Against the Grain

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International Dateline-Earthly Paradise

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ture when someone with a PhD in industrial engineering, co-owner of a software company, and a doting aunt — not a mom, not a teacher, not a librarian, not an author or illustrator — blogs about kidlit. Highlights include Cool Girls of Children’s Literature, 175 Cool Boys from Children’s Literature, My 6 F’s of Book Appreciation, and Ten Tips for Growing Bookworms.

The Miss Rumphius Effect — http://missrumphiuseseffect.blogspot.com/, with its origins in the 1982 American Book Award winner Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney, is the blog of teacher-educator Patricia Stohr-Hunt. Here, teachers, parents, and students will find reviews of poetry and nonfiction for young readers through middle grades. Included are thematic booklists, browse by content, and her Teaching Library link to LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com/catalog/pstohrkidlit).

Mitali’s Fire Escape: A safe place to chat about books between cultures — http://www.mitaliblog.com/. Author Mitali Perkins blogs about the power of diverse literature to influence our lives. Whether delving into bullying, storytelling customs, ethnic differences and similarities, the effect of various media in presenting different cultures, among other relevant topics, her insights are thoughtful, inclusive, and offer anyone seeking quality literature and its importance in cross-cultural understanding a safe place to explore.

Open Wide, Look Inside — http://blog.richmond.edu/openwide-lookinside/. A blog about teaching elementary math, science, and social studies, with heavy emphasis on the integration of children’s literature across the curriculum. The blog description says it all. This blog should be a great resource for K-5 classroom teachers looking for ways to inspire reading as well as explain challenging concepts in math and science.


Reading Rants — http://www.readingrants.org/ — has been promoting out of the ordinary YA books on the Web for more than ten years. As a true pioneer of Web reviews and a veteran of the blogosphere, it is still going strong. Jennifer started the Website in 1998. It was transformed into an interactive blog in May 2007, where teens can respond to reviews and add their own. A fun feature of this site is its wonderfully inventive title lists, including such temptations as Riot Grrrl!, Slackers Fiction, Stoned, and Bay Meets Book.


Well-Read Child — http://wellreadchild.blogspot.com/ — is compiled by instructional designer, mom, and book lover, Jill Tullo. Her blog offers book recommendations, learning activities, and reading tips. Tullo’s mission is simple: “get kids to read” and to provide resources to help instill a love of reading.


YABC: Young Adult Books Central — http://www.yabookscentral.com/. Since 1998, YABC has been a Web presence for teen and tween literature. Book reviews, author interviews, newsletters, publicity, and other YA lit resources for and by teens and tweens. Lots of great resources for homework, too, but no, they won’t write your book report for you.

YA YA YAs — http://theyayayas.wordpress.com/. “Three Young Adult Librarians blather about YA literature, YA librarianship...” and while they’re at it, provide sharp, pithy reviews; book news; craft ideas; and links to tons of resources YA librarians can use for teen programming.

International Dateline — Earthly Paradise

by Rita Ricketts (Blackwell’s Historian and Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Author Adventurers All, Tales of Blackweliains, of Books, Bookmen and Reading and Writing Folk) <Rita.Ricketts@bodleian.ox.ac.uk>

The ceaseless tumbling of the billows grey,
The white upspringing of the sprouts of spray

In the last instalment, we encountered Basil Blackwell’s own “up-springs.” He and his father were frustrated poets, and both wrote articles, Basil profusely. Benjamin Henry wrote tourist guides for Oxford set between blue paper covers, serious in tone and style. All his working life Basil had wanted to write an account of the Blackwell story, and considerable correspondence exists in the Merton Blackwell Collection concerning his efforts. In the end he “ran out of time,” despite his 94 years. Almost certainly the need to concentrate on the family firm, they felt keenly the problems of struggling writers and extended them enormous generosity. Top of this list were those who would not otherwise have been noticed, let alone published; the story of Alf Williams, “the Hammerman Poet,” was the subject of the last issue. Another example of Blackwell beneficence concerns Edith Barfoot, who the soft-hearted Basil met in the 1950s. Over sixty, 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 produced a short paper entitled “The Discovery
of Joy in the Vocation of Suffering.” Much moved and impressed by both Edith Barfoot and her paper, Basil published the study. Adding a brief forward, he drew on his own explorations into the idea of the Holy Spirit, and claimed nothing except “to speak as a child.” This small buff-coloured book was simply, although beautifully, produced at Basil’s own expense.

That we know the stories of such writers as Williams and Barfoot is in large part due to the written accounts Basil left behind, now in the Merton Blackwell Collections. John Betjeman had lauded Basil’s efforts, singling out “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.” This episode recounts the story of May Morris and reveals Basil’s attempt to rescue her father’s unpublished writings. As well as providing a vignette capturing the spirit and ethos of the Pre-Raphaelite era, it reveals, implicitly, much about Basil and his own philosophy of life. The story uses, in the main, Basil’s words, put together from various scripts. Basil’s interest in Morris was inherited from his father, Benjamin Harris Blackwell, and not unsurprisingly he chose An Earthly Paradise as a school prize. It was, Basil wrote, “a happy choice, for the idle singer enchanted me for many an empty day and led me on to explore his prose romances (good reading in youth!)” and so to an event of cardinal importance in my life — the reading of one of the best biographies in our literature, MacKail’s Life of William Morris.” Basil’s ardour for Morris grew as he ventured into publishing, and living near to his house at Kelmscott he sought to establish a connection with Morris’s daughter, May. Morris had died in 1896 when Basil was only six years old. Several excursions were made by boat from Appleton to Kelmscott, with his father in tow. His wife Christine was an asset, and her warmth and knowledge of gardening worked its magic on the reserved May Morris: “my wife, whom to know is to love … could coax May Morris into shy merriment and persuade her to rehearse delightfully a nocturnal argument of cats.”

Basil always remembered his first meeting with May: “that happy day when I found her in knickerbockers, prunig the vine at Kelmscott. Something of this happier face is captured in Rossetti’s chalk drawing of May in girlhood, showing the serene curved eyebrows of “her lovely mother” (Jane Morris). May’s is also the care-free face of the central figure in Burne Jones’s picture The Golden Stairs. But Basil’s abiding impression of May was more sober: of her “face of noble and austere beauty, somewhat haggard, with eyebrows set at an angle reminiscent of a Greek tragic mask and suggesting some sad and painful happening in her life. I remember her form as tall and slender, moving with dignity, and clad in garments of rich design and of a fashion that was all her own” … and her surroundings echoed The Tune of Seven Towers:

No one goes there now
For what is left to take away
From the desolate battlements all arrow
And the lead roof heavy and grey.
No one walks there now:
Except in the moonlight
The white ghosts walk in a row …

“Her appearance and her bearing were apt,” Basil explained, “to a sense of dedication which her conversation constantly revealed; for the words ‘my father’ were ever on her lips. It was manifest that her life was devoted to keeping her father’s memory not only green but dynamic. Her championship of an artistic creed outworn, and something or counter to so much for which Morris had lived and worked, and it is the measure of May Morris’s achievement that Morris had remained an inspiration and a household word to this day; and I am glad that I was able to contribute a little towards that achievement. She had set her heart on building and endowing a memorial hall at Kelmscott, with the purpose of perpetuating her father’s memory, and in craftsmanship be worthy of his ideals. So this proud shy woman, through the years, preached and pleaded her cause, lecturing and speaking on platforms, writing (and how well she wrote), and editing that monumental edition of the collected works of William Morris in 24 volumes.”

Basil continued what he termed his “dual relationship” with May: private friendship and public support for her work. “There were times when we talked of the progress of Memorial Hall and there were times when, with Miss Lobb and my wife, she would talk happily of trifling matters, of their camping holidays, of their visits to Ireland, or of the Kelmscott snowdrops of rare pedigree whose descendants each Spring carpet the bank beneath the beech hedge in our orchard.” He recalled a lecture on Pattern which May gave at his invitation at an Arts and Crafts Exhibition at Oxford in the early ’20s. “What a knowledge of loveliness she showed, and how modest she was in presenting it; but how like a whip were her words when a foolish woman came up to her afterwards and rather patronisingly suggested she might give that lecture before some other body.” May retorted “My fee is ten guineas”; she had given her services to Basil’s cause freely. In the drive to proselytize she had to overcome her natural shyness: Basil remembered “comforting and encouraging her when she came to Oxford to address Sir Michael Sadler’s Town and Gown Luncheon Club, remote and timorous among two hundred men. I remember the lovely substance of her dresses, beautified by rare but unprecious jewelry.”

I remember aright, one of the windows opened, stood the pump under which in the morning May and her companion stood in turn while the other worked the handle. Upstairs one passed into a shrine dedicated to the memory of ‘My Father.’ There, in the frozen stillness of a museum, the pilgrim stood, surrounded by the lovely evidence of that versatile genius, most memorable among them his painting, la Belle Iseult, showing at once rare achievement and promise of mastery, had he persisted, in the supreme art of ‘silent poetry’: and on the bed (four-poster and surprisingly short) his noblest memorial, a copy of the Kelmscott Chaucer — that masterpiece of typography whose artistic glories are strangely alien from the robust spirit of the author. Thence you passed to the chill of the tapestried chamber, where, penniless with cold, while a wooden fire sent its modest warmth straight up from a huge open hearth, the hieratic May would turn for you with an ivory knife the pages of some manuscript of her father, or sit at her loom, surrounded by grim titanic figures portraying the blinding of Samson… Then one became aware again of the tragic set of those (May’s) eyebrows. There must have been a time when in that gloriously exciting company at the Manor, like Hardy’s Phena: Her dreams were upbrimming with light, and with laughter in her eyes.”

Later, as friendship developed, Basil grew to discover May in her own right, “and in the end I began almost to regret that in her devotion to her father’s memory she had almost completely submerged her own genius. She would remind me of a spell-bound princess, such as may be found in those poems, half story and half dream, which enchanted me in reading that earliest collection, The Defence of Guinevere and other Poems. She was the captive of her father’s memory, and she had, as it were, to complete the tapestry of it before the spell could be broken. It was an heroic task; for all the current of present-day life ran away from or counter to so much for which William Morris had lived and worked, and it is the measure of May Morris’s achievement that Morris had remained an inspiration and a household word to this day; and I am glad that I was able to contribute a little towards that achievement. She had set her heart on building and endowing a memorial hall at Kelmscott, which was to perpetuate her father’s memory, and in craftsmanship be worthy of his ideals. So this proud shy woman, through the years, preached and pleaded her cause, lecturing and speaking on platforms, writing (and how well she wrote), and editing that monumental edition of the collected works of William Morris in 24 volumes.”

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May's second triumph, at Basil's behest, was the further promulgation of her father's words. At the beginning of the same year (1934) he had written to her enquiring: “that if any scrap of her father’s writing should still be unpublished, we might help to commemorate his centenary by printing it handsomely at the Kelmscott letterpress on the very same hand-press which once had been part of the equipment of the Kelmscott (Press).” May responded almost immediately with a beautifully scripted letter. She thanked Basil, and explained that she would send all that remained of her father’s writings that had not appeared in book form. “Bearing in mind that the whole of May Morris’s life was devoted to keeping her father’s memory not only green but dynamic, it should not come as a surprise when, some days later, a panting porter brought into my room a huge parcel, which he set down with a thump on the floor. I found it to contain a mass of type-scripts, pamphlets, periodicals and all 500,000 words were saved. And May Morris’s bequest was not think it necessary to say anything … I made material obstacles should melt away… and I did immediately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the diately conscious that a Mystic betrothal was registered in heaven to be fulfilled when all the
“For a time Shaw shared the house of the young couple, but finding the situation too exacting, and lest he should be the cause of breaking the marriage,” he vanished. But “the manage that had prospered so pleasantly as a ménage a trios proved intolerable as a ménage a deux ... and the husband vanished too.” Presently there was a divorce. “The beautiful one” Shaw wrote, “abolished him root and branch and resumed her famous maiden name.” Forty years later Shaw was motoring through Gloucestershire when the spell of Kelmscott came upon him; he turned aside to visit the grave of William and Jane Morris, which he had not seen before. Then he was moved to knock at the door of the manor. It was opened by the terrifying Miss Lobb, and “presently the beautiful daughter and I, now harmless old folks, met again as if nothing had happened.” Basil’s last encounter with May came on a Bank Holiday in 1938. “We shipped our sculls at Kelmscott and made our way up to the house; I saw her at a distance in the paddock: she turned and gazed at us stonily as we advanced, looking very like dishevelled tripper, and I had a moment’s anxiety lest she might not recognise us and speak words of rebuke which she might regret. I called out to her, and her manner changed (she admitted that she was about to chase us away deeming us to be a party of idle curious who had come by cabin-cruiser).”

After a feast of home-made wine and home-made cake, May walked the Blackwell family back to the riverbank where their boat was moored. She told Basil that “she no longer cared to go out either to the front or the back of the Manor House; for the long peace of Kelmscott had been invaded by an aerodrome behind the village, and on the river the old wooden weirs and bridges had been replaced by concrete work, and rollers had given way to locks for the benefit of motorboats.”

“How much they miss,” Basil commented, “these folk who lounge on the decks of cabin cruisers while they speed heedlessly above the stream, soothed (I suppose) by the tawdry music which normally invades their homes. Unknown to them the subtle music at the water-level, from swaying rushes, from the kiss of sculls precisely dipped, and the quiet mirth of little eddies as the blades are pressed home; unknown the deep content in healthy weariness and the sense of achievement at the day’s end. Such joys were known to May Morris in the hey-day of life at Kelmscott, but are now almost forgotten on the upper reaches of the Thames. It is all part of the passing of an age. The noise and vulgarity of the world were pressing hard upon her, and I was aware of a weariness of spirit that day:"

The heavy elms wait, and restless and cold
The uneasy wind rises; the roses are dun;
Basil’s weariness must have been a premonition. “Before the year was out I stood at her grave. The chapter was finished and the book closed; William Morris had passed into legend.”

Continuing the theme of Blackwell writing, the next instalment delves into the diaries of Will King: poet, Quaker, and a famous Blackwell antiquarian bookseller.

Endnotes
1. In his diaries (MBC) Benjamin Henry writes that his sole ambition is to “provide for himself, his mother and his apprentices,” and his son never thought seriously of doing anything other than joining the family firm; the same went for the next two generations of Blackwells.
2. Notes from the Rector of Appleton, Peter Wyld; parts of these notes were published in the Oxford Diocesan Magazine, July 1984.
3. Betjeman at the celebrations for BB’s 70th birthay.
4. This story has been published in many versions, one such by the William Morris Society; see also MBC BLK 3/6.
7. Alf Button is the character in a book of the same name by W. A. Darlington.