

June 2010

International Dateline -- Tales from the East

Rita Ricketts

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

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ricketts, Rita (2010) "International Dateline -- Tales from the East," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 3, Article 42.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5581>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

International Dateline — Tales from the East

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>

Column Editor's Note: *In the last installment we followed Basil as he set out to review the entire publishing scene in the United Kingdom and to fulfil his ambition to fill the gaps with quality publications from his own House. In time this dream materialised despite not being on the London scene, tied and committed as he was to the family firm in Oxford. Basil Blackwell claimed that his own contribution to the publishing world was relatively modest in scope. The great names did forsaken him, but nonetheless he had established his own place in the market. The area he marked out for his own may have been limited by the dictates of geography, but it neither diminished his ardour as a publisher nor his support for writers in need of a publisher. — RR*

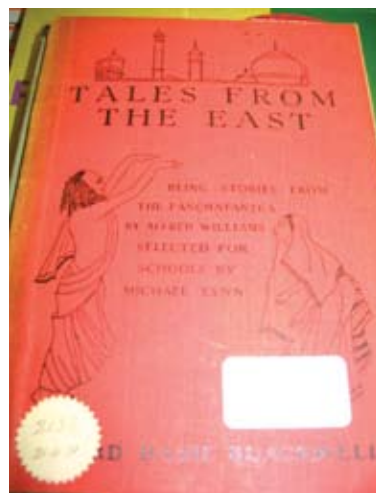
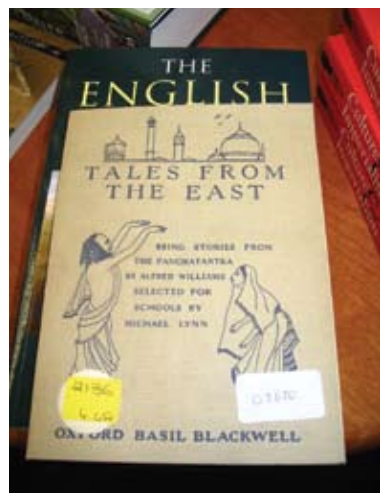
Basil Blackwell's love of the classics and of their publication in finely printed form, attracted many would-be authors; as the **Blackwell Publishing** archive bears testament. Sifting through back copies destined for the **Bodleian**; through fable and story going back the Greeks, I came across a **Blackwell** version of **Panchatantra** stories translated from ancient Sanskrit.¹ Coming from the cradle of storytelling, they were intended to implant moral values and governing skills in the young sons of the king; a sentiment **Basil**, as a governor of a local school and chairman of the Magistrates Juvenile Bench, would have heartily endorsed. Down the centuries these moral fables were published to appeal to children of all ages. The **Blackwell** version was no exception, but its history is very exceptional. **Alf Williams' Tales from the East**, were published by **Basil Blackwell** in 1931, reprinted 1931 and re-issued in 1948, having been selected for use in schools. **Basil** would never countenance “talking down” or “writing down” for children, but the edition is only a selection, as he deemed a full translation to be too expensive for schools, parents, or children before the Second World War.²

And then there comes a side to **Sir Basil** which he kept dark and deserves a bright light shone on it — his capacity as a writer — not only of tactful letters — for he once wrote in a thing called “Augury” an account of **Alfred Williams** which is, I think, one of the most perfect pieces of English prose that I recollect — a most touching description of a poor man who wanted to become a writer, and who starved in order to do so, and who was a good writer and died in poverty for the sake of being a writer. That is a true bookseller and publisher for you — a man who can appreciate the sacrifice of a man like **Alfred Williams**. And more lately he has written an account of **May Morris**, **William Morris's** daughter, and her friend **Miss Lobb**, that tough nut, and of **Kelmscott** as he and I remember it.

One of the most moving examples of **Basil's** own writing describes the visit of a poor (and in fact dying) man, who cycled over from Swindon with a manuscript of Oriental tales in translation. The *Story of Alfred Williams*, and that of **Edith Barfoot** elsewhere, typifies the approach that **Basil**, and his father, took to “publishing”:

*“Some years ago there reached me through the post a typescript on thin green paper, bearing the impress of a hard-worn typewriter. The accompanying letter stated that the work was a translation from the Sanskrit, that the Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford had written an introduction, and that if we should decide to publish the book and thought that pictures might be able to add to its attractions, a certain young artist might be able to make them for us. The letter was signed **Alfred Williams**. The Translator's Preface showed that **Alfred Williams** could write English. The Professor's Introduction testified to his scholarship. The address typed on the letter gave the name of a village near Swindon, and the best course seemed to be to invite **Alfred Williams** to come over to Oxford and discuss the matter. He replied that he would be happy to come, and on the appointed day he arrived punctually, a man seemingly in his fifties and with a charming smile. As soon as he entered my room I was aware that I was in the presence of a rare spirit, but being slow, and often wrong, in my estimate of men, I could not tell what lay behind the serenity, the cheerfulness and the gentleness which both his face and his manner revealed. Our discussion raised no difficulties. He would revise his typescript according to my suggestions, and bring it to Oxford again in a week or two to meet the artist in my room, and to complete the preliminary plans for publication.*

*He courteously excused himself from lunching with me, for he was anxious to be getting home. When was his train? He had bicycled. I thought that a meal between two rides of twenty-seven miles could hardly be amiss, but let it go at that, and proposed a day for the next meeting. A look of pain came into his eye as he asked me, very gently, if the day after would be equally convenient, for his wife had just undergone a very serious operation of doubtful value, and the day I had offered was that on which he was to bring her home from Swindon hospital. So ‘the day after,’ and the hour of 2:30 was agreed, and **Alfred Williams** went his way. At noon of the day appointed came a telegram: ‘**Alfred Williams** died in his sleep yesterday.’ It was signed by a name unknown to me, and there was no address. Two or three days I was asked if I would see someone who ‘wanted to tell*



Photos: **Alf Williams, Tales from the East**, being stories from **Panchatantra**, were published by **Basil Blackwell** in 1931, reprinted 1931, and re-issued in 1948. They were regularly used in schools.

*me about **Alfred Williams**’; and there entered my room the man (as I soon learned) who had sent the telegram. He was stone-blind. He told me that he had been **Alfred Williams's** closest friend, and that he felt I ought to be told the whole story. He felt it was due to his friend and due to me, and as he sat before me with*

continued on page 77

the strange stillness and slow speech of the blind, this honest man spoke words that made my ears tingle. 'Heart failure?' I supposed. 'Well, that's what the doctor said, but I'm afraid it was starvation ... that and bicycling into Swindon every day, and then that hill up to the hospital to see his wife. You see, we found his bank book, and since Christmas he has spent only twenty-six pounds (it was then late June), and there was little left.'

Even so **Alfred Williams** had saved a bit, for we found in a drawer a pound note pinned to a bit of paper on which he had written 'for port-wine for **Mary**'; and I fancy he was starving himself to give her comforts in hospital.' 'And she? Was her operation successful?' It was a forlorn hope. It's a cancer, you see, and she can't last long. She had been looking forward to coming home, and her husband had promised to come for her early on Friday. She was sitting at the window looking out for him when the news came to the hospital that he had been found dead in his bed. They did not know how to tell her, and she sat there waiting and waiting ... Now she's home, and so near gone that, when I sit by her bed, sometimes I strain my ears to hear if she is still breathing, and can't hear a sound; and I'll say gently, 'Are you there, **Mary**?' and she'll whisper, 'Yes, **Harry**.' And so, bit by bit, came out the story of **Alfred Williams** and his wife **Mary**; how a country boy, like **Jude the Obscure**, he was set to work in the fields, but his thirst for learning drove him to the town of Swindon, where after the day's shift in the Railway Works, he taught himself Latin and Greek (and not only after the day's shift, for he used to chalk on the frame of the steam hammer which he tended the characters of the Greek alphabet, that he might learn them while he worked); how he began to write poems, which being published won him some fame as 'The Hammerman Poet'; and so, leaving his forge, he devoted himself to Literature, helped and encouraged by the village girl he married; how they set up their house literally, by taking bricks out of a lock in the derelict Berks and Wilts Canal, and using them to build with their own hands the house where they lived almost unknown to their neighbours, but sufficient unto themselves, he for Letters only, she for Letters in him.

But the sales of Poetry even before 'The Great War' were small, and even with the help of articles and lectures, can have provided but a stepmotherly portion to this devoted couple. In 1916 **Alfred Williams**, being near, if not beyond, the age limit, volunteered for military service, and after a rejection on grounds of poor health, succeeded in enlisting as a gunner. He was drafted to India, where he began to explore the great literatures of the East and to teach himself Sanskrit. On his return to England he pursued his studies, and out of them had come the Translations which he had offered me. 'They thought a lot of him in London,' said the blind man, 'and only last week (the last time he was with me) he told me that the Prime Minister had written to tell him that it had been decided to grant him a Civil List Pension and sent him a cheque for £50 to carry him on for the present.' But I fancy he knew what was coming for him, for he came over to me and gripped the arms of my chair so hard that I felt them tremble, and said, '**Harry**, it's too late.' He had learnt by then that his wife's case was hopeless. And now his wife's one care was that his Sanskrit books, the great Lexicon, Grammars, etc., should be given to the University Library. Could I help her there? I asked if it would be a comfort if I went to see her ('It would indeed'), and arranged to meet the blind man at the house in South Marston a day or two later.

I found the little house built with their own hands, and entered the sitting-room. Small, clean, furnished with the bare needs for sitting at table for food or work, austere as a cell, it contained **Alfred Williams**' books. They stood on a small desk by the window, eight or ten books, the nucleus of a Sanskrit scholar's working library. There were no other books to be seen; and it was manifest that to equip himself with these costly volumes he had sacrificed all his Greek and Latin and English books. I

went upstairs. The bedroom was as bare as the room below. In the bed, the clothes pulled up to her chin, lay the dying woman. The ivory skin was drawn tight on her face, and her neck was wasted almost to the bone. Only her eyes moved. Beside the bed sat the blind man, and between them on the floor was a case containing all **Mary Williams**' earthly treasure. I was asked to open it, and there was the revised typescript which **Alfred Williams** had promised to bring to **Oxford**. There was nothing else in the case save discarded sheets of the same work. It was all of a piece with the sense of finality which possessed that house.



Mary Williams' first care was for the Sanskrit books, and I promised to see that they were well bestowed. We then spoke about the typescript, briefly, for it was clear that words were costly in that room, and I said I would lose no time in producing the book. We had spoken simply and with a kind of unearthly serenity about the books and the typescript, but as I took my leave I felt that I must tell **Mary Williams** that I should always remember gratefully my meeting with her husband, for he was one of those who left you a better man than he found you.

Like summer tempest came her tears.

'One of the best,' she whispered.

I left the house and drove home on that summer afternoon with that sense of awe which once or twice in a life time takes a man, when, for a moment, and without desert, he is caught up in the high triumph of one of the rare spirits of mankind."

His philosophy of publishing was inspired by idealism, but it was also tempered with business shrewdness. Although, he argued, "the idea is of the first importance, it must be right and apt to the time." All these elements of his philosophy underpin the richness, quality, and variety of the **Blackwell** imprints. In his first Dent Memorial Lecture, in 1930, **Basil Blackwell** attempted to define the labyrinthine "art" of publishing. "The publisher," he outlined, "peculiarly needs to be equipped with the qualities of idealism and shrewdness. He must recognise literary merit — more, he must discover it — he must have a flair — he must anticipate by just the right narrow margin the changing tastes and interests of the reading public (and in that sense he must have something of the journalist about him) — he must lead while seeming to follow. One lobe of his brain must be devoted to literature, scholarship, and art; the other to adroit bargaining — bargaining with author or his agent, with printer, with paper-maker, with bookseller, with publicity agents, and not uncommonly, with other publishers." He expanded his thesis: "The publisher is open to criticism if he does not make and maintain personal contact with as many booksellers as possible; for booksellers are his points of contact with the public... Booksellers are always ready to give advice... and their advice is seldom wide of the mark; for they are tutored daily by the public we all seek to please."³

But what of the unsung of the publishing world — the authors whose manuscripts are rejected? What art form did Sir Basil advocate for dealing with this most painful of duties? As in most things, **Basil Blackwell** was never at a loss for words or ideas. When a refusal, not "rejection," was called for, he had as his model the obsequious formula of a Chinese firm, as reported years ago by a Hong Kong correspondent of the Central news: "We read your manuscript with boundless delight. By the sacred ashes of our ancestors, we swear that we have never dipped into a book of such overwhelming mastery. If we were to publish this book it would be impossible in the future to issue any book of a lower standard. As it is unthinkable that within the next 10,000 years we shall find its equal, we are, to our great regret, compelled to return this divine work, and beg you a thousand times to forgive our action." No doubt in practice, **Basil** had his own inimitable way of letting people down lightly. For his part, **Basil**, too, had to adjust his sights. For just over a decade, he had indulged his love of publishing. But his publishing adventures were, to some extent, to be curtailed by the death of his father in 1924.

continued on page 78

Wandering the Web — Selected Sites on Family History Research

by **Amanda L. Hardin** (Research/Instruction Specialist, WKU Libraries)

Column Editor: **Jack G. Montgomery** (Coordinator, Collection Services, Western Kentucky University Libraries)
<jack.montgomery@wku.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *Ms. Hardin has for many years been a historical researcher of local and family history at the WKU Kentucky Library and Museum. The library handles an incredible number of questions concerning heritage and family history. When I first considered an article on resources in family history, I could not imagine a more knowledgeable resource than Ms. Hardin, who now works in reference at the main library. — JM*

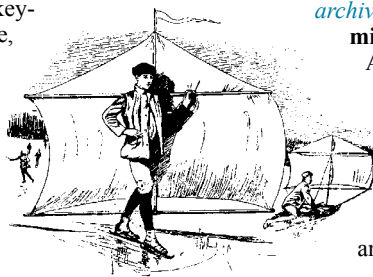
In recent years, there is a continued growth of interest in family history. Consistently more and more researchers are turning to Web-provided resources to search, link family trees, and share stories. In the trend of an ever-growing social media storm, there are rising genealogy resources beginning to add links for the creation of meaningful connections through family research online.

CyndisList — <http://www.cyndislist.com/ancestry.htm> — This site is the best starting point for online genealogy research. It equips users with how-to guides, a review of the best online sites — both national and international — and features a list of the best sites that are available to patrons for a fee. **Cyndislist** provides a guide to the best print sources in the bookstore area of the site. For social interaction there is also an online message board for hard-to-find connections and areas to share information.

Ancestry.com — <http://www.ancestry.com/> — The first online source for new research available for a subscription fee, this site provides ample searchable indexes, database results, and some digitized images available with fee-based subscription. Along with this database there are free communities based on sharing resources that have branched from the site for the purpose of sharing and developing research and connections.

RootsWeb Community — <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/> — As the oldest and largest genealogical community provided through ancestry.com, this site is able to link visitors to endless uploaded family histories, as well as connect to some of the major government databases. Search is available by surname, full name, and keyword. **RootsWeb** has a forum, family tree software, surname websites, mailing list subscriptions, as well as a built in Soundex converter.

Family Search — <http://www.familysearch.org/> — This is the genealogy Website of the Church of the Later Day Saints, and it includes search capability of the IGI, the Ancestral File, the Family History Library Catalog, and Website submissions. Users are also provided with



mailing lists and online forms to order FHL research, and the Website allows users to save their own research and have safe online storage.

Seventh-Day Adventist Periodical Index — <http://www.andrews.edu/library/car/sdapi.cgi> — This site created by **Andrews University**, the Seventh-Day Adventist institution of higher learning, provides free access to their Periodical/Obituary Index in full text, searchable by: title, subject, and author.

Family Tree Connection — <http://www.familytreeconnection.com/> — This Website provides researchers unique collections of listings for free, but for a fee patrons will receive full access to databases. The basic collections can be searched by full name, type of record, date, region, and city/state with a more advanced search in the full-access version. This is an excellent Website for storage of family tree information.

Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records — <http://www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov/> — This is the Official Land Patent Records site which provides a database that searches more than two million Federal land title records for Eastern Public Land States, which were issued between 1820 and 1908. This site includes scanned images of varied records along with the Eastern Public Land States covered in this database: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin. It also provides Serial patent images, issued between 1908 and the mid-1960s.

National Hospital Records Database — <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords/> — Available through the National Archives, this Website provides information on the existence and location of the records from hospitals in the UK Currently over 2,800 entries can be found by searching the database using a simple inquiry screen.

Gravesite Locator — gravelocator.cem.va.gov/ — Provided by the U.S. Government, this site is an online searchable index by name, date of birth and death, and cemetery name. **Gravesite Locator** provides a search of over three million military burials from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs including international military cemeteries.

National Archives and Records Administration — <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/> — The **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)** Website provides access to the main Archival Databases (AAD) for the United States, allowing visitors to search Passenger lists as well as major military databases with advanced search capabilities.

Geneanet — <http://www.geneanet.org/> — This Website provides visitors with a database indexing surnames from before 1850 & corresponding contact information — online or offline, as well as a wiki, blog, and forum for researchers. 🌿

International Dateline from page 77

Edith Barefoot

In 1956 **Basil** made the acquaintance of **Edith Barfoot**. Then in her sixties, she had been bed-ridden and in constant pain with rheumatoid arthritis since her teens. She told **Basil** how she had triumphed over her pain under the spiritual guidance of the Cowley Fathers. Encouraged, by one of their number,

she wrote down her thoughts on suffering, producing a short paper entitled “The Discovery of Joy in the Vocation of Suffering.” **Basil** was much moved and impressed by both **Edith Barfoot** and her paper.

The following year **Basil** published **Edith Barfoot's** study, with a brief forward. He drew on his own explorations into the idea of the Holy Spirit, but claimed nothing except “to speak as a child.”²⁴ This small buff-colored book was simply, although beautifully, produced. 🌿

Endnotes

1. Originally composed in India in the 2nd century B.C, they are believed to have been written by the scholar **Vishnu Sharma** and others.
2. MBC, BLK 3/6.
3. Op cit notes by **Basil Blackwell** on publishing.
4. Notes from the Rector of Appleton, **Peter Wyld**. Parts of these notes were published in the *Oxford Diocesan Magazine*, July 1984.