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International Dateline — From London's East End to the Dreaming Spires of Oxford

Benjamin Harris: The First B H Blackwell 1813-1855

by **Rita Ricketts** (Blackwell's Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author *Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk*) <ritaricketts@hotmail.com>

Summary

In the previous issue **Rita Ricketts** considered the historic relationship between the great **Bodleian Library** and **Blackwell's** bookshop, *From Fortress to Fairway*, (see *Against the Grain*, v.20#3, p.82). Yet the **Blackwell** connection extends beyond the **Bodleian** into the heart of Oxford, the City and University. "**Blackwell's** is an Oxford institution through and through" and all its "adventurers" have played their part on the local stage. But the way the early **Blackwellians** established themselves, from a very uneven playing field, has its lessons, even for today.¹ In this latest article **Rita Ricketts** voyages with the first "Oxford" **Blackwell** as he sets up shop. How did it come to pass, she asks, that the son of a jobbing tailor from London's East End came to Oxford and became a bookman? And thereby hangs a tale; a **Blackwell** tale!

Beginning in Bookselling

"Yet are we bold to demand a standing among the most important societies for the improvement of man, physically, socially, morally and intellectually."

"Turn again **Wittington**, thou worthy citizen ..." goes the old nursery rhythm. **Dick Wittington** did turn again, back to London to seek his fortune, but not so **Benjamin Harris Blackwell**. He emigrated to Oxford in the early 1830's, and there his descendants have remained, despite the subsequent lure of London for those succeeding in the book trades. **Benjamin Harris Blackwell** was born in London in 1813, before **Wellington** beat down **Napoleon** and the new bourgeoisie won the vote. His father, **Joshua**, was a tailor in London's East End and an active member of the local **Temperance Society**. Little is known of **Joshua**, but from parish records we learn that he was married at St Andrew's in Holborn in 1808 and that two sons resulted. We also know that he was something of a maverick: a disposition that has passed down the line of **Blackwells**. That he joined the **London Temperance movement**, was as much to cock a snook at the government of the day, by depriving it of excise duty, as to improve the lot of 'mankind'. But it had other advantages too. Certainly it would have been in the **Temperance Rooms** that his two young sons, **Benjamin Harris** and **Isaac**, would have got their hands on books. And this tendency, their father doubtless encouraged. What open-minded father would not want his children to escape the East End's fetid alleys with their foul congestion of all the traffic servicing the trades and businesses and herds of abattoir-bound beasts leaving their filth behind; where paupers literally starved in the streets and victims of Gin Palaces breathed their last in shadowy doorways?

Joshua Blackwell's understanding of the state of the Rag Trade in London may have also made him keen for his sons to better themselves; he likely guessed that the days of labour-intensive trades in the capital city were numbered.² But Oxford, albeit with a long history of association with his trade, was no alternative. Anyone who took the trouble to look in Oxford's street directories would have seen that there was a preponderance of tailors. On the other hand, it would have been a big draw for anyone "beginning in bookselling."³ Perhaps **Benjamin Harris**, the prime mover of the two brothers, had heard tell of the famous bookman, **Plantin** of Antwerp, who coming from a similarly humble family, three hundred years before, had set up in a university city. His reasons, which he had written of to **Pope Gregory XIII** long afterwards when he had made his way, would have resonated with the **Blackwells**: "good access to the city... different nations to be seen in the market square... abundant manpower and necessary materials ... and nearby the **University of Louvain**... outstanding for the learning of its professors in all subjects" and a place "whose learning I reckoned to turn to profit for the general well-being of the public in manuals, textbooks and critical works."⁴ And little did **Benjamin Harris** dream, when he set out, that the **Blackwells** were to be to Oxford what **Plantin** had been to Louvain.

When **Benjamin Harris**, his wife to be, **Nancy**, and his brother arrived in Oxford in the early 1830's, they found a haven where the City streets, which were not without their meaner side, could soon be left behind. Cows were still driven to grazing across Magdalen Bridge, and "the hills around Oxford were studded with plummy forest and the valleys were prolific in every class and genus of herbage. Views of the Colleges and Churches of the City offered everything London had had, and their spires were reflected in the mirror-like surface of the rivers, Cherwell and Isis."⁵ And Oxford had other attributes too. For all its provincialness, it was at the forefront of social change. As education expanded and other cities gained university charters, the influx of a wider breed of students and scholars made Oxford an increasingly cosmopolitan centre. Although the Church still held sway in the University, its dog days were numbered. Rival religions were in the ascendancy, and the industrial revolution spawned its own creed. While **Darwin** was juggling with natural selection in the animal world, the railway engineer **Herbert Spencer** observed the process in the business world where the fittest survived and prospered. Within twenty years their work was linked with that of the impassioned **Tom Huxley**, who put the old order in the dock.⁶ All this was manna to newcomers with fresh ideas. But was Oxford the place to set up in business where the University was discouraging the expan-

sion of the retail market, and there was already a preponderance of book traders?

But **Benjamin Harris**, looking further than the end of his nose, saw new trends. A municipal inquiry, conducted in 1832, concluded that "the city has lately much increased in size and population, and may be said on the whole to be prosperous." There was much talk of the relaxation of the University's ancient residential and religious laws, which would further enlarge the population. Improved transport brought students from new universities elsewhere in Britain, and from Europe and America.⁷ Coach services to and from London were already in operation, and "horse-drawn omnibuses, run by private enterprise," had made their appearance in the streets before the new railway had opened. The local hotels were quick off the mark, and advertised "Omnibuses to and from the Railway Stations for every train."⁸ Among the most lucrative visitors were the gentlemen farmers, enriched by their success in transporting high-priced agricultural products, and successful industrialists seeking the accoutrements of gentrification. Wanting nothing better than to ape their betters in the Shires, they sought to furnish their fine new houses with books. They aspired to send their children to the public schools and the universities, both already growing in number, and thence to the professions, the Civil Service, law or politics. Here then was a new market to be tapped. And **Benjamin Harris** was astute enough to seize the **Zeitgeist**; he rightly judged that the Oxford book trades were no longer limited "by the relatively small size of their ready market."⁹

It was long since that Oxford's medieval illuminators and scribes had given way to second hand bookshops, printers, bookbinders and paper makers. Here was a wealth of expertise to be built on by any enterprising newcomer. Thus it was that **Benjamin Harris** pinned his hopes on the book trade. Arriving in Oxford he collected a supply of second-hand books, which he took around on a handcart. At the same time as operating his "mobile lending library," **Benjamin Harris**, together with his brother, set up the **Oxford Branch of the Temperance Society**. Here working people (men) were given tea and books could be consulted and borrowed. Honing his skills, and entering matrimony, **Benjamin Harris** was now determined to put his book business on a more permanent footing. At the age of thirty-three, in 1846, he took a lease on a small ground floor property for £18 per year, putting the name **B H Blackwell** above its door at 46 High Street. An old faded photograph shows this parade of shops at St Clements, fronted by an open market; a further magnet to attract the public across Magdalen Bridge. The little **Blackwell** shop was sandwiched between the trading establishments of **William Loder**, pork butcher, and **Samuel Prince**, baker, and nearby was the family firm of one **Henry Eagleston**, ironmonger

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and straw-hat-maker, which kept its doors open until 1947.¹⁰ To add gravitas, **Benjamin Harris**'s shop was next door but one to **J B Cardi**, professor of French.¹¹

"That the (**Blackwell**) shop was situated outside the city limits was significant, for unless he were a freeman of the City, or the son or apprentice of a freeman, no one might set up a new business in Oxford without the payment of a fine." Reflecting on his grandfather's life, **Basil Blackwell** took pride from the stand **Benjamin Harris** had made as "one of a number of young adventurers in trade who refused on principle to submit to this tyranny, and opened shops just beyond the City's eastern boundary across Magdalen Bridge." So, in this spirited, colourful and hardworking company, began the business and literary adventures of **B H Blackwell**. Although the small shop was a step away from the heart of the University, **Basil Blackwell** later wrote, "it was on a site not unpropitious for those times, when undergraduates leisure was not absorbed by organised athletics, and the haunts of the Scholar Gypsy were not mere names in a fading poem but were frequented in the course of long afternoon walks... Not by chance the road to Headington, Gypsy lane, Elsfeld and Shotover led past the door of **B H Blackwell's** shop."¹² But **B H Blackwell** the First, then in his thirty-second year, was not himself disposed to leisure. Competition made the going hard, with the dominant bookshops of **Parker** in the Broad, **Thornton** in the High, and nineteen other booksellers within the City's bounds.¹³ Nonetheless, "whither he went."

Mr Greatheart

"Whither! Nay, none but God knows whither."

As if his bookshop and temperance duties were not enough, **Benjamin Harris** applied for the post as Oxford's first City Librarian; the Library was to open in 1854. Very little is known of his short term as the City's first Librarian, and the record in the City Library archives is slight. But a letter from the **House of Commons** dated 14 June 1854 from **William Ewart**, the prime sponsor of the **Public Libraries Act**, states that "the City's first Librarian bore a name which Oxford will always connect with books."¹⁴ Although **Benjamin Harris** had joined the ranks of esteemed Oxford librarians, the demands of his new post were far removed from those laid down by **Sir Thomas Bodley** for the "**Bodley Librarian**," where all that was required was "leisure, learning, friends and means."¹⁵ "One wonders," mused a contemporary, "how **Mr Blackwell** and his assistant contemplated the future, in which it was their duty to be in constant attendance on weekdays, from 9.00am until 11.00pm (10.00pm in the winter months) and, after church, from 6.00-10.00pm on Sundays."¹⁶ But contemplate it he did. The higher purposes of the **Public Library Act**: "that knowledge should triumph over ignorance to become the means of enlightenment against utter destitution by self-improvement," were right up his street.¹⁷ As Librarian at the **Temperance Rooms** he had been helping others to do just that for the last decade. The Public Library too was purged of "any work of an immoral or infidel tendency,"

but it was an immediate success.¹⁸ During its first year, over 13,000 books were issued for reference and its selection of newspapers, Metropolitan and weekly, were widely read. Judging by the daily attendance of over 400, the Library's "handsome room," on the ground floor of the Town Hall, St Aldgate's Street, must have provided a welcome respite from the workplace, or an overcrowded family kitchen. In its interior, there was "a neat little drinking fountain, affording copious libations of 'acqua pura.'"¹⁹

Back at his day job, the young librarian-book-seller had been busy considering the prospects for overseas openings; Britain, after all, was not the only "workshop of the world." The newly emerging industrialists in America and Germany, fast challenging Britain's pre-eminence, would stop at nothing to gain a competitive edge. Commensurate with this was a growing demand for education, particularly technical and scientific. **Benjamin Harris** was convinced that their demand for educational material must, at least, equal that in the British market. Since opening his shop **Benjamin Harris** had traded almost exclusively in second-hand books, not available outside Britain. Now, to advertise them overseas, he set to work to prepare catalogues to inform potential overseas customers about his stock. Taking advantage of the new and fast steamboats, he would be able to send parcels of books across the Atlantic in two weeks. Scant evidence of his success survives. But a bill, dated 11 January, 1853, shows that the *Oxford Chronicle* had produced 250 catalogues numbering twelve pages, at least one of which must have found its way across the world. An invoice dated 30 May 1853 for books to the value of £4.14, was sent by **Benjamin Harris** to a **Mr John Gooch** of Pennsylvania.²⁰ Stories of his life as a bookman are also in short supply. One recorded by his grandson, reveals the tribulations of a humble tradesman.²¹

My grandfather, **Basil Blackwell** wrote, "having been invited to value some books offered for purchase," was courteously received by a local Quaker who was well known for his sobriety and devotion. Showing **Benjamin Harris** to the room where the books were housed, the Quaker inquired: "Wilt thou take tea?" Not wanting to trouble his host, **Benjamin Harris** politely declined the invitation. But, as so often must have happened, the valuation took rather longer than was expected and "presently the door opened and the Quaker's wife came in, bearing a tray with teapot and pleasant nourishment and put it down on the table." **Basil**, picturing his grandfather's relief at the sight of the sustenance, describes how he thanked her graciously. "But almost before she had left the room, the door immediately flew open; the Quaker entered, seized the tray and carried it off, saying 'Thee hasn't to tell a lie in my house.'" For someone as sober, upright and self-denying as **Benjamin Harris** this upbraiding must have been mortifying. Another story concerns his crusade to eliminate the demon drink. Not only did **Benjamin Harris** call meetings where diseased livers were dissected, by experts, but he publicly upbraided those "who should know better" who failed to support him in his campaign: "we have not one minister of the gospel to assist us, nor one medical practitioner to attempt to dispel the delusions which are generally indulged concerning the qualities of intoxicating liquors."²² Nonetheless he continued this work to the end of his life, combining it with his custodianship of both the shop and the library.

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But fitting in library, bookselling, community and family duties with teetotal evangelism, took their toll on **Benjamin Harris**. And as his health declined, so his obfuscations grew: "When a sudden sharp pain caused him to cry out, he would try to cover-up by pretending to sing scales; he was after all an avid chorister." His family were not deceived. At the age of forty-one **Benjamin Harris** succumbed to angina pectoris, exacerbated by diphtheria. **Basil Blackwell** always maintained that his grandfather had "literally worked himself to death." In lighter vein, **Basil** mooted "perhaps it was *abstinence* that had killed him?"²³ But the death of **Blackwell's** founder was no joking matter for his widow. **Anne "Nancy" Stirling Blackwell** "was left with a business in its growing pains...and when the publishers' accounts had been settled and the stock had sold at a valuation, the young widow had little enough left." **Benjamin Harris's** executor was one **Chas Richards**, a bookseller, of 104 High Street, to whom his son, **Benjamin Henry**, was later apprenticed. As a licensed appraiser, "he valued for probate the stock of printed books on May 15 1856." The value being as little as it was, he wrote to the publishers, **Routledge and Co.**, hoping to persuade them to relinquish their claims for un-paid bills. A generous reply came back by return, from **George Routledge** of 2 Farrington Street, London: "After your letter of this day we will most willingly give up our proportion of the dividend for **Mrs Blackwell's** use. I only regret that she should have been so badly provided for."²⁴

Benjamin Harris was laid to rest in the public graveyard beside the **Church of St Cross**, Holywell, and the first **B H Blackwell's** went with him. Yet he had made a name for himself, and his work as the pioneer of the **Oxford City Library**: "this quaint honour," did not "turn to dust."²⁵ Even today, his grave is still "a fine and private place." Standing clear of the hawthorn and in the shade of the yew, it is heightened in summer with purple-flowering *Honesty* speckled all around. The site of the Cemetery is ancient. In mediaeval times it had been part of a small village of fullers and weavers with a manor house,

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a Green, a church and the “holy wells,” which gave the site its name. It still teems with meadow life, just as it was described in the **Doomsday** book. Although its peace was temporarily disturbed during the **Civil War**, and again in the eighteenth century when it was used as a cockpit and a bowling green, it was restored when **Merton College** acquired the land and made it available as a burial ground. **Benjamin Harris’s** grave lies NW of the Church, and a notice, by the wooden bench, points it out. And he is in good company. At the sound of a **Stanley Spencersque** trumpet, he could arise to a roll-call of many notable book people: the writer **Kenneth Grahame**, poets like **Maurice Bowra**, brushing up on his **Pindar**, **Charlie Williams**, **Basil Blackwell’s** old **OUP** friend, and the drama critic, **Kenneth Tynan**. There are others too, who served the causes of the University, and far beyond: **Radcliffe-Maude**, for example, who founded **UNESCO**. **Benjamin Harris’s** glee can only be imagined at when he discovers himself in the company of the great Victorian church composer, **John Stainer**, hymning himself through eternity. 🌿

Editor’s Note: In next month’s issue **Rita** will consider the role of women in the **Blackwell** story. The modest **Benjamin Harris** is not forgotten; his beginnings in bookselling were the inspiration for the future bookselling and publishing “empire.” But it is doubtful if his small shop “on the wrong side of Oxford’s City wall,” would ever have been revived if it had not been for the determination of his wife, **Nancy**. — **KS**

Endnotes

1. **Dame Jessica Rawson**, Preface, in **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All: Tales of Blackwellians, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk*, Reading and Writing Folk, Blackwell’s 2002.
2. **Gilda O’Neill**, *My East End*, Penguin, London, 1999, pp 20-31.
3. **Basil Blackwell’s** words.
4. The Book as a Commodity, *L’Apparition du Livre*, **Albin Michel**, 1958.
5. *Oxford Directory*, 1846, taken from the description of Oxford, pp 2-3.
6. See, for example, **Adrian Desmond**, Huxley, Penguin, London, 1994.
7. For example, the relaxation of the requirement that Fellows be ordained and single.
8. op cit, **Fasnacht**, pp198-202.
9. op cit **Ruth Fasnacht**, p 140.
10. The **City Council** became increasingly aware of the need to relax the “Freeman” regulations: allowing more people to open up in trade and created employment opportunities, even if this meant sacrificing the preservation of Oxford’s beauty: see op cit **Fasnacht**, p 203.
11. *The Oxford Directory*, 1846.
12. Thoughts on early beginnings — **Basil Blackwell** (no date as yet found).
13. In one case at least, **Fred Trash**, also a publisher.
14. *A History of the City of Oxford*, **Ruth Fasnacht**, **Basil Blackwell**, 1952, p 193.
15. **Basil Blackwell**, notes on the Functions of a Good Bookshop, September 30 1952.
16. Scrapbook, **Oxford City Library**, 1855-1954, p 5.
17. *The Public Library Act*, 14 August 1850. **Joseph Taylor**, **Oxford City Library**, 1855-1954, pp 4-7.
18. op cit, **Oxford Library** p 4.
19. **Dutton, Allen and Co’s Directory and Gazetteer** for 1863.
20. This Bill can be seen in the **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
21. A story handed down to **Basil** by his father, **Benjamin Henry**.
22. Article written in 1839, in the **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
23. See, for example, a letter from **Sir Basil** to **J P Wells**, the *Oxford City Librarian*, 17 February 1973.
24. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes, **Merton Blackwell Collection**, **Oxford University**.
25. **Marvell**, *To His Coy Mistress*.

I Hear the Train A Comin’ — A Tale of Two Cities

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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...,” so begins the **Dickens** classic *A Tale of Two Cities*. This contradictory statement, this duality, will also serve as the theme for this November’s 28th annual **Charleston Conference**. At that time, publishers, librarians, information providers, scholars, and vendors will gather to discuss the state of affairs at this wondrous intersection of technology, content, and academia. As both a preview of the conference and an homage to **Dickens’** masterpiece, let’s look at some other key passages from *A Tale of Two Cities* and how they map to some critical scholarly communication issues sure to be discussed in Charleston.

“A dream, all a dream, that ends in nothing, and leaves the sleeper where he lay down, but I wish you to know that you inspired it.”

To **Harvard University’s** Faculty of Arts and Sciences and its recent adoption of an open access mandate. In February, **Harvard** became the most prominent university in the United States to require open access to its faculty members’ research publications. This kicked up a great deal of

dust within the space, but what does it actually mean? As **Sandy Thatcher** and others have pointed out, the policy is either inconsistent, underdeveloped, or silent on several key points, including the timing of deposits, copyright retention rights, and versioning. Nevertheless, other institutions seemed poised to follow suit, including **Stanford’s School of Education** and **Macquarie University** at this writing. What influence will this have on scholars’ actual behavior, publishers’ policies, and the general accessibility of scholarship? In the short run, if other high profile mandates such as the **NIH’s** are a template, the impact will be more abstract than practical. Adoption rates have been less impressive than the publicity these initiatives have generated. It is quite possible that an eventual tipping point will be reached as wave after wave of institutional mandates erode the traditional structures of information dissemination. That is the dream of open access advocates, of course. Or it may be that **Harvard** has started a chain reaction that, like the **Dickens** quote, “ends in nothing”. In any event, **Harvard**, “I wish you to know that you inspired it.”

“Up the two terrace flights of steps the rain ran wildly, and beat at the great door, like a swift messenger rousing those within.”

To the **Kindle**, a device that has burst onto the scholarly communication scene amidst a clamor of fervent expectations. In my conversations with textbook and journal publishers, students, librarians, and university administrators, I have been asked numerous times over the past few months about **Amazon’s** handheld reader device. Instructors want to offer course materials that can be downloaded onto **Kindles**. Vendors like **Highwire** are tweaking their platforms to deliver content in a **Kindle**-friendly format. University presses such as **Princeton**, **Yale**, **University of California**, and **Oxford** have been very quick to make their catalogs available for **Kindle**. It is wonderful to see the market excited over new developments, particularly when sectors like the university press have often been flat-footed in embracing emerging media. However, before we get too excited, let me ask something. Are you using a **Kindle**? Do you know someone who is using a **Kindle**? Have you even seen a **Kindle**? We have been roused by the **Kindle**; it is the rain running wildly and beating at our great door. It may well turn out to be a trans-

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