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International Dateline -- Food for Soul

Rita Ricketts

Blackwell's, Rita.Ricketts@ouls.ox.ac.uk

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International Dateline — Food for the Soul
by Rita Ricketts (Blackwell’s Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author Adventures All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk) <Rita.Ricketts@ouls.ox.ac.uk>

Carlisle wrote that “the soul of the whole past time lies in books.” And Basil Blackwell was determined to put them into the hands of the general public at an affordable price. Thus for twenty years until the outbreak of the Second World War, under the Shakespeare Head imprint, he produced a series of books, some glorious, all dignified, where care and attention was lavished on their design and production.

The last instalment of these Tales “of reading and writing folk” followed Basil Blackwell’s progress as he developed the family publishing house,desiring to have take over the reins of the book-selling side after his father’s death in 1924. Not content with his simple series of “writers unknown to fame,” he looked to venture into the world of fine printing in order to put good books into the hands of the general public at an affordable price. Journeying here with Basil we will encounter the scholarly master publisher J. H. Bullen, the great typographers Emery Walker and Bernard Newdigate, the Shakespeare Head Press that Bullen begat, Newdigate shaped and Basil Blackwell saved, and some of the finely-tuned partnerships that emerged from these collaborations. Although the story of SHP, wrote Basil, “is only a minutiae in the history of British book production ... both the books produced at the Press and the people who caused them to be printed have made a notable contribution to the design of books and to the dissemination of the printed word. For this much we should be sincerely grateful.” In no time, as we will discover, Basil made the ideals, scholarship and practices of SHP his own. For this, if for no other reason, the name of Basil Blackwell will go down in the annals of the history of the book. And his message to the publishing trade resonates today. Basil Blackwell deeply mourned the passing of SHP and years later, when he had more time on his hands, he wanted to provide a more permanent memorial to the man who made it, Bernard Newdigate. At the same time he sought to lodge Newdigate’s (SHP) books “in some place of ready access for the instruction of anyone who should study to achieve or to recognize excellence in printing.” This was not achieved during Basil’s lifetime, but he need not have worried. The books produced are to be displayed in the Blackwell Hall of the (new) New Bodleian, where they will speak for themselves. It is due to the vision, openness and generosity of the Bodleian, Merton College, Julian Blackwell and Wiley Blackwell that the books and memories of SHP are preserved. Nigel Blackwell too, every bit a publisher as his grandfather, retains its name.

Before, during and after the Great War, the demand for books, especially the classics, was burgeoning; parallel with the general quest for self-improvement. Yet these Classics, at the luxury end of the book market, were usually issued as finely printed works of art; there were too few of them, and they were seldom affordable. Basil was determined to find a way of putting them into the hands of the general public, while also supporting the printing crafts. Aided and abetted by his old Merton College friend Adrian Mott, with whom he formed a partnership, Basil, in his maverick way, saw also the chance to trigger a counter-revolution. Supporting fine printing, and the Private Press Movement, would, he hoped, “halt for a time the headlong flight of mass production for its own sake.” Among his copious notes, to be found in the Merton Blackwell Collection is an explanation of his rationale and the sources of his inspiration:

“...it was always more in the world than men could see, walked they ever so slow; they will not see it for going fast ... it does a bullet no good to go fast; and a man, if he truly be a man, not harm to go slow; for his glory is not at all in going but in being. And if we modify this a little, remembering the bitter truth that our own materialistic and mechanical age, and also add ... the extra Morris joy in handling and making, we begin to appreciate the need for, and the ideals of, the arts and crafts movement... William Morris set the book printer a standard he could not hope to reach, and ... widened rather than diminished the gap between the ideal book ... and the book of every day.” But surely this was not the point; the patterns and styles set by Morris could not be maintained, indeed it was not necessary or important to maintain or even imitate them; the important thing was the statement of aims and practical solution in one man’s eyes. Modifications to the doctrine by later artists and perhaps in line with modern production needs would have to be made, but the message had been seen and understood. The proof of this is to be seen surely in the non-private press book that revealed the wake of the first wave of enthusiasts: books from Pelican and Nonesuch ... Symon’s First Edition Club, the University presses, various hard-backed pocket editions offered by many of the regular publishers ... the ubiquitous Penguins (from 1939) and standard library editions from the Shakespeare Head Press.”

Basil’s chance to add the name of Blackwell to the list came with the virtual bankruptcy of J. H. Bullen’s SHP, and an invitation to take it over. The invitation probably came from the typographer Emery Walker, whose work was already greatly admired by the youthful Basil. Basil set off, with Adrian Mott, to see the press for himself, and as a result it was purchased for £1,500, and incorporated on 21 February 1921. Passion was high as Basil Blackwell and Adrian Mott set out to “develop the ideas which had inspired its (SHP) founder.” Basil had always admired the work of scholarly Bullen, sharing his passion for Elizabethan song and story. Bullen had set up as a publisher in 1889 but even before this he had been actively concerned in the publication of the works of Day, Marlowe, Middleton, Thomas Campion and many other Elizabethan and Caroline writers. In partnership, first with H. W. Lawrence (1891-1900) and then with F. Sidgwick (1900-07), Bullen issued a large number of books, notably the delightful Lyrics from the Song Books of the Elizabethan Age, issued in 1886, which was the first of a long line of similar collections. Bullen’s work attracted the great typographer-to-be Bernard Newdigate into the fold, who was invited to join the “Stratford men” as aesthetic and technical adviser. “Whereas Bullen was an amateur,” Basil wrote, albeit an inspired one, Newdigate was a professional.”

With the arrival of Newdigate, the concept of a new Shakespeare Head image began to appear. Basil hired him at the SHP with the following of Newdigate’s typography: “from a purely aesthetic viewpoint Newdigate was the press, for its lifetime. Whereas Bullen may have had the dream, the scholarship and the vision, Blackwell and Mott the faith and the courage — and the money, it was Newdigate, “who organised the words, shapes and patterns that were the book w: it is, Basil asserted, “because of this superb organisation of words, shapes and patterns that the Press is best remembered.” Fine words were common to the Blackwell men, father and son, but a living also had to be made. Basil, like his father, knew from the start that indulging in the “gentle art of fine publishing” would be a labour of love; that making money was a Herculean task and one seldom accomplished. And at his first meeting with Bernard Newdigate, he was calmly reminded of this fact. Bernard was what Basil described as “a fidget printer” who was “capable of altering the imposition of a whole book after it had gone to machine.” Seeking to restrain his impatience, Basil suggested that estimates be produced and formally accepted. And then, Basil remarked wryly, Newdigate would doubtless “dedicate the profit to getting it right!”

Basil recorded his first impression of the man he came to admire so much: “He called to my mind first and always a descriptive passage in Dickens.... As I contemplated the great brow, and the bold dome fringed with brow, the circular spectacles... and the beaming eyes twinkling behind those glasses, I was perfec;e reminde of the man who had traced to their source the mighty ponds of Hampstead. And

continued on page 95
This modest monk, who had had very high standards in character, set about preparing himself for the Civil Service examinations. But he was not destined to be a Trollope-like Clerk. His father’s press, porter...opinion editorials... the field... interviews with industry players... comparative reviews for information professionals... reports from... stand-alone and comparative reviews, and press releases, among other features. Produced by folks with impeccable library and publishing credentials... [t]his is a title you should consider... "The Charleston Advisor serves up timely editorials and columns, standalone and comparative reviews, and press releases, among other features. Produced by folks with impeccable library and publishing credentials... [t]his is a title you should consider..."


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International Dateline
from page 94

indeed there was something Pickwickian in his innocence... his enthusiasm for antiquity; but he was the spiritual dignity and remoteness of the later, post-Fleet Pickwick." But Newdigate had a scholarly pedigree too. He matched Bullen’s familiarity with Elizabethan literature and even surpassed him with his knowledge of the families and characters of that era; he was of the same kin as Sir Roger Newdigate who had founded the Oxford (Newdigate) Prize for English verse, and many of these poems had been published by B B Blackwell. Newdigate’s father, son of the third Earl of Dartmouth, who had trained and worked as an Anglican priest, was converted to Catholicism and to the enthusiasm of a Benedictine monk, Fr. Strutter. This modest monk, who had founded St. Gregory’s Press of Stratford-on-Avon, where he ran “a halting enterprise printing devotional books,” was more renowned for his faith than his business acumen. Bernard’s father threw caution to the wind and sank his faith than his business acumen. Bernard set about preparing himself for the Civil Service examinations. But he was not destined to be a Trollope-like Clerk. His father’s press, which had moved to Leamington and was styled as the Art and Book Company, was showing symptoms of collapse and Bernard decided to come to the rescue.” Training himself on the job, Newdigate caught the eye of Emery Walker: “that good genius of printing for more than forty years.” Newdigate often admitted to Basil that “he learnt more about the conditions of fine printing from Emery Walker than from any other source.” He learnt that red ink alone did not make for an impressive title page, that the unit of a book is not one page, but a pair of pages, and that it was preferable to use “bigger type solid than smaller type leded.” Newdigate had very high standards in printing and in the quality of paper he used, lamenting the mean grey paper used in the Government’s printing establishments. The mandarins cannot have taken his criticisms too much to heart, since Newdigate was appointed to the Board of Education to assist in the inspection of printing classes. Having learnt his craft

continued on page 96
at his father’s small press, out of which the Arden press grew (taken over by W. H. Smith in 1905). Basil’s part came to the assistance of Bullen. Thus it was that when Basil took over the SHP he “inherited Newdigate.” Beginning his own apprenticeship in the art of fine printing, Basil had to submit to the idiosyncrasies of the Master; letting Newdigate have his head, even when it made no commercial sense. One of the earliest books produced under the new Blackwell/Newdigate partnership was the Loves of Clitophon and Leucippe, 1923, printed on Kelmscott paper with a few special vellum copies. “This,” Basil gleefully recounted, “was a fine beginning to the new order... and the style of Newdigate is already apparent: close word spacing, judicious leading, strong title page opening, and a crisp letterpress on firm white paper.” Its essence stemmed from its associations with Morris, and Kelmscott. Basil and Bernard Newdigate had planned to produce a Kelmscott edition of Froissart but it had never progressed beyond a trial double page spread and a few other scraps. The SHP version appeared in 1928. Basil wrote that on this book of Emery Walker can be felt pushing Newdigate, and the pages, into their right and proper shapes.” The text moves from page to page at a steady pace and the shoulder notes and decorative shields give an impression of “restrained order.”

The Newdigate Chaucer, 1928-9, was more flamboyant and livelier exercise, with more calligraphic flourishes between stories. The Lynton Lam Illustrations taken from very early editions, and some French sources, add a touch of lightness and gaiety to the pages. For some of these illustrations, continuing Bullen’s hopes and tradition of using “Stratford men,” the local art school provided students who could colour and “also lay gold with very fine results, and some pages have a sort of mediaeval golden magic feel.” In his book on the private press, Colin Franklin compares the SHP Chaucer with two other editions from the real private presses: Kelmscott and the Golden Cockerel. He comes down in favour of the Stratford version by virtue of its simplicity and careful planning. Basil attempted his own comparison, looking at all three printings where they dealt with the same point in the story — the Prologue with Chaucer’s description of the Monk and the Friar. “For my own taste,” Basil concedes, “the Newdigate version is to be preferred although it does smack of the children’s book and the fairy tale just a little. The Cockerel is perhaps nearer to the Chaucer words, illustration-wise, except that the hearty earnest, sexual Chaucer overtones are muted by the coldness of the Gill illustrations, complete as they are in their human and branchlike intertwining. The Morris page is not easy to compare due to the lack of an appropriate illustration, but in some of the other illustrations appearing in the Kelmscott, the Chaucer feel is missing.”

At the same time SHP printed the Cresset Press edition of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress of 1928. Designed by Newdigate, it is a large 14 x 10” edition in two volumes. Basil described it as having, “a strong black feel throughout with ten full page illustrations by Blair Hughes-Stanton. The illustrations are good, and give it a fitting liturgical feel.” Apart from it being “primarily a typed book,” it was, according to Basil, “a typographer’s tour de force.” Two volumes of the Venerable Bede’s History of the Church of England, produced about this time (SHP 1929), show the same developing style, and are akin to the work Newdigate was producing for Cresset Press. Chapman’s Homer was produced between the years of 1930-31 with over fifty wood engravings by John Earle, “and this,” Basil claimed, “demonstrated that the Caslon was not always inevitable or necessary for a superb design. In these books — charming to read.”

Equally impressive is the SHP Decameron, with over sixty illustrations produced in a facsimile by R.J. Beedem and Miss E. Joyce Francis. The illustrations derive from those used in the edition printed in Venice in 1492, by the brothers Gregorii and are the work of that great school of Venetian book illustration which flourished between 1490 and 1499 (the date of Aldus Poliphilus). The books indeed have a sense of being produced from use of long lines of Monotype Poliphilus capitals, printed in blue and closely word-spaced starting each chapter. As well as his mastery of design, The Ben Jonson Poems (1936), edited by Newdigate, are an indication of his scholarly ability. “Set in 12 pt Caslon, with running heads in italics caps, including swash letters, this book was one of the first attempts to introduce the whole plays of Shakespeare into a book of one volume. Each page is beautifully positioned and each pair of pages perfectly balanced,” wrote Basil who had learnt a thing or two about poetry publishing from his father. “Many composers have a rule of thumb that poetry should be set to the measure of the longest line, but that drives the poem too much to the left, giving the page a lopsided look. To judge of the middle I find it convenient in practice to hold a short length of brass rule vertically from the top of the type script of the poem to be set to the bottom and to move it right or left until it divides the poem approximately into two equal parts, the Meridian at which the straight edge rests will then determine the middle of the measure to which the verses are to be set... The make-up of poetry, also, requires the exercise of care and a certain nicety of judgement to make sure the facing pages balance one another.”

Other works of poetry followed. The completed works of Drayton, one of the unfinished ambitions of Bullen, was finally produced when Michael Drayton and his Cicle, written by Newdigate, appeared in 1941. He had designed and printed the first four volumes and upon the death of the American editor of this edition, John William Hebel of Cornell University, he had, in co-operation with an English scholar, Kathleen Tillotson, completed the fifth volume. “His own sixth volume, was in the grand scholarly tradition of a long line of scholar-printers Aldus, Caxton, Plantin, and will surely have granted him place in the printer’s Valhalla,” Basil enthused. More works—a day SHP editions followed: “sturdy, unpretentious editions” of Sterne, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, the Barchester Novels and the “Definitive Bronte.” These publications, an early experiment in combining fine printing and mass production, set Basil’s imagination churning. If Newdigate had made work of antiquity “easy-pleasant-charming to read,” had he not written, “our dear enemy — new editions of texts already in great demand by the general public such as a one-volume Shakespeare? Newdigate seized on the suggestion. After weeks of trial, Newdigate came up with a typographical solution for combining the whole corpus of Shakespeare into 1260 pages, each page having two columns. Meanwhile Basil boldly rang up the printers asking how many would have to print to sell at six shillings a book. Undaunted by the answer, 50,000, Basil placed his order.

The SHP one-volume Shakespeare was a staggering success; the more so as it coincided with terrible economic depression of the Thirties, and the book went to a reprint in 1937. When Basil announced in 1940 that he was taking over the work of others, which led him to seize the now an invalid “kept at home,” read the proofs “improved the set leisurely.” Newdigate, now an invalid “kept at home,” read the proofs “improved the setting, and wrote a short life of Shakespeare to introduce the plays. “He lived to see the new edition, and saw that it was good.” Rereading it in old age, Basil wrote of its history to an old friend: “I insisted upon the chronological order of the plays which enables one to follow the development of the poet’s mind and style. I am at present in the last Act of Romeo and Juliet — an immense leap forward from Love’s Labours Lost, and establishing the master. Most editors and publishers of one-volume Shakespeare’s have followed sheepishly the order in the first four volumes. Histories, Tragedies, and I revolted from that in going for a chronological order.” Basil would have been overjoyed if “his” edition had been returned to print but sadly, he reflected, “the Shakespeare Head text is no longer to be deemed canonical, good enough only for intelligent amateurs.” Even more than the eclipse of his Shakespeare, Basil deeply mourned the passing of SHP itself. For twenty years, Basil wrote, “until the outbreak of the Second World War, the SHP was engaged in a series of books, some glorious, all dignified. More importantly, it put books, previously unobtainable and unaffordable, into the hands of a wide readership. Basil did not himself lay claim to the achievements of the Press, rather he laid all the praise at the door of the typographical genius Bernard Newdigate.” Both Basil and Bernard Newdigate are a tad unsung. Basil had the inspiration, the guts and the inclination to value the production of fine books for the general public before profit. He took part in a counter revolution while finding ways to harness mass production. Newdigate was forever modest. Stanley Morison in a notice of his death praised “his high appreciation of the work of others, which led him to seize the
opportunity of commending in print the merits of other people’s typography, raising the reputation of others at the expense of his own. He was himself quite different to praise, and discouraged attempts of other writers to give publicity to his own work.” Hence, after a lifetime of effort to inspire tread printing and publishing with the ideals of the Arts and Craft movement, Newdigate remains the most under-rated of typographers.” Yet the books he designed, Basil recorded, “remain as a monument to his ability as a designer showing a recognisable technique using very simple means… a steady eye for the minutest detail, a disciplined use of a good and fitting typeface and a complete understanding of the unity in the book page(s).” Added to this, Basil explained, “he always had it feeling for the flavour of a period, marrying typeface, illustrations and page format to fit the spirit of the job in hand.” When Newdigate died, the Shakespeare Head Press, for all practical purposes, died with him; the War Office had commandeered the Oxford building in 1942. Having widened the readership of the classics, Basil Blackwell was already intent on yet another crusade.

Column Editor’s Note: In the next instalment we follow Basil as he sets out to review the entire publishing scene in the United Kingdom. — RR

Endnotes

3. BB’s notes
4. Newdigate’s reputation was well known within the literary trades; John Betjeman, for example, had written to Basil that he wished that his letter-writing could be “as spacious and gracious as the typography of Newdigate.”
5. Mr. Kendrick (the composing room foreman) famously described Newdigate as “fidget printer; fit to break your heart …” and Emery Walker (who was himself not easily satisfied) told Throp that Newdigate had “once over-run (adjusted throughout) a page six times before he was satisfied.”
6. Newdigate subsequently obtained an external degree from London University
7. Op cit Basil Blackwell Bernard Newdigate p 21
8. Basil suggested, it is possible to be slightly mean and criticise the letter-spacing of the larger capitals, set in the Fred Griggs Campden types, on some of the title pages.”
9. This edition was the subject of a finely produced booklet and exhibition at the Bodleian Library, R Ricketts, A Moment in Time, the Bodleian, Oxford University, 2004.
10. A proof, pre-publication copy, sent by BB, can be seen in the Bodleian.
11. In this instance the use and positioning of this type was the happy choice of Henry Schollick, Basil’s right hand man with a very steady hand on the tiller
12. London Mercury Book notes, October 1933
13. Basil had sought the advice and help of established writers, such as T S Eliot. In an undated reply Eliot praised Basil’s efforts and took “the liberty” of suggesting “texts which are not of great length and which are practically unobtainable: Marlowe’s and Golding’s translations of Ovid, Philemon Holland’s selections from Livy, Suetonius or Pliny, selections from Donne, The Martin Marprelate Tracts, Campion’s and Daniel’s Treatises on Verification, Gawain Douglas’s Vergil, Underdowne’s Heliodorus and Nashe’s Terrors of the Night and The Unfortunate Traveller.”
14. In the event, the Bard’s plays were condensed into 1,170 pages.
15. BB, Double Crown Club Address
16. letter, BB to J Cryer, October 28 1977
17. Basil Blackwell, June 63
18. His Book Production Notes remain; they appeared in the London Mercury from 1920 to 1937 and formed one of the most valuable critical analyses of printing and book production during this time. See G Betteridge, Scholastic Studies in Printing, Advisory Council for Further Education, Manchester, June 1969

And, be sure and read all that the iconoclastic Dennis Brunnings has to say about the GBS, the Kindle, the iPhone and the Blackberry! Don’t you love it! Dennis will be in Charleston where we can all pick his fertile brain! See this issue, p.68.

Talk about timely! John Cox <John.E.Cox@btinternet.com> and Nawin Gupta <Nawin@nawingupta.com> are offering publishers a health check opportunity so that they can cope with the recession and grow through these times by concentrating on critical activities and seeking practicable operational efficiencies. A standardized review is available for a package price, concentrating on sales and cash flow forecasts, the scope for reducing the costs of publishing by concentrating expenditure on mission-critical activities, and practical operational efficiencies, including outsourcing if it is appropriate. The extent of the health check is dependant on the type of publishing involved — books, journals or both — and can be tailored to the publisher’s requirements. And John will be in Charleston!

The tireless Tinker Massey will be in Charleston and she says that Neal-Schumann will be representing her new book which is being published by Chinos Publishing House. Ask her about it when you see her!

And speaking of tireless — Gene Waddell has retired from the College of Charleston library and is now in Kyoto, Japan! Gene plans to spend the next year studying buildings in Japan, China, and India, among other things! In his ten years as archivist for the Library, Gene Waddell has made a remarkable and lasting impact. In recognition and appreciation for Gene’s outstanding work, he has been named College Archivist Emeritus. More about tireless! David Nicholas, Mark Kendall, and Ian Rowlands have worked long and hard on Ciber’s Global Library Survey to Examine Electronic Resources Changes and Trends in a Challenging Economy, the results of which will be shared and discussed during one of the Charleston Conference keynotes! Stay tuned!

We are signing off now but remember if you want a mention in ATG printed or online, send an email, press release, whatever to <kstrauch@comcast.net> or input something yourself on the ATG NewsChannel — www.against-the-grain.com/.

See you soon in Charleston! Yr. Ed. 🍀