup>7</sup> As poetry went through its sea change, **Basil's** sense of disconnection, and his incomprehension, intensified.

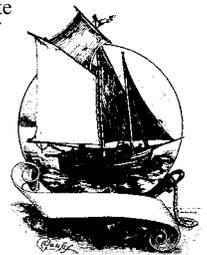
Despite his misgivings about "modern" poetry, **Basil** was game for innovation and readily included new women writers on his list: **D. L. Sayers**, **Vera Brittain**, **Edith Sitwell** and **Nancy Cunard** to name but a few. A **St Hugh's** graduate, **Phyllis Hartnoll**, who worked for **Blackwell's** before she went to **OUP**, was ever grateful to **Basil Blackwell** for the recognition she received with her "Newdigate poem."<sup>8</sup> It was also **Basil's** intention to promote and publish women's fiction. Indeed women were strongly represented on the list of *Blackwell's 3/6 novels*, which were varied and "often unpredictable." "One female author, a **Miss M. (Margiad) Evans**, surprised the, relatively, youth-

ful **Basil** when, greeting him with apologies for being late she attributed this to a visit to 'Ellison's' to buy underwear, which, she informed him, had been charged to his account!"<sup>9</sup> Although footing the bill was as much a feature 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).<sup>10</sup> 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 not always with "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 Highet**, **L. P. Hartley**, **Walter de la Mare**, **Eleanor Farjeon**, **Beverly Nichols**, the **Huxley** brothers, **Roy Harrod**, **Louis MacNeice** and the redoubtable **Richard Crossman**. They included the earliest published work of **Stephen Spender**, **Dorothy L. Sayers**, **Louis Golding**, **Edmund Blunden**, **A. L. Rowse**, **Guedalla**, **James Laver**, **Isaiah Berlin**, **A. L. Rouse** and **LAG Strong**.<sup>11</sup> They found themselves in the good company of poets such as **Sassoon**, **Meyerstein**, **Powys Mathers**, the **Sitwells**, and **Christopher Morley**, with his *Eight Sin*. Among these **Harold Acton** "was greatly to the fore, 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*.<sup>12</sup> **Acton** edited for *Oxford Poetry*, and *Oxford Outlet*, or *The New Oxford*. One of his contemporaries, **Peter Quennell**, another "Blackwellian editor," and a 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 went 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 enjoyably absurd line," in which he compared a piece of "furtive music" to the sound of "biscuits being rubbed together."<sup>13</sup> **Aldous Huxley** too 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 staid....."*<sup>14</sup>

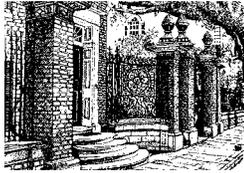


Despite all **Basil's** good intentions, to get as many writers as possible into print, (their voices being heard at his sister's regular readings in the shop on Saturday evenings), the passage of his volumes was not always smooth. The vicarious time traveller can only guess at the rivalry and in-fighting 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 inkling 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** rhetorically muted the legality of this: "did it breach copyright?" **Spender**, writing from Germany (after going down from **Oxford** he lived in Berlin of the Weimar Republic along with **Isherwood** 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 only acceptable ones from a very poor selection."<sup>15</sup> "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

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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 recognised. **Basil** saw his “names” appearing in the lists of **Macmillan**, **Cape**, **Faber**, and many more: “Sic vos non vobis mellificatis apes,” he declared – “thus not for you, ye bees, ye honey make. But although the great names may have forsaken him, **Basil** nonetheless established his own place in the market. And although the old **Blackwell** habit, of bearing the costs of publication, had to go, it never did, totally. **Basil** continued to provide **Blackwell** support for writers whose work could never be commercial. The *Story of Alfred Williams*, in **Basil Blackwell’s** own words, typifies the approach that he and his father took to “publishing”:

*“Some years ago there reached me through the post a typescript on thin green paper, bearing the impress of a hard-worn typewriter. The accompanying letter stated that the work was a translation from the Sanskrit, that the Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford had written an introduction, and that if we should decide to publish the book and thought that pictures might be able to add to its attractions, a certain young artist might be able to make them for us. The letter was signed Alfred Williams. The Translator’s Preface showed that Alfred Williams could write English. The Professor’s Introduction testified to his scholarship. The address typed on the letter gave the name of a village near Swindon, and the best course seemed to be to invite Alfred Williams to come over to Oxford and discuss the matter. He replied that he would be happy to come, and on the appointed day he arrived punctually, a man seemingly in his fifties and with a charming smile. As soon as he entered my room I was aware that I was in the presence of a rare spirit, but being slow, and often wrong, in my estimate of men, I could not tell what lay behind the serenity, the cheerfulness and the gentleness which both his face and his manner revealed. 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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standards? Provide price quotes in Canadian dollars or Euros for a product from Hong Kong? Such is the stuff of a typical business day for us. Meanwhile, our data center is managing the synchronization of over 80TB of data with servers in Moscow, Beijing, and Cairo — no small task in itself.

The specialized tools, travel regimens, and human resources required to capably procure and support exotic content are essential, but entail considerable investment. This means multilingual staff in the areas of Publisher Relations, Acquisitions, Sales and Marketing, Customer Service — even Finance. Yet the market for such products, compared to more broadly-used Anglo-American resources, is relatively small. And because of the nature of the content we specialize in, we must also maintain IT capabilities equal to, and in some ways more robust than, more mass-market suppliers. With these complexities and the vagaries of foreign currency fluctuations, it is crucial that we manage responsibly to remain a stable and viable supplier. We’ve managed to find that balance for more than 20 years, during a period of revolutionary change in the financial, political, and economic environments of our source partners.

Our niche in the information industry can at times feel like an advance frontier post, with all attendant excitement and challenges. With the help of suppliers and customers, we’re charting that frontier more every day.

The goal is to be an efficient channel for this content, for the benefit of sources and consumers alike. We seek to listen to our customers, to acquire relevant resources and make them as easy as possible to understand and use. Along the way, our desire is to create the most comprehensive and relevant possible suite of research tools for our areas of geographic focus, and to minimize the library’s burden by providing a consistent support experience. We look forward to future appearances in this column, and welcome feedback from other readers with ideas for topics in the spirit of **ATG** — bringing publishers, librarians, and vendors together. 🐼

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 a meal between two rides of twenty-seven miles could 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 her 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 'wanted to tell me about Alfred Williams'; and there entered my room the 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 his wife. You see, we 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 pinned to a bit of paper 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 was sitting at the window looking out for him when the news 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; how 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 not only after the day's shift, for he used to chalk on the frame of the steam hammer which he tended the characters of the Greek alphabet, that he might learn them while he worked); how he began to write poems, which being published won him some fame as 'The Hammerman Poet'; and so, leaving his forge, he devoted himself to Literature, helped and encouraged by the village girl he married; how they set up their house literally, by taking bricks out of a lock in the derelict Berks and Wilts Canal, and using them to build with their own hands the house where they lived almost unknown to their neighbours, but sufficient unto themselves, he for Letters in him.

But the sales of Poetry even before 'The Great War' were small, and even with the help of articles and lectures, can have provided but a stepmotherly portion to this devoted couple. In 1916 Alfred Williams, being near, if not beyond, the age limit, volunteered for military service, and after a rejection on grounds of poor health, succeeded in enlisting as a gunner. He was drafted to India, where he began to explore the great literatures of the East and to teach himself Sanskrit. On his return to England he pursued his studies, and out of them had come the Translations which he had offered me. 'They thought a lot of him in London,' said the blind man, 'and only last week (the last time he was with me) he told me that the Prime Minister had written to tell him that it had been decided to grant him a Civil List Pension and sent him a cheque for £50 to carry him on for the present.' But I fancy he knew what was coming for him, for he came over to me and gripped the arms of my chair so hard that I felt them tremble, and said, 'Harry, it's too late.' He had learnt by then that his wife's case was hopeless. And now his wife's one care was that his Sanskrit books, the great Lexicon, Grammars, etc., should be given to the University Library. Could I help her there? I asked if it would be a comfort if I went to see her ('It would indeed'), and arranged to meet the blind man at the house in South Marston a day or two later.

I found the little house built with their own hands, and entered the sitting-room. Small, clean, furnished with the bare needs for sitting at table for food or work, austere as a cell, it contained Alfred Williams's books. They stood on a small desk by the window, eight or ten books, the nucleus of a Sanskrit scholar's working library. There were no other books to be seen; and it was manifest that to equip himself with these costly volumes he had sacrificed all his Greek and Latin and English books. I went upstairs. The bedroom was as bare as the room below. In the bed, the clothes pulled up

to her chin, lay the dying woman. The ivory skin was drawn tight on her face, and her neck was wasted almost to the bone. Only her eyes moved. Beside the bed sat the blind man, and between them on the floor was a case containing all Mary Williams' earthly treasure. I was asked to open it, and there was the revised typescript which Alfred Williams had promised to bring to Oxford ... Mary Williams' first care was for the Sanskrit books, and I promised to see that they were well bestowed. We then spoke about the typescript, briefly, for it was clear that words were costly in that room, and I said I would lose no time in producing the book. We had spoken simply and with a kind of unearthly serenity about the books and the typescript, but as I took my leave I felt that I must tell Mary Williams that I should always remember gratefully my meeting with her husband, for he was one of those who left you a better man than he found you. Like summer tempest came her tears. 'One of the best,' she whispered. I left the house and drove home on that summer afternoon with that sense of awe which once or twice in a life time takes a man, when, for a moment, and without desert, he is caught up in the high triumph of one of the rare spirits of mankind."

Despite his romantic idealism Basil was well aware that the publisher had also to be shrewd. "He must recognise literary merit — more, he must discover it — he must have a flair — he must anticipate by just the right narrow margin the changing tastes and interests of the reading public (and in that sense he must have something of the journalist about him) — he must lead while seeming to follow. One lobe of his brain must be devoted to literature, scholarship and art; the other to adroit bargaining — bargaining with author or his agent, with printer, with paper-maker, with bookseller, with publicity agents, and not uncommonly, with other publishers."<sup>16</sup> But what of the unsung of the publishing world — the authors whose manuscripts are rejected? What art form did Basil advocate for dealing with this most painful of duties? As in most things, he was never at a loss for words or ideas. When a refusal, not "rejection," was called for, he had as his model the obsequious formula of a Chinese firm, as reported years ago by a Hong Kong correspondent of the Central news: "We read your manuscript with boundless delight. By the sacred ashes of our ancestors, we swear that we have never dipped into a book of such overwhelming mastery. If we were to publish this book it would be impossible in the future to issue any book of a lower standard. As it is unthinkable that within the next 10,000 years we shall find its equal, we are, to our great regret, compelled to return this divine work, and beg you a thousand times to forgive our action." No doubt in practice, Basil had his own inimitable way of letting people down lightly. For his part, Basil, 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 instalment reveals Basil, despite his onerous duties as the incomparable Gaffer of the fast-expanding Blackwell empire, adventuring in the rarefied world of fine printing through the medium of the Shakespeare Head Press. — RR

#### Endnotes

1. See R Ricketts, *Adventurers All*, Blackwell's, 2002.
2. Basil Blackwell's "version" of Tennyson.
3. See Reid, Ricketts and Walworth, *A Guide to the Merton Blackwell Collection*, Merton College, Oxford, 2004.
4. C. N. Francis, In Memoriam, Sir Basil Blackwell 1879-1984.
5. Basil Blackwell notes, *Merton Blackwell Collection*.
6. Notes, Basil Blackwell, September 25, 1972.
7. Letter, BB to L F Herbert, 21 August 1974.
8. Phyllis Hartnell (Editor, *Oxford Companion to the Theatre*) to Sir Arthur Norrington, August 1 1977.
9. Margiad Evans, who had some success with a book entitled *The Wooden Doctor*.
10. Only five of Owen's reached print before his death: a childhood competition winner in an evangelical magazine, *Song of Songs*, in *The Hydra*, "Miners," *Futility* and "Hospital Barge at Cerisy" in *The Nation* — see letter to Arthur Norrington from Ithaca N.Y., USA, September 4 1977 working on a Collected poems of Wilfred Owen.
11. This list was compiled by Basil Blackwell, 18 May, 1977, mostly from memory as most of the records were lost.
12. A L Rowse, *The Good-Natured Man*, in *Oxford, China and Italy, Writings in honour of Sir Harold Acton*, Edited by Edward Chaney and Neil Ritchie, p 64.
13. Peter Quennell, *ibid*, pp57-58.
14. Aldous Huxley, *Out of the Window, Selected Poems*, Basil Blackwell, 1925.
15. Stephen Spender to Basil Blackwell, from Hamburg, undated but probably in the summer of 1930.
16. Dent Memorial Lecture 1930.