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International Dateline — Adventures In Publishing

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>

*His work is never done. Day in, and day out, he is confronted with a heap of reading material which not all his efforts can reduce to unformidable proportions. Subject to constant interruption, he maintains his imperturbable urbanity...with young authors who come to him for counsel, he stands up to their elders who have not shared his opinion of their latest work...For the books he has re-constructed or rewritten, what kudos is his? He is content to remain anonymous, unwept, unhonoured...*¹

Introduction

The last episode of this **Blackwellian** tale told of the opening of the famous **Broad Street Shop** in Oxford, and the growth of a publishing and bookselling empire in the hands of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**. This present article tells something of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell's** adventures in the land of publishing, and of the characters he encountered.² While **Alice's** adventures in the wonderland of Oxford are almost universally well-known, those of **Benjamin Henry** are less so. But if you had walked down Oxford's Broad Street in the last decades of the nineteenth century you would have encountered many (now) household names on their way to browse at **Mr. Blackwell's** little shop, which was fast earning a reputation as the "literary man's house of call." Certainly **Alice's** creator **Charles Dodgson** was a regular. Among the famous, and famous-to-be, who "called" at "Mr. Blackwell's" and ended up on his lists, were **Dean H. C. Beeching**, the **Housmans**, **Rennell Rodd**, **Strachey**, **Mackail**, **John Buchan**, **Arnold Ward**, **Compton Mckensie**, **Walter de la Mare**, **L. A. G. Strong**, **Sir Alan Gilbert**, **C. M. Bowra** and **Stephen Spender** to name just a few.³ Some have acknowledged their debt to **Blackwell** publishing; the likes of **J. R. Tolkien**, the **Huxleys**, the **Sitwells**, **Sir Alan Herbert**, **Geoffrey Faber**, **G. D. H. Cole**, **John Betjeman** and **Christopher Morley**, whose *Eight Sin* was published at one shilling, and fetched at auction some \$60.

Nonetheless, reading through the biographies, and autobiographical material, of many of the writers who started in the **Blackwell** stable, it is surprising how relatively few attribute their early beginnings to **Benjamin Henry**. In some cases, **Graham Greene** for example, they tried to disown their early lucubrations. But without the help of **Mr. Blackwell** many may have struggled to get on the first rung of the publishing ladder. Indeed it was writers "unknown to fame" who were the most earnest of **Blackwell** habitués. And within days of opening his **Broad Street Shop**, it was to these would-be writers, as well as readers, that **Benjamin Henry**



turned. More accurately, it was to *him* they looked. Many young hopefuls had stood at his workroom door, manuscripts in hand, awaiting an audience with the hardworking "Mr. Blackwell"; albeit with some trepidation since, more so than their tutors, he was known as "a stickler for grammar and form." It was **Benjamin Henry's** assistance in bringing forth the offspring of these poets, which led to the formation of **Blackwell's** publishing. Drawing on the existing **Merton Blackwell Collection** and on new papers generously donated to the **Bodleian** by **Wiley Blackwell**, **Benjamin Henry's** own handwritten chronological record of all his publications for example, we are now able to glean a clearer picture of those early days of his **Publishing House**.⁴ That I am now able to work on this new material is in great part due to the help of **Philip Carpenter** (**Wiley Blackwell** — who generously arranged for the transfer of all the records to the **Bodleian**), **Sarah Thomas** (**Bodley's Librarian** — who agreed to house them) and **Richard Ovenden** (Keeper of Special Collections), **Clive Hurst** and **Chris Fletcher** (**Bodleian**), **Julia Walworth** (Fellow Librarian — **Merton College**) and **Julian Reid** (**Merton's Archivist**) and to **Julian Blackwell** for continuing to fund the **Blackwell History Project**, which makes this research work possible.

Adventurers All

"Young poets, unknown to fame"

Within a year of the opening of the **Broad Street Shop**, in 1879, the imprint, **BH Blackwell** was launched with *Mensae Secundae*, 1879; a collection of verses from **Balliol College** put together, with **Benjamin Henry's** guidance, by **H. C. Beeching**, followed by another slim volume, *Primavera*, the following year. **Benjamin Henry**, with all his business acumen and knowledge of the book trades, knew instinctively the symbiotic relationship between publishing and bookselling; just as today publishers seek to sell their wares directly through the Internet. Whereas the publisher takes a small number of big risks in producing a limited number of books, the bookseller takes a

large number of small risks in buying a limited number of books from



various publishers. But, wrote **Basil Blackwell**, "the bookseller is an anxious man and cannot afford to make many bad bargains, since his profits are small and his expenses are high."⁶ Yet being on the front line, in immediate contact with the public who buy and read books, talking and exchanging ideas with men and women with all kinds of interests, the bookseller has the "local" knowledge to make of himself a good publisher. And that is exactly what **Benjamin Henry** set out to do. In retrospect it seems rather apt that he had attended the boys' elementary school in Clarendon Street, which later became the site of the **Oxford University Press** warehouse. Diarist, essayist, translator of the *Classics* and author of local tourist guides to Oxford; he was something of a writer himself. But he accepted that a writer's life was impossible without means, and set about providing an income for his family and serving his book-buying public. That he was not himself able to take up writing as a profession did not deter him from helping others who yearned for literary recognition. **Benjamin Henry** determined "to remove from the work of young poets the reproach of insolvency."

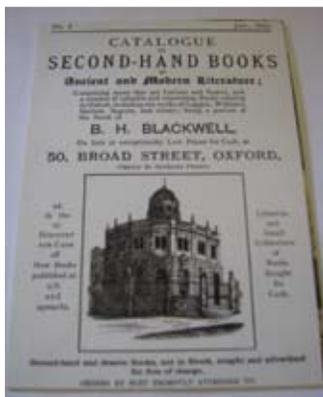
Not surprisingly then **Benjamin Henry's** first adventures in publishing took more the form of disguised "bursaries" for would-be poets. And in his own time, and at no cost to them, **Benjamin Henry** thought nothing of working into the early hours of the next day correcting their manuscripts, as his diary, written on a page torn from an old minute book on 12 June 1882, revealed. What he chose to publish was to be "confined to such work as would seem to deserve publicity. It is hoped that these adventurers may justly claim the attention of those intellects which, in resisting the enervating influence of the novel, look for something more permanent in the arduous pursuit of poetry"⁷ And he would have been far too modest to imagine that indeed his poetry series, such as *Adventurers All*, *Wheels*, *Waifs and Strays* and *Oxford Poetry*, would endure, taking up a permanent position on the stage after he was dead. It was under the **Blackwell** imprint that the poems of **Wilfred Owen** (*Wheels* 1919), **Aldous Huxley's** first work, *The Burning Wheel* and **Tolkien's** first ever poem, *Goblin's Feet* (*Oxford Poetry* 1915) were published. But it was typical, of this modest man, that he staked no claims for himself. He would have been more than satisfied with the tribute paid to him by one of his grateful poets as "a gentle man," with a gentle art — "a habit of publishing."⁸ The poet **Christopher Morley** provided a reminder of **Benjamin Henry's** contribution

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to late nineteenth and early twentieth century poetry, recalling his “habit of publishing collections of undergraduate verse.” His “little booklets,” wrote **Christopher Morley**, “were bound in paper and sold (if at all) for a shilling each.”

Morley remembered such volumes as *Ignes Fatui* and *Metri Gratia* by **Philip Guedalla** of **Balliol** and *Play Hours with Pegasus* by **A. P. Herbert** of **New College**.⁹ Taking his own cue from this more august company, **Morley** took the plunge, and risked sending a little sheaf of his own rhymes to **Mr. Blackwell**. This, he remembered was in October 1921, when **Benjamin Henry** was near the end of his days. But **Morley** was not disappointed. The elderly **Benjamin Henry** was as assiduous as ever, and he invited him into the office in Broad Street “to discuss his work.” “What I remember best of my bashful interview with **Mr. Blackwell** senior,” **Morley** wrote, “besides his pink face and white hair and extreme politeness, was his asking me to put in some more commas.” He told **Morley** that he liked his poems but “there don’t seem to be any commas in them. Perhaps you don’t use commas much in America?”¹⁰ **Mr. Blackwell’s** bark was worse than his bite, and duly **Morley’s** poems came out, with or without “proper” punctuation, under the **B H Blackwell** imprint. Despite his exacting standards, **Benjamin Henry** had no shortage of contenders for his lists, and they were warmly welcomed. His daughter, **Dorothy**, too, attracted them to **Blackwell’s**, holding readings for poets on a Saturday evening, as **Vera Brittain** recounted.¹¹ That his writers valued these **Blackwell** contacts is evidenced by **Benjamin Henry’s** association with the **Horace Society**.¹² Having educated himself on the *Classics* and being able to provide a very creditable translation, he was asked by the organisers of the **Horace Society** to be their “Keeper of Records.” (What publisher today would in his own time be available to observe the creation process at first hand? This, nota bene, was one of the many secrets of **Benjamin Blackwell’s** much un-sung success.)

Founded in 1898, the **Horace Society** “was a literary club with a difference. The members met, not to discuss others’ works, but to rehearse their own.”¹³ **Basil Blackwell** recorded his father’s experiences at the hands of the “**Horace**” poets: “Each (poet) was bound to produce and read to his fellows, a poem written for the occasion ‘in a well-known language and not exceeding in length, not falling below in brevity, any poem of **Horace**’ (excluding the *De Arte Poetica*).” The list of members included such well-known names as **Asquith**, **Belloc** and **John Buchan**, **A. D. Godley**, **St. John Lucas**, **Arnold Ward** (the Club’s founder



and great nephew of **Matthew Arnold**), **H. C. Beeching**, **Laurence Binyon**, **A. E. Zimmern**, **Meade Falkner** and **W. R. Hardy** (who invariably produced a poem in Greek). Unusually, two **Cambridge** men, **Maurice Baring** and **Owen Seaman**, were also admitted. After a short, but sparkling life of three years, the **Horace Club** was disbanded. But it was not forgotten. **Benjamin Henry**, in his meticulous way, had kept an autographed copy of each of the poems, pasting them into an album at the end of each meeting.¹⁴ **Sir Arthur Norrington** wrote that these records “served as a moving monument to Victorian wit and scholarship.” But it was also a tribute to **Benjamin Henry**, who was welcomed and esteemed as one of their number. He subsequently published a collection of the poems, featuring **Hilaire Belloc’s** “rebus” design. Sumite Castalios *nigris de fontibus haustus* (*From the Black Wells draw ye the Muses draughts*).¹⁵ True to form, he forbear to mention that he was the “Black Well” source from which his poets drew their draughts.

But although it was via poetry that **Benjamin Henry** made his debut in the publishing world, his imprint was not limited to this genre.¹⁶ His first, poetry, author, **Dean H. C. Beeching** of **Balliol**, also edited an elegant reprint of **George Herbert’s** *The Country Parson* for **Benjamin Henry** in 1898. Before this, in 1885, as Rector of **Yatterdon**, **Beeching** collaborated with **Robert Bridges** and **H. E. Wooldridge**, to produce the famous *Yatterton Hymnal* (words and music). Arguably, this was the most notable work to bear the early **Blackwell’s** imprint. In its field, it had an influence way beyond the rural parish for which it had been prepared. And **Vaughn William’s** *English Hymnal* owed much to it. Other more weighty tomes followed. A very distinguished book, **Dudley Medley’s** *English Constitutional History* came out of this same era. Becoming a standard text, it was affectionately known as “Deadly Muddy’s.”¹⁷ These later volumes, produced with the help of his son, were to make the publishing side of things viable. His earlier writers had looked on **Benjamin Henry** as some latter day Clerk of Oxonford: with his threadbare cloth and forty books in red and black who gave no care for “gold in coffre.” The most profit, of the worldly variety, **Benjamin Henry** ever received from his publishing adventures was, at best, an average of less

than £200 per year. It was a start, nonetheless, and the value of the goodwill he generated was incalculable. **Benjamin Henry** had not thought himself sufficiently qualified to go all out on the publishing side, and he was too preoccupied with the firm as a whole, but he had made sure that his son was. As **Basil** was drawn into the business, and after the upheavals of the 1914-18 War, **Benjamin Henry** lent his weight to



the endorsement of more ambitious projects. Even during the Great War, when their were acute paper shortages, the **Blackwell** imprint introduced a new flood of writers, with impressive contributions from women writers, **D. L. Sayers**, **Edith Sitwell** and **Vera Brittain** notably for example.¹⁸

During the last few years of his life the imprint began to appear on an even wider range of works, and the gravitas of his House was increased with the acquisition of **The Shakespeare Head Press**. The SHP had been founded in 1906 by **A. H. Bullen**, a London publisher “who had a dream.” According to a **Mr. Kendrick** who was the head “comp” at the **Shakespeare Head Press**, first under **Bullen**, and later under **Bernard Newdigate**, **Bullen** did actually say that he had a dream regarding the press; a dream which had impressed him very strongly. In this dream he had been visiting **Shakespeare’s** birthplace and someone had said to him “You’re not going away without seeing the book?” “What book?” he asked. “Why, haven’t you heard of the noble edition of **Shakespeare** that is being printed here — the first complete edition ever printed and published in **Shakespeare’s** own Town.” This dream cried out to **Bullen**, “and he was determined to set up a press of Stratford men.” And **Bullen’s** partner, **Frank Sidgwick** recorded in his diary that the dream came true.¹⁹ A complete **Shakespeare** was produced between 1904-7, and **Bullen** published many other works of the Elizabethans, and reached out to the “modern” canon, to include the works of **W. B. Yeats**. Despite the quality of his work, **Bullen** had no head for commerce, and sadly at his death, in 1919, at the age of 63, the **Press** was left derelict. **Bullen** deserved better than this. Both **Blackwell** masters admired his fine printing, and his publication of *Elizabethan Lyrics and Love Songs* had brought them back from oblivion. But “Weep you no more, sad fountains”: the **Blackwell’s** came to the rescue, ignoring a gloomy economic forecast and the high level of unemployment in Britain. The **Shakespeare Head Press** was incorporated in February 1921, and at the second directors meeting, held in June, there was only £20 in the kitty.

Happily, **Basil Blackwell** wrote, it was becoming good business, not simply idealism, to be generous of time and skills in the production of books! And this was **Benjamin Henry’s** hallmark. Along with this idealism and painstaking care was **Benjamin Henry’s** exactitude

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and insistence that a day's work be done in a day. This credo was extended to all his dealing, irrespective of their importance. His strictures were once deployed, **Basil Blackwell** recounted, "in a run-in with the **Times Book Club** in the early 1990s, but it hadn't prevented him from being regarded as one of its most influential members." Better known, was his "little misunderstanding with **Hilaire Belloc**." The situation arose when **Belloc** offered a collection of his essays to "**Mr. Blackwell**." **Basil** describes how his father then undertook to publish them. Shortly afterwards, however, **Benjamin Henry** noticed the self same essays appearing in some other literary paper, "and he told **Belloc** that he was disturbed by this!" Answering this concern, **Belloc** replied, "Oh that is common form these days!" My father's reaction, **Basil** continued, was typical. Explaining that "perhaps I am a little old-fashioned," he returned the manuscript to the miscreant. **Belloc** knew he was beaten and produced his "amende honorable" in recompense. It was at this point that **Belloc** had designed his famous "**Blackwell**" rebus around his friend's name. All was well. As a token of reciprocity, **Blackwell's** used **Belloc's** offering to adorn the covers of its catalogues.²⁰

A Great and Lone Achievement

"A good man who did good things"

Benjamin Henry's adventures in publishing were not entirely motivated by idealism. They were also a response to the rapid economic, political and social changes taking place. To survive, the small businessman had to be jack of all in his trade, and **Benjamin Henry** was a Master not just a Jack: hence the symbiotic growth of both the publishing and bookselling sides under **Benjamin Henry**. For those with **Benjamin Henry's** skill and probity, this was the golden age of the small family-owned business: labour in the towns was plentiful, wages were low, food and housing were cheap and income tax was 5d in the pound. Added to which, **Benjamin Henry's** modest ambition to "open up in trade on his own account," had taken place against the wider backdrop of Victorian Britain at the height of its imperial, if not economic, glory. The wealth that had been created when Britain's industrial power was at its zenith generated social, political and economic agitation and reform, which was beginning to manifest itself in a voracious demand for education. It was this growth of universal education and the expansion of institutions, from elementary to university, which turned around the fortunes of the British publishing, as well as bookselling, and cleared the way for **Benjamin Henry's** success.²¹ With this "new age of enlightenment," came an unprecedented increase in the demand for books: fiction, non-fiction and those covering the new "technical" curriculum subjects such as economics and science and the growth of a whole new market for children's literature and school texts. The **Blackwells**, father and son, understood the necessity to support this new learning with well-produced, but cheaper, books. Overseas markets also developed as foreign students, studying in Oxford, returned

to serve "Victoria's People" in the far corners of an expanding Empire or in the independent "New World." And **Mr. Blackwell's** fame went with them.

When **Basil Blackwell** joined his father in Broad Street, in 1913, he found the family firm in fine fettle. Overcoming a blip at the beginning of the century, the value of total sales (publishing and bookselling) were, by then, up to £27,000, as compared with £15,000 in 1901. **Blackwell's** net profits were averaging eleven percent of sales, and the balance sheet showed a figure of £20,000. At his father's death in 1924, and not before, **Basil Blackwell**, took over the chairmanship of the firm, a position he held for exactly the same number of years, forty-five, as his father. **Benjamin Henry** continued to take a close interest in publishing until his death; the very week of his death he attended Board meetings as usual. After his death, his publishing work belatedly received some public approbation. The *Daily Mail* pronounced that: "**Blackwell** did a very great service to Oxford in providing encouragement and a chance of publicity to young writers." Perhaps the last word on **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** comes best from his son, "I used to watch my father as he sat in his chair reading in the evening, and ask myself: how is it that this man, so quiet, so apparently reclusive, is so highly esteemed by his friends and fellow citizens? Has he really something of greatness?" Great, in **Benjamin Henry's** book, would have meant the writers of the *Classics* and the *Bible*. But his son recalled a text from **Thucydides**, which summed up his



Sir Basil with the Blackwell coat of arms in Merton Hall.

father's "greatness": "*Of all the manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most.*" But, uncharacteristically, his publishing adventures had not shown this "restraint." They had been risky, entrepreneurial in the best sense, and, in the short run, made little profit. Yet the way he pursued his trade enabled him to leave behind a business that his son, his family and heirs were to benefit from to this day. More importantly he laid the foundations of one of the most important independent academic publishers. 🌿

Editor's Note: The way in which Basil Blackwell developed the Publishing House, expanding the work and dreams, of his father, is the subject of the next episode. — KS

Endnotes

1. *Literary Characters*, Jonathan Cape, 1954.
2. More archive material, awaiting processing, has only recently been discovered, thanks to **Wiley Blackwell** and the **Bodleian**.
3. *Vogue* July 1950.
4. See also **Rita Ricketts** *Adventurers All*, **Blackwell** 2001.
5. From **Basil Blackwell's** notes, June 5 1963. *Adventurers All* was one of the most famous of the *Blackwell Poetry Series* and is taken as the title of the history of **Blackwell's** written by **Rita Ricketts**, 2001.
6. Letter to **Sir Arthur Norrington**, 18 April 1975.
7. **Basil Blackwell's** own notes on his father's life and work.
8. **Christopher Morley's** description of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**.
9. **Herbert** went on to campaign for the rights of authors, when, later, he was MP for Oxford, 1939-50.
10. An extract sent by **Jack Wolsdorf** from an essay "Concerning the first edition of *The Eight Sin*" by **Christopher Morley** published by **Colophon** 1934, see **Blackwell's Broad Sheet** March 1985.
11. **P. Berry & M. Bostridge**, *Vera Brittain, A Life*, Vintage 2001 p 156.
12. A fuller version of this story was researched and written up by **Rita Ricketts** for the Balliol Record.
13. Op cit, **Norrington**, p 25.
14. The original forms part of the **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
15. *Oxford Magazine*, 1939.
16. The complete hand-written, by **Benjamin Henry**, list, only recently recovered, can now be seen in the **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
17. **Sir Basil Blackwell's** speech to celebrate 100 years of **Blackwell's** publishing, September 6 1979, such as **Tolkien**, **Edith Sitwell**, **D. L. Sayers** who all acknowledged his importance.
18. A fuller treatment of their work for **Blackwell**, and the influence of the "War" by **Rita Ricketts**, can be seen in an earlier episode of *Against the Grain*, the conference paper of Charleston 2008, *A New Decameron*, and The Proceedings of the Christ Church, *Women Warriors*.
19. **Frank Sidwick's** diaries and other material relating to the **Shakespeare Head Press** are in **BB's** notes and his 1975 essay on **Bullen** and **Newdigate**. **Sidwick** left **Bullen** and founded his own firm of **Sidgwick and Jackson**.
20. **Sir Basil Blackwell** to **Sir Arthur Norrington**, December 5, 1975.
21. There was of course a growing problem for Britain, as an economic power, no longer the undisputed workshop of the world.