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International Dateline — The Library of Blackwell's

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>

"Many men will aver that the greatest educative influence of Oxford resides neither in the Bodleian, nor schools, nor tutors, nor lectures, nor college societies, but in the excellent management and most liberal facilities of one of the best bookshops in the world — Mr Blackwell's."

In the last instalment of the **Blackwell** story, **Rita Ricketts** introduced us to the **Blackwellian** women. Through their lives we could gain an insight into the creative genius of the **Blackwell** men, which transformed one small shop into an empire. That the firm was ever re-established, after the death of **Benjamin Harris** in 1854, is largely due to his wife **Nancy** (**Anne Nancy Sterling Blackwell**) who was determined to see the name "**B H Blackwell Bookseller**" revived in her elder son, **Benjamin Henry**.¹ On New Year's Day 1879 her wish was fulfilled; her son opened the door to a small one-roomed shop above which the name "**B H Blackwell's**" was painted, at a central site in Oxford's Broad Street. This episode tells of the opening of the famous **Broad Street Shop** in Oxford, trade with overseas libraries, and the growth of a publishing and bookselling empire.

Benjamin Henry Blackwell 1849 - 1924 A Merchant-Scholar²

*"This above all – to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."*³

An Apprenticeship as Lengthy as Jacob's was to Laban⁴

*"Snatches of reading (said he) will not make a Bentley or a Clarke. They are, however, in a certain degree advantageous."*⁵

Benjamin Henry, "**Harry**," **Blackwell**, like his own children, **Basil** and **Dorothy**, in their turn, was born over a bookshop. After his father's death, when **Harry** was merely six, his mother, **Nancy** had been forced to move to rented rooms, in a cheaper and less salubrious part of town down by the Canal. Here she resumed her former trade, embroidery and dressmaking, "in order that she might prepare her young son for the task of restoring the family name." Showing a natural aptitude for books, in and out of the schoolroom, his fate was sealed, and **Nancy Blackwell** redoubled her efforts to steer him in his late father's footsteps. But given the family's financial circumstances, **Benjamin Henry** had to work his passage, acquiring "qualifications" through the apprenticeship system. Thus it was in 1862, when only thirteen, **Harry** left **Price's (Dame) School** to be bound apprentice at one shilling a week, with annual increments of one shilling, to a bookseller, **Charles Richards** at 104 High Street, Oxford.⁶

"**Mr Richard's** shop was a queer one, one side being a bookshop and the other a wine

merchants."⁷ When trade was slack in the long vacations, and the weeds grew in Oxford's Streets and booksellers took down their shutters and sorted and dusted their stock, **Benjamin Henry** studied the catalogues, learning the entries by heart. When seeking for further adventure, he would pause from **Quaritch**, and turn to **Caesar**. Guided by **Smith's Principia Latina** he adventured vicariously, accompanying **Caesar** to the Gallic Wars. Pausing to reflect on the state of Europe, he could not help being fired up by its injustices. Seeking relief he would take strenuous exercise on the river or running round the meadows before breakfast. Here he was reprieved from **Caesar's** "dreary themes of war," to find the rural idyll of the singing farmer of **Virgil's Georgics**.

Studious and enterprising as **Benjamin Henry** was, his lack of formal education led to setbacks. While at **Richard's** shop he had applied, and failed to get, the post of Librarian of the City of Cardiff.⁸ Nonetheless, patience was one of his virtues, and "seventeen years went by, during which he completed his apprenticeship." He had bided his time, but he was now more than ready for further responsibility. An opening for a manager came up at the flourishing firm of **Slat-ter and Rose**, at 2-3 High Street, and **Benjamin Henry** made his first move. New responsibilities did little to disrupt the former pattern of his life; he continued to combine a day's work with his own programme of "continuing education." A page of his diary, with entries from 1879 to 1882, provides an insight into what this involved. The range of his reading is in itself worthy of note. To his earlier study of the classics, and his habitual reading of **Tennyson**, he added **Don Quixote**, and was moved to spend several days on **Pope's Dunciad**, a satire of **Aaron Hill**, which he "started on June 6 at 6.50am." At the same time he studied the qualities and temperaments of creative writers, using **Isaac Disraeli's**, the father of **Benjamin**, "**Curiosities of Literature**," and "**The Literary Character**." One "literary character," caught his special attention: **Thomas Babington Macaulay**, as captured in a new study by **George Trevelyan**.

Harry Blackwell's youthful diaries also convey his sense of pleasure as a member, and treasurer, of the **Falcon Boat Club**, "which cost me 24 shillings per annum." In the height of midsummer, June 1877, when the light was at its longest, he went "down river in evening (and) picked up crews for sports." **Harry Blackwell's** physical stamina must have been immense; packing in this vigorous programme of activities on top of a job where he worked over ten hours a day, six days a week. On the Seventh Day he got no rest; **Benjamin Henry** was by now a chorister at the **Church of SS Philip and James**, the new parish church in North Oxford. But despite his full life

Benjamin Henry was not content with his lot. An entry in his diary for 1877 recorded the germ of his ambition: "I have now been with **Mr. Rose** six years and seem likely to stay for a year or two, at the end of which I hope to be able to with a little assistance to open in London or elsewhere a business on my own account."⁹ A year later, according to his diary, his mind was now fully made up: "I will begin business in Oxford and probably in October 79." Hearing of vacant premises at 50 Broad Street, progress was faster than he anticipated, and he formally agreed to take the shop on 17 October 1878.

Benjamin Henry was well prepared to open his little bookshop; during his years at **Slat-ter and Rose** he had made many friends and contacts, the beginnings of a business network, and after seventeen years in the trade he had a wealth of experience and knowledge to draw on. More importantly his wages enabled him, given his customary self-restraint, to save for his big day. Steadily buying suitable books, he had accumulated, by the autumn of 1878, a nice little nest egg with over 700 works in his personal stockpile. The list, as featured in his diary scribbles, was an eclectic mixture featuring Greek and Latin classics amongst "modern" poetry and biography. **Diodati**, **Diodorus Siculus**, **Diogenes Laertius** and **Dionysius the Areopagite**, held court, in strict alphabetical order, for the amores of **Ovid**, while **Carey's Dante**, 1868, vied with **Drayton's** eclogues in Spencerian mode. **Palgrave's Golden Treasury**, an 1875 edition, was exposed to works of English criticism by the contemporaneous **Stofford Brooks**, on English Literature 1876. A life of **Chatterton**, an 1837 edition, was, perhaps, a reminder of the ignominy of poverty, and a life of **Bacon**, an 1853 edition, an invitation to "embrace" life!

Benjamin Henry's collection sported the work of fellow publisher and bookseller, **Henry Bohn**, and, splendidly, twenty-two volumes of the 1810 Fourth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in company with three volumes of **Froissart's** series of *Chronicles*, 1871 edition. **Henry Hallam** could be found juxtaposing *A View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, three volumes, 1834, with a *Constitutional History of Britain*, spiced-up by **Roscoe's** *Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini*, an 1822 edition. Not to be left in the shade, were the Puritans of the Midlands. Their struggles were personified in *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, written by his wife **Lucy Hutchinson** in 1806. They would doubtless have looked askance at **Keble's Christian Year**, an 1874 edition bound in calf, which **Benjamin Henry** had acquired in exchange for a pack of cards and four pence! Conservatively valuing his "stock" at £126 (diary entry 24 December 1878), with a nominal sale price of £190, he used the security of this "working capital" to take the final plunge.

The Name Over the Door

*"A remarkable shop, kept by a very remarkable man."*¹⁰

When **Mr. Blackwell** (as he was always called, opened his shop on New Year's Day 1879,

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it consisted of a tiny room, only twelve-foot square, with space for only one chair and one customer. From this modest beginning, with a working capital of £100, a loan of £150 at three percent, twenty pounds worth of fixtures and fittings, a further outlay of £70 on books and £60 put aside, **Benjamin Henry** set out to become solvent and to provide for his future. This new "merchant-trader" was in good company. The little shop was established on a site that had been dedicated to trade for many generations. When, for example, his father had opened in St Clements, being prohibited from the "inner-city," the small shops in Broad Street, numbered 48-50, contained no less than seven practitioners of diverse traders: **S. Seeker**, in "china," **J. Daly**, a stationer, **W H Bliss**, painter and plumber, **Matthew Charles**, engraver, **J. Bradfield**, plumber and **Henry Lockwood**, Tailor. Thirty years later, **Benjamin Henry** joined the throng of Broad Street trades people, his mother, too, being listed as "dressmaker."

Impervious to the temptations offered at No 52, the **White Horse Public House**, **Benjamin Henry** must have been uplifted by the adjacent buildings of the University, where the faces of the emperors of the Sheldonian, and the facades of the **Colleges of Trinity and Balliol**, outshone the run-of-the-mill jumble of old buildings that made up **Benjamin Henry's** immediate surroundings. To the back were stables and haylofts; "undergraduates were still prone to equestrian exercise." More to **Benjamin Henry's** taste, was the headquarters of the **Churchman's Union**, deriving from the Oxford Movement. Perhaps because of these many "presences," and despite the existence of other competitors further down, on the other side of the same street, "**Mr. Blackwell's** bookshop had, from the outset, a special air about it." "Those who came in from the noisy, cobbled street," chronicled *Oxford Magazine*, "found quiet and an invitation, not so much spoken as conveyed by the friendly spirit of the bookseller, to scrutinise and handle the books on the shelves without obligation to buy."¹¹

A full account of the Shop's customers is preserved in the immaculately kept accounts of **Benjamin Henry**. The first entries, in 1879, list names such as: **Beeching, Jowett, Macmillan, Ward, Parker, Thornton, Raven, Routledge, Longman, Morris, Higham, Gilbert, Norton, Drayton, Gladstone, Chatto**, and so. As the lists progress, the names become more familiar, and more famous, and celebrated libraries make their appearance. The stock, mostly second-hand, was drawn from Ancient and Modern Literature. It had been chosen with good judgement and with a bias towards Greek and Latin, reflecting **Benjamin Henry's** love of the classics. Using the skills he had learned as an apprentice and inspired by the legendary **Quaritch**, he compiled catalogue's to advertise his wares and titillate the interest of potential "paying" customers.¹² Such was the excitement generated by entries in his first catalogue, that he enticed even those not known to take exercise to attend in person at his little shop. One such customer was the formidable scholar, **Ingram Bywater**. Legend has it that he once said to a pupil: "You go for a walk! I have not wantonly taken a walk for twenty years." But on receiving a copy of **Mr. Blackwell's** first catalogue, he left his breakfast

and ran to 50 Broad Street to secure a copy of the rare edition of **Pacius' Organon**?¹³

Benjamin Henry's early, almost instant, success brought out what his son later termed "his quiet business genius." His life style was modest and "returns from the business were ploughed back enabling it to continually expand." During his second year of trading, in 1880, **Benjamin Henry** took on his first apprentice. **Master Fred W. Chaundy** came straight from school, untried and untested. At his binding, the signing of his indentures, he solemnly promised: "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." And for all this he was to receive 3s. 6d. a week, rising to 10s in his fifth year! Master and boy worked long hours from 10:00 a.m. to 10:30 at night, and according to his diary of 22 November 1881 **Benjamin Henry** thought of engaging another pair of hands; duly **Master Fredk. Hanks** came on board just over a year later. With more hands on deck **Mr. Blackwell's** shop expanded to include scientific and general volumes, as the 1886 catalogue reveals.

Dr. Radcliffe's "Physic Library" had been re-housed in the newly built University museum in Parks Road, Oxford, and **Blackwell's** was the recipient of some 800 volumes of overflow, some containing the bookplate of **James Gibb**, architect of the **Radcliffe Camera**. New books, too, began to feature alongside their second-hand rivals, and soon tipped the balance of sales. Catering for the Christmas trade in 1894, **Benjamin Henry** produced a general catalogue, with something enticing for the "whole family and for all tastes and all ages": poetry, drama, religion, history, biography, reference books (the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in twenty-four volumes), almanacs and annuals, including one for football! Adult titles, 1,500 in number, included the major Victorian novelists, with the notable exception of **Trollope** whose reputation had sadly collapsed at the time of his death in 1883. Younger writers featured too: **Hardy, Kipling, Meredith, Lytton, Lever, Harrison Ainsworth, F. Marion Crawford, Marie Corelli, Hall Caine** and many who are long since forgotten. "Who," asked **Arthur Norrington**, reviewing the lists for the "**Blackwell's History**," "can remember **Amelia E Barr's Feet of Clay** or **Lover for an Hour is Love for Ever**?" Among the extensive list of children's books was a "gift pack" entitled "Our Little Ones" Library, done up in a case with silk ribbon at 1s 6d.

Foreign texts too were soon to be found on **Mr. Blackwell's** shelves, and the catalogue of 1895 included Spanish, French, German and Italian texts. **Benjamin Henry** had been appointed by the **Oxford Union Society** to provide foreign books for their library, and a note informed customers that "**B H Blackwell** having agents in the leading Continental Cities is enabled to obtain Foreign Works, not in stock, with the utmost promptitude and at the lowest rates." Just as **Benjamin Henry** relished the inclusion of texts in other languages, so he delighted in providing a selection from the fine and applied arts, a special interest of his own. The catalogue of 1912 advertised the reproductions of the great masters in the recently revived *Arundel and Medici Prints*. By now the sales of new books exceeded the second hand. Taking their place beside the antiquarian specialities, were new tomes of science, medicine, economics, technology, the **Loeb** parallel

translations from Latin and Greek (1906) and two famous series: *World Classics* (1901) and *Everyman's Library* (1906). For light relaxation the reader delighted in: *Nostramo*, *Mr. Polly*, *Zulieka Dobson*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *The Four Just Men*. Their children were treated to *Peter Rabbit* and *Wind in the Willows*.¹⁴

Judging by this eclectic selection, old and new, **Benjamin Henry's** "bookish place" could not fail to have broad appeal. And **Benjamin Henry's** ardour, to educate and attract readers from far and wide, was undampened. And there was also plenty to attract those who were not able to present themselves in person in Oxford. By 1913 overseas trade accounted for 12 percent of sales, and it continued to grow in importance. Moreover, **Benjamin Henry's** skill in "knowing his market," so successful at home in Oxford, was now applied to the selection of works that may appeal to his overseas customers. American Libraries took notice of a selection in leaflets he prepared from 1902-3. Among the offerings were 542 mid-seventeenth century tracts, quarto leather-bound, detailing the Civil War and the Commonwealth and priced at \$350. But America was not, as yet, **Benjamin Henry's** biggest overseas customer. He had taken a special interest in the educational fortunes of a new group of undergraduates training for the Indian Civil Service; the Indian Institute having opened at the end of Broad Street in 1884. Such was the bond that developed that **Blackwell's** outdistanced all its competitors in the supply of books to India. Every Monday morning the Indian mail would arrive by P & O, and **Benjamin Henry** would join the *mélée* in the stockroom. Under his supervision books not in stock were ordered that day; to be despatched no later than the following Thursday.

Other forthcoming "Commonwealth" customers also featured high on **Benjamin Henry's** list of priorities. **Rhodes Scholars** too, starting to arrive in Oxford from 1903, could find refuge and familiarity behind **Mr. Blackwell's** shelves, a precious commodity for any stranger off the streets of Oxford, cold and wet as they so often were. This hospitality did not go unrewarded. When **Rhodes University** in Grahamstown was founded in 1904, the librarian, who had known **Blackwell's** as an undergraduate, looked no further than **Benjamin Henry**. Writing back in response to the librarian's request, he promised that the spine of each of the books consequently despatched would be blocked with the inscription "**Rhodes University**." Soon similar relationships were built up in other African universities, as well as in New Zealand, Canada and America. These new friends may, at first, have been more a burden than a benefit. **Clifford Collins** of the **University of Canterbury**, New Zealand, wrote of his embarrassment at the "meagre purchases," which "for decades could hardly have covered the printing and postage costs" incurred in servicing the library.¹⁵ But, as was his way, **Benjamin Henry** did not see things solely in a commercial light. If he had any motive, other than the spread of knowledge, it was to shore up the future by putting his family business on a broader footing. And his policy, towards these new customers, turned out to yield a very lucrative long-term return.

Albeit tucked away in a provincial city, among the old cobbled streets of the University, **Blackwell's** attracted favourable comparisons with the "more established" shops in the Capital. "Else-

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where," it was suggested: "... a bookshop is no longer a literary centre, it has become a pleasant, flowery pasture. If it has lost power, it has gained in beauty. How gay it is within! Every colour of the rainbow, every kind of shape and size greet the eye and whet the palate of the literary ruminant." Yes, these would be the golden days of browsing, only — well, the bookseller seems to mistrust the browser. "Are you being attended to, sir? Seen the latest novel, very strong, sir? Puff's essay just out." "So," the account went, "the rascally attendant, a plague on his impertunity, confronted the customer." "What must we who have an air about us of good feeling, a certain distinction of garment, a shiny hat, perchance gloves, be less at our ease than the merest stall hunter? Shall **Martin B---**, the friend of **Elia**, read two whole volumes of **Classisa Harlowe** unmolested, and we be eyes askance if we read a title? But I know a shop or two where I can escape this insult to my honesty. There is an old-fashioned window down in Piccadilly behind which there is great wealth not dragon-guarded... But higher still do I laud the **Sosius of Oxford**, where I may stand from morn to night unchallenged, finding the newest books from all the world before me, and I should ask for one not there, be it in the language of the hairy Ainu, some all-knowing one can tell me its price and the publisher."¹⁶

Turnover being fast, and the shop as popular among members of the City as the Gown, **Benjamin Henry** now felt confident enough to purchase the freehold of No 50, also acquiring the lease of Lockwood, the tailor's, at the rent of £40 a year. These enlargements were carried out partly with the help of his original benefactor, **Mrs. Messer**, who now lent him £1, 150 on a mortgage at four percent. This lucky stroke was enhanced by "the kindness of **Mr. Parsons**, of the Old Bank," who, while advancing him the money, shook his head gravely and bemoaned that: "he was not in banking to lend money on old houses."¹⁷ There were fears that the alterations to **Blackwell's** would change both the character and the nature of this "literary man's public house-of-call."¹⁸ Public opinion, however, soon moved in favour of **Benjamin Henry's** decision. The new alterations were hailed in the press: "**B H Blackwell's** takes the opportunity of calling attention to alterations at 50 and 51 Broad Street."¹⁹ Now the reader had yet more "liberal access" to "that favourite lounge of the lettered, **Mr. Blackwell's** well-known and hospitable taberna."²⁰ The verdict was unanimous: **Blackwell's** remained "the very bookiest of bookshops, lined with shelves full of books, full of tables covered in books.... The very floor was heaped up with books. We browsed at leisure. No one came to disturb us or to ask us to buy."²¹

Indeed **Mr. Blackwell's** shop had more the air of a free library, than that of a retail outlet. An article in the *Manchester Guardian* pointed to this tendency: "Perceiving that they liked to be left alone, **Mr. Blackwell** allows his customers to treat his shop as a free library. If a visitor wishes to buy a book he must say so, for he is never spoken to unless he speaks first. A courteous and expert attendant is at his disposal the moment he wants him; but if he does not want him he is left in peace, and may remain as long as he likes, and depart without buying anything." Perhaps the attraction of libraries over bookshops is that of "a goodly volume lying before you, ... that you may open it if you please, and need not open unless you

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please. **Mr. Blackwell** seemed to have a natural insight into the mentality of book-lovers, who are also book-buyers."²² Somehow he had the genius to translate this insight into a commercial success, although he would never have seen it in that way. For **Benjamin Henry** books were objects of value in their own right, irrespective of any other advantage they may bestow or any price they may fetch.

Even though he daily presided over a successful, and growing, enterprise, **Benjamin Henry's** love of books came first. It was this love of books that had launched his adventures in "book land." What was "food for thought" became manna for a successful business: its spiritual capital. For all his business acumen, **Benjamin Henry** remained unworldly. As an old man he liked nothing better than to hide himself away, producing and annotating his scholarly catalogues. Drawing on years of hard work and "self-education," he had the chance to pass on "the soul of the past." It also gave him a distinction, which more than made up for his lack of formal qualifications. He was, as his son **Basil** suggested, a scholar manqué; reading as much as he could and delighting in the society of the learned. His "scholarship" was not missed on his customers. It brought them in and provided them with the kind of reference facility that graced the learned libraries. Moreover, it provided a fertile environment for would-be writers, especially when their muse was being elusive. They were often to be found at the door of **Benjamin Henry's** workroom, lucubrations in hand, waiting for him to exercise him editorial powers. And they did not wait in vain. But **Benjamin Henry's** role as a publisher, and his encouragement of "writers unknown to fame," is perhaps less well known.²³ Characteristically **Benjamin Henry** would take little credit for this development. At the end of his first catalogue, he included some lines from **Pyndon's Ship of Fools**:

*"Styll am I busy bokes assemblynge,
But what they mean do I nat understonde."*²⁴

Editor's Note: The next instalment will tell the story of **Blackwell's** beginnings in publishing. — **KS** 🐼

Endnotes

1. **Basil Blackwell**, commemorative speech, *Blackwell's 1979-1954* (1946), Christ Church January 7 1954.
2. A description applied to **Basil Blackwell**, but one just as appropriate for **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, see *The Lily*, Michaelmas 1984, p 5 (the magazine of Magdalen College School), from a poem by **Maida Stainer**.
3. **Polonius's** dictum, which, according to **Fred "Father" Hanks**, summed up the life of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, recorded in "**Rex**" **King's** diaries.
4. From the diaries of "**Rex**" **King** dated 3 August 1920.
5. **Dr. Johnson**.
6. *ibid*.
7. *op cit.*, Publishers'. Record p 666.
8. *ibid*.
9. **Benjamin Henry's** diaries 1877.
10. **Lord Rosebery's** words.
11. *The Oxford Magazine*, 1939.
12. "*Catalogue No 1*" has been preserved, and was reprinted in 1973 to coincide with the issue of No 1000.
13. *The Oxford Magazine*, 1939.
14. *Op cit*, **Norrington**, p 40.
15. *Op cit*, **Norrington**, p 41.
16. Browsing in Bookshops, **Orlo Williams**, *World*, October 18 1910.
17. *Op cit* Publishers' Circular p 667.
18. **Bishop Stubbs's** phrase.
19. *Morning Post*, December 26, 1906.
20. As the shop had been described in the *Oxford Magazine*, June 4, 1902.
21. *Barbara Goes to Oxford*, Methuen, 1902.
22. **Dr. Folliott's** "Crochet Castle."
23. *The London Daily News*, Wednesday November 12, 1924, p 6. Ironically the paper had been established in 1846 by **Charles Dickens**, a writer **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** disliked.
24. *ibid* (**Norrington**).