International Dateline -- Adventurers All

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The Blackwells played Ulysses: they were brave enough to take the risk of launching poets, at their own expense: “Come my friends, it’s not too late, to seek a new world. It may be that the gulls will wash us down. It may be we shall touch the happy isles. Yet our purpose holds: To sail beyond the sunset.”

Introduction

Leaving through the Bodleian and Merton Blackwell Collections, Adventurers All, Tales 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). 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 chart 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 encouraging of talent, or even the finding of genius; the excitement of the calculated risk and the vindication of judgement…”

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 served 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 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.”

The gathering storm is hardly sensed in Leafing through the volume was edited by the great Fabian economist A. P. Herbert, was ever grateful to his father. Basil’s early endeavours, as it was when his father started out, the narrow and with the Merton Blackwell Collections between 1916 and 1919, were edited by a “team,” although between 1916 and 1919, were edited by a “team,” although

“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 Cherrwell 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 aesthetic and friend-enemy.” John Betjeman remembered one of his offerings, “with an enjoyable edge line,” in which he compared a piece of “furtive music” to the sound of “biscuits being rubbed together.”

Aldous Huxley looks close 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…….”

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 (or as it was known then, Berlin) to La Pietra, wrote, “Poor’ maybe viewed from...

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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 scarpered 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 I should decide to publish the book and that thoughts 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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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 man who between two rides of twenty 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 was prepared to tell me what Alfred Williams was like, and said, 'You know how to tell her, and she sat there waiting and waiting ... Now she's to me and gripped the arms of my chair so hard that I felt them tremble, and said, '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 her. 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 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. And now her husband was at the window looking at the hill that 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, as 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 a life 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, 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 installment 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, Basil’s, 2002.
2. Basil Blackwell’s “version” of Tennyson.
8. Phyllis Hartnell (Editor, Oxford Companion to the Theatre) to Sir Arthur Norrington, August 1 1977.
11. This list was compiled by Basil Blackwell, 21 May, 1977, mostly from memory as most of the records were lost.
13. Peter Quennell, ibid, pp57-58.