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## International Dateline -- On the Point of a Needle

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# International Dateline — On the Point of a Needle

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>

*“Unlike medieval historians...who used to speculate as to how many angels could stand on the point of a needle...Blackwellians, although not angels, did indeed stand on the point of a needle,” asserted Sir Basil Blackwell: “It was Nancy Blackwell’s skill in embroidery that led to the founding of ‘Blackwell’s of the Broad.’”*

## Introduction

In this latest article **Rita Ricketts** introduces us to the **Blackwellian** women. It is perhaps through their lives that we can gain an insight into the creative genius of the **Blackwell** men, which transformed one small room into an empire. That the firm was ever re-established, after the death of **Benjamin Harris**, 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**.<sup>1</sup> 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. **Sir Basil** described his grandmother as “being in the right tradition of great Victorian women, who thought more of their duty than of their rights.” With these qualities she endowed her son, and seeing him established was reward enough. But that she had been able to see her son through school and an apprenticeship as lengthy as **Jacob’s** was to **Laban** could indeed be said, as **Sir Basil** later wrote, “to stand on the point of a needle.” It was indeed his “grandmother’s skill in embroidery which made what she did possible.”<sup>2</sup>

## Warrior Women

Left to fend for her family at the age of 32, **Nancy** moved to cheap rented quarters at 1 Jews Mount, subsequently called Bulwarks Lane, looking down on the terminus of the Oxford and Birmingham Canal; now the site of **Nuffield College**.<sup>3</sup> Henceforth she made a living plying her dressmaking skills and teaching embroidery.<sup>4</sup> Her good craftwork brought her to the attention of the Conventual Sisters of St Thomas, whose habits she helped to make. And her fine needlework, in the best traditions of the Oxford Movement, embellished many a ceremonial ecclesiastical vestment.<sup>5</sup> But her skills also caught the attention of a secular and more lucrative market, where she captured a corner with her elaborately sprigged waistcoats. The vogue among Victorian undergraduates at the time, they were to be seen on “young **Pendennis**, who, during his time at the university, was rather a dressy man and loved to array himself in splendour. He and his polite friends would dress themselves out with as much care in order to go and dine at each other’s rooms, as other folks would who were going to enslave a mistress...but what follies will not youth perpetrate with its own admirable gravity and simplicity?”<sup>6</sup> And the **Blackwell’s** were to profit from their “folly.” As the family fortunes picked up, **Nancy** moved the family, together with a boarder-apprentice and a servant, to larger, more spacious, quarters at 46, Holywell Street, in 1874; a house large enough to let lodgings in term time.<sup>7</sup>

Within a year of the opening of the **Broad Street Shop** in 1879 **Nancy** went to live with her son “over the shop,” as his diary records.<sup>8</sup> There she remained until she died aged 64, on the 4 June 1887. “Her mission in life abundantly accomplished,” **Anne Nancy Stirling** was buried among her kinswomen, the weavers and fullers of the old mediaeval village of the Holy Wells, beside the church of St Cross. Thus she rejoined her husband, **Benjamin Harris**:

*“Some natural tears they’d drop’t, but wiped thm soon;  
The world was all before them, where to choose  
Thir place of rest, and providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took thir solitarie way.”*

Their way had not been so solitary, and they are not forgotten. But for all **Nancy Blackwell** gave the firm it’s spectacularly successful new start, neither she nor her descendant **Blackwell** women played any for-

mal role in the bookselling and publishing businesses. They too earned their laurels, but elsewhere. **Nancy’s** daughter **Matilda** went as a missionary to South Africa. **Lilla**, wife of the second **B H Blackwell**, was a teacher and organist. Her daughter **Dorothy** was a hospital matron, nursing during two world wars. **Christine Blackwell**, wife of **Basil**, was a successful classicist with a First from **London University**. She worked for the Greek scholar **Gilbert Murray**; an avid and eloquent champion of women’s rights. That **Christine** was a classical scholar should not come as a surprise when you know that her three daughters were named **Helen** (of **Troy?**), **Penelope** (the faithful wife of **Odysseus?**) and **Corinna** (**Korinna**: the ancient Greek poet alleged to be the teacher of and rival to the better-known Theban poet **Pindar?**). All three daughters inherited, and exhibited, the radical and individualistic traits of their father’s side.

To this day, **Corinna**, an avid environmentalist, fights the **Blackwell** cause of academic bookselling and is as iconoclastic as ever were her father and grandfather. And it is **Corinna** who had the energy and foresight to preserve the **Blackwell** archives. **Dame Penelope** followed her grandfather’s and father’s interest in Liberal politics, gaining prominence in the Party; she too brought up children alone after the death of her journalist husband. Their father always professed ignorance “as to just how they could juggle so many things.” And while he admitted that “half his self was lost” at the death of his “peerless secretary of forty years,” he retained a very heavily reinforced glass ceiling within the firm. As a student at **Merton** he lamented that “female undergraduates were remote mysterious and chaperoned creatures.” But while he rejoiced in the success, elegance and grace of one woman in the **Greats School**, whose name he discovered from a scrutiny of her bicycle, he recorded that this “**Phoebe W.** had her reward when she married her history tutor.” For **Basil**, this was “a proper ending for a clever girl!” It is not on record what **Basil’s** mother **Lilla** thought of this chauvinism!

Like **Nancy Blackwell** before her, **Lilla** had had to take on the role of bread-winner. It is interesting that the **Blackwell** men seemed to have a penchant for choosing women who could weather adversity! **Basil’s** sister **Dorothy** saw her mother as a latter day **Boadicea** “because she was a fearless fighter against injustice,” while **Basil** described her as having “something of the country air about her.” As a free spirit, he recorded, she found it “difficult to adjust herself to the stratified society” of Victorian Oxford.<sup>10</sup> She inveighed against the gulf that existed between the Townsfolk and Gownsfolk of Oxford, a stance which appalled and dismayed her husband, who had grown up to regard the divide as “untraversable and fixed.”<sup>11</sup> To occupy her two small children in the confined space above the shop, **Lilla** would tell stories of country larks on the Norfolk farm where she grew up.<sup>12</sup> Among these stands the indelible image of **Lilla** as a small village girl, always showing off in front of her peers, dressed up as the village zany (idiot). Taking no pains to conceal her jest, she was discovered by the real “village zany” who gave chase: a chase **Lilla** never forgot! Other stories brought to life the harvest home suppers. When the hard work was done: “the hay cart was brought round filled with clean straw, and the little children laid in and covered with a tarpaulin ... the horses black with sweat in the stable, the small kegs of brandy, ... and the townie cousins, visiting from London, to be ‘initiated’!”

*“All sang, (and after sixty years  
The singing lingers in my ears)  
From wagon-tops, while bearing back  
The end of harvest to the stack;”<sup>13</sup>*

**Lilla**, together with her four sisters and one brother, **Jack**, enjoyed a carefree and happy early childhood. They lived in a roomy and pleasant farmhouse, “with French windows opening onto the lawn, and hanging creepers.”<sup>14</sup> **Lilla** loved to recall the one outstanding, and rather dramatic, feature of the **Taylor** children’s childhood home: “the huge crater before the front door where a thunderbolt had once struck.” Typically it was this image that had stuck in the mind of the

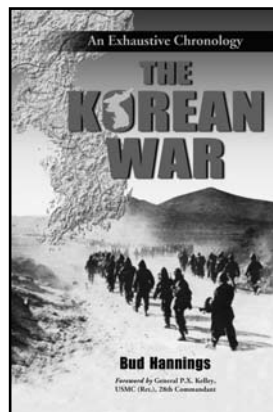
*continued on page 81*

imaginative **Lilla**. But her image of her father was equally clear. **John Taylor**, as she had told her children, was a strong, thickset man "with a golden spade-beard and kind blue eyes." Her father, owning and farming his own land in the Norfolk village of Blo' Norton, "was much respected as an honest and upright man." Guided by his grand-daughter's written record, it is not difficult to "see" **John Taylor** "with his square bowler hat spanking through the lanes on the way to market at Diss." On rare but memorable occasions, **Lilla** was allowed to accompany her father to market. Here she would wander off from the din of stock auctions, and the farmers haggling over prices, to be tantalised by the colourful displays of wares on the general stalls. **Lilla's** memories of these halcyon days were, alas, soon to be overlaid by those of tragedy.

Despite the cheerful demeanor of the **Taylor** family, the livelihood of rural England, and small farmers in particular, was being threatened by the reform of the Corn Laws. This reform changed the face of rural England forever; in its wake came the destruction of so many small farms who were unable to contend with the influx of cheap corn from Canada. Sadly, **John Taylor**, along with hundreds of others, suffered this fate. **Dorothy Blackwell** recorded her mother's poignant account of the day their farm went under the hammer. Down below, in the farm courtyard, in front of his eyes, **John Taylor** saw the whole disastrous spectacle where "his horses and possessions were all being sold." **John** was broken-hearted. His death was untimely, and his good strong life largely unrewarded.<sup>15</sup> **Lilla**, on the other hand, like the husband she was to meet, was determined to find a means to overcome the family's tragedy. Typical of many dutiful daughters, and sons, of the time, **Lilla** put aside any thoughts of marriage and stayed on at the farm to care for her mother. By becoming the village schoolmistress, and playing the harmonium in church, her daughter **Dorothy** recorded, **Lilla** was able to maintain her mother in the old farm until she too was laid to rest next to her husband in the village graveyard, in the company of other faithful old servants who had succumbed to cancer "the scourge of that part of Norfolk."

**Lilla's** sense of fun was matched by her sensitivity and telepathic leanings, wrote her daughter: "In a dream my mother described the tossing manes and red nostrils that were the portents of disaster. At some much later date she woke my father up at 2 am to say "I have been in the horse fair and **Jack** (her brother) is dead." And truly news came that **Jack** had died at that time, tragically, from an overdose of laudanum. **Dorothy** added that her mother's telepathy may have been passed on. In 1928, as **Lilla** lay dying, **Basil Blackwell** was telephoned from Blo' Norton by an old pupil of hers asking if all was well with **Mrs. Blackwell** as she had been compellingly aware of her all day! **Lilla's** stories of her brother **Jack**, riding high on his horse across the wind-swept fields of Norfolk were also the stuff of myths for her children. Not content with the cramped rural life, **Jack** sought his fortune in Canada as a "trapper." Here, according to **Lilla**, "he was in his element ... and he was a wild one." Yet in his native village, many years after his death, his fine horsemanship was still legendary, as was his reputation as "an amateur vet" and "one who would put on the gloves and take anyone on." The fields at that time had dykes rather than ditches with straight walls, and if a heavy carthorse slipped in he was boxed and helpless. Then the cry went up "**Fetch Jack Taylor**." Putting a halter round the animal's neck, and with complete control of a very steady horse, he would drag the animal inch by inch out of the dyke. One jerk would have been fatal!

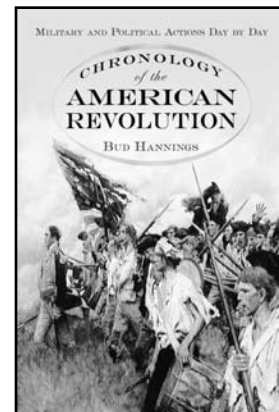
**Lilla's** stories must have encouraged her children's' imaginings to run riot, and in this **Basil** certainly needed no encouragement. **Dorothy**, working through the London Blitz, was as fearless as her forbears. Hardly known as compared with her brother **Basil**, she had many talents, studying piano under **Dr. Ernest Walker**, the musical genius of **Balliol**, and playing first fiddle in "**Dr Allen's** orchestra." She shared her parent's hatred of cant and had no time for Victorian fading flowers, if such a species ever existed. Small, but strong and athletic, **Dorothy** competed with her brother at tennis and swimming; she was also a good horsewoman and rejoiced in long walks through the Oxfordshire countryside. **Benjamin** and **Lilla**, determined that their daughter should be as well educated as their son, sent **Dorothy** to **Oxford High School** where she did not disappoint them. According to **Basil**, "**Dorothy** responded to the mark-grubbing discipline of those days by a weekly score of 'Red A's.'" But like her mother, grandmother and great **Aunt Matilda**, she was also "a carer." A formidable nurse, she worked in France during the First World War and as a Matron



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in the Second. Family folk-law has it that during the endless nights of the Second World War, **Dorothy** acquired the habit of "kipping in a laundry basket" only to be "sent flying down the corridor during bombing raids." After her father's death **Dorothy** was well provided for, but the family business passed to her brother **Basil** in Oxford. She watched him continue with her father's good work, but many years later, at **Basil's** Encaenia, she still regretted that her father had not received a degree. But it was in her gift to chronicle her mother's adventures, and to pass them onto the next generation.

**Lilla's** "country air" continues in the family house, gardens and woodlands of Osse Field, where her grandson, **Julian**, lives. Symbolically Osse, the name of the local stream, also means good luck. And **Lilla** brought the **Blackwell** name plenty of that. It was at Osse Field that **Basil's** wife **Christine** established a garden worthy of **Lilla**; a garden whose shape and form is still largely unchanged. Like **Lilla**, **Christine** too was a rock upon which **Blackwell's** development relied. Her knowledge of Greek epic and drama came in handy: the works of **Euripides**, for example, represented ordinary people, especially women, "with impassioned sympathy."<sup>16</sup> And she used bags of this to tame her energetic husband, and smooth any ruffled feathers in the family firm. She worked tirelessly in the local community and for the larger family of **Blackwellians**, often nursing convalescent members of staff. At home she blunted the edges of her husband's ego, reigning in his imaginary flights of fancy and creative embroidery of the truth. She had openly admonished **Basil** when he invented a story for the **Shakespeare** critic, **Wilson Knight**. The Ghost in Hamlet, **Basil** maintained, did not speak, but was invented on the insistence of the theatre manager to "help" the audience. "And, pray, how do you know that, **Basil**?" **Christine** asked. **Basil** parried "that he knew it exactly the same way the Catholics knew the Virgin went to heaven in the flesh — through the imagination." "And I hope you told **Mr. Knight** that," came **Christine's** swift rejoinder.

The **Blackwell** women were renowned for having the last word, and **Christine** was no exception; her often-heard tart rejoinder of "Rubbish **Basil**!" was not far removed from **Dame Alice More's**

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“Tilly Vally Master More.”<sup>17</sup> A skilled tactician, she let Basil have his head, or let him think he had it anyway. And so this partnership continued until they could be likened to **Mathew Arnold’s** “bright and aged snakes.” **Christine** termed this period “injury time.” They agreed that “be this long or short, this time was to be reckoned as a bonus.”<sup>18</sup> Shortly after their sixty-second wedding anniversary, **Basil** wrote, “my beloved was gradually withdrawn from us as life ebbed... Her courage remained invincible... Now the tide is in full flood, bringing the numerous treasures of precious memories. Laus Deo.”<sup>19</sup> Her garden remains as a tribute:

*“While by the rosebed gay you stood, and  
Revelled in the multitude of blooms with unfamiliar names, and tints  
And folds new-found and sweet,  
We wondered much at the rich poser which  
Breeds so many and many a flower  
Not like the myriads known before, and  
Each one lovely and complete.”*<sup>20</sup>

At her death **Basil** was desolate and fell back on the books in his **Osse Field Library**.<sup>21</sup> From the first she had been the strong one in their partnership. Giving the impression of severity in her bearing, she

had cut her hair short at a time before it was not quite the done thing for “young ladies,” thus meeting with her father’s disapproval. But far from being an early “Flapper,” she had more the air of the schoolmistress about her; certainly she looked very competent.<sup>22</sup> She met her future husband while working for **Gilbert Murray**, and for a while, determined to pursue her career, she resisted the temptations of the urbane, spirited, fair-haired **Basil**. He was the sentimental one, and resolving as ever **John Donne** had “to live with thee and be thy love” he won her over. After her marriage to **Basil**, and with the arrival of a brood of children, she largely set aside her academic pursuits. But she never lost her enthusiasm for the Classics or literature. **Basil**, in his Victorian way, “didn’t on the whole think of women as great readers ... for women generally are not kindly disposed to books, which lie about and harbour dust, and cost money which might be better spent. A woman collector of rare books is *rarissima avis*.”<sup>23</sup> He must, of course, have been generalising, for his experience of women, and **Christine** in particular, was quite otherwise.

To contain her lively progeny, fresh air and fields were called for. Thus **Christine** and **Basil** swapped urban North Oxford for village life in Appleton. Designed around the principles of **William Morris**, their house appeared modest and bare. Furnished with heavy unpolished oak tables and chairs, it had the look of a rambling cottage.<sup>24</sup> It must have been a haven of freedom for the young **Blackwells**. While **Christine** allowed her children considerable freedom; they were often observed romping barefoot down the lanes, **Basil** referred to them as “the Philistines.” **Christine’s** father disapproved of the children’s “local accents” and they were, according to her own accounts “in need of a good deal of disciplining.”<sup>25</sup> But Philistines, the **Blackwell** children, were not. They inherited their parents, and grandparent’s, love of books, and provided a testing-ground for **Basil’s** developing interest in children’s literature. Just as **Benjamin Henry** had taught his son and daughter to read the classics, so **Christine** and **Basil** encouraged their three daughters and two sons.<sup>26</sup> **Christine** took a deep interest in education and her contacts with local schools helped to find promising recruits for the firm. Her judgement, according to her husband, was immaculate. One or two of the girls recruited in this way, and much admired by both **Christine** and **Basil Blackwell**, have only now come up to retirement. Their stories provide a living memory of **Blackwell’s** and **Blackwellians**.

**Christine**, as much as **Basil**, gathered around her a host of literary and bookish friends who she would often coax out of shyness and reserve. Most memorably, as **Basil** recorded, was the way she broke the spell that bound **May Morris** so firmly to the past and to the ghost of her father (**William Morris**). Another of **Christine’s** converts was **Dorothy L. Sayers (DLS)**, who was a regular visitor. **DLS** writes of her delight at seeing **Christine** with “a sweet baby on her knee.”<sup>27</sup> **DLS**, as **Christine** had been, was determined to earn her own living. But unlike **Christine** she managed to wangle a formal place in the firm. By 1916 **Basil** had enough work to justify the employment of an editorial assistant. Interviewing **DLS** in his father’s workroom he was confronted with a “tall, very slim young woman, dressed in a formal blue serge costume with informal yellow stockings.” It soon emerged that the youthful, and very bright, **DLS** was more interested in gaining an entrée into publishing than in the detailed and meticulous work required of a trainee editor. Within a year she managed to add her own first volume of poems to the **Blackwell** list. The volume was published in the *Adventurers All series*, and at number nine she followed in the footsteps of **Elizabeth Rendall** and **Ester Lillian Duff**, with other women appearing in *Oxford Poetry*.

Similarly women made their mark in the **Blackwell** poetry series *Wheels*: 1916 **Edith Sitwell**, **Nancy Cunard**, **Helen Rootham**; 1917 editions, **Lucy Hawkins**, **Marian Ramie**, **Emma Gurney Salter**, **Doreen Wallace**, **Beatrice Llewellyn Thomas**, **Marion Prysce**, **Vera** and **Margaret Larminie** and in 1918 **Eleanor Deane Hill**, **Susan Miles**. Soon after **DLS’s** departure from **Blackwell’s** came **Dorothea Still’s** *Poems of Motherhood* and **Gladys Mary Hazel’s** *The House*. Of the former, **Edith Sitwell** is of particular note. To provide “*passing-bells for these who die as cattle*” **Basil Blackwell’s** 1919 volume (number 6) of *Wheels*, edited by **Edith Sitwell**, was dedicated to **Owen’s** memory and contained seven of his poems, bringing him to public attention for the first time. **Edith Sitwell** also prepared the first edition of his poems (1920). But it was **DLS** who had burst through the male portals

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#### Endnotes

1. **Basil Blackwell**, commemorative speech, **Blackwell’s** 1979-1954 (1946), Christ Church January 7 1954.
2. *ibid*.
3. Letter, **Basil Blackwell** to **M. Maclagan** (Oxford Library) January 7 1954, including some of the notes and material he used for his Christ Church speech.
4. In the Oxford Directory of 1880, **Nancy** is described as a dress-maker, even though she was now living with her son at the **Broad Street Shop**.
5. *op cit* Christ Church notes.
6. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes.
7. The 1871 Census records **Ann Blackwell** living at 1 Bulwarks Alley, formerly Jews Walk, with her three children, an apprentice and a servant. The 1874 Oxford Directory records the dress-maker living at 46 Holywell.
8. **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
9. The conclusion of *Paradise Lost, Book XI*.
10. **Sir Basil’s** notes on his mother.
11. **Sir Basil Blackwell’s** notes.
12. Written up by her daughter, **Dorothy**; **Basil’s** sister.
13. **John Masfield**, *Land Workers*.
14. **Dorothy Blackwell’s** notes.
15. From the notes of **Dorothy Blackwell**.
16. see **Margaret Drabble**, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, OUP, 1987, p 187.
17. **Henry Schollick**, Address at the service of Thanksgiving for **Basil Blackwell**, 31 May 1984.
18. Letter Gaffer to **Angela Melvin**, undated but after the death of his wife.
19. Letter Gaffer to **Melvin**.
20. **Edmund Blunden**, a **Blackwell’s** poet, *Shells by a Stream*, quoted in **G S Thomas**, *The Old Shrub Roses*, Phoenix House, London, 1955, p 15.
21. This is the working Library of **Sir Basil**, which has been generously bequeathed to the **Bodleian** by **Julian Blackwell**.
22. Interview **Basil Blackwell**.
23. **Basil Blackwell**, notes, September 30 1952.
24. Interview with **Basil Blackwell** by **Ved Metha**.
25. Letters, **Christine Blackwell** to **Basil Blackwell**, September 1919, Ramsgate.
26. **Richard** and **Julian Blackwell** both in their turn became Chairmen of the firm. **Julian Blackwell** is now its President.
27. 1918, letters of **DLS**, the **Bodleian**; the baby being **Richard Blackwell**.
28. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes.