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. 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. 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.”

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. 2 Henceforth she made a living plying her dressmaking skills and teaching embroidery. 3 Her good craftsmanship 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 ecclesiastical vestment. 4 But her skills also caught the attention of a secular and more lucrative market, where she captured a corner with her elaborately spangled 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?” 5 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 in term time. 6

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. 7 There she remained until she died aged 64, on the 4 June 1887. “Her mission in life abundantly accomplished,” Anne Nancy Sterling Blackwell was buried among her kinswomen, the weavers and fullers of the old mediaeval village of the Holy Wells, besides the church of St Cross. Thus she rejoined her husband, Benjamin Harris:

“Some natural tears they’d drop, but wiped them soon; The world was all before them, where to choose Their place of rest, and providence their guide: They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, Through Eden took this solitary 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 formal 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 (Corinna: 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 iconiclastic 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. 8 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 “inseparable and fixed.” 9 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. 10 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 back with sweat in the stable, the small kegs of brandy, … and the townie cousins, visiting from the stable, the small kegs of brandy, … and the townie cousins, visiting from

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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 sitting 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 imaginations 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 cand 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 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.” 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
“Tilly Vally Master More.”’17 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 Matthew 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.”18 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.”19 Her garden remains as a tribute:

“While by the rosebed gau you stood,
And folds new-found and sweet,
Not like the myriads known before,
And each one lovely and complete.” 20

At her death Basil was desolate and fell back on the books in his Osse Field Library.21 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 schoolmarmess about her; certainly she looked very competent. 22 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 urban, 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.”23 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.24 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.”25 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. 26 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 debut at seeing Christine with “a sweet baby on her knee.”27 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 Adventures 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, Beauchtte Llewellyn Thomas, Marion Pryce, 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 continued on page 83