

April 2011

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Recommended Citation

Ricketts, Rita (2011) "International Dateline -- The Bookseller's Apprentice," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 45.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5822>

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International Dateline — The Bookseller's Apprentice

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@bodleian.ox.ac.uk>

Introduction

The last installment delved into the boxes of the **Merton Blackwell Collection**, revealing the scholar-bookseller **Will King**. But **King** was never an apprentice at **Blackwell's**. In this issue we find yet more tales of **Blackwellian** autodidactics, taken from the **Merton** treasure trove. We now go back in time to the days of **Blackwell's** second apprentice, **Fred Hanks**, who worked his whole adult life in the **Broad Street Shop** (1883 to 1945); **Benjamin Henry** had taken on his first apprentice, **Master Fred W. Chaundy**, during his second year of trading in 1880, and eventually he left to run his own shop. **Fred Hanks** recalled the signing of his indentures: "the scene is a room in a house, No.36 Woodstock Rd., the date is July 1st.1883; present **B. H. Blackwell**, his brother **Mr. F. J. Blackwell**, my mother and a little boy – myself." In this company he promised, on the Bible, "to serve faithfully for five years, not to waste the Goods of his said Master... not contract Matrimony within the said term nor play Cards or Dice Tables...haunt Taverns or Playhouses." For all this he was to receive 3s. 6d. a week, rising to 10s in his fifth year. Wages being barely above subsistence level, it was the opportunity to better themselves that attracted young autodidacts, and more particularly, their mothers.¹ At **Blackwell's**, **Hanks** not only learned the art of bookselling, but much of scholarship too. And from the start, **Basil Blackwell** recalled, "he had a director's pen in his pocket"; indeed, later on, he joined the Board. Earning the sobriquet "**Father Hanks**," he was feted by City and University, and in recognition of his service to scholars he was awarded the **Oxford University** honorary degree of MA. In this instalment we can "hear" him describing something of his life as a bookseller in bygone days (1883-1933) only barely recognizable in today's "retail" world.

The Stories of "Father" Fred Hanks

"Some of you," **Fred** writes, "may possibly be wondering how I happened to become associated with the firm of **Blackwell**." **Hanks** explained that it came about because of a love of books and of church music. "I should first explain that my father died when I was five years old ... and the only education my mother could afford was that provided by the elementary schools as 2d per week. It must have been when I was about eight years old that my dear old mother, anxious to do all she could to supplement my elementary school education (I don't know that she had any idea of my becoming a bookseller) thought it would be good for me to learn a little French, and I remember accompanying her to a bookseller's shop (I can't remember which shop it was, but it certainly wasn't **Blackwell's**, for it was not then in existence), and there she purchased with her hard earned pennies and presented me with a French grammar. This was, so far as I remember, the first book I ever possessed... A year or

two later **S.Philip** and **S.James Boys' School** was opened, and here, under the extra mural tuition of my dear old friend **Mr. Dermer**, I learnt a little more French and some Latin up to the first book of **Caesar**...

I must now take you back again a few years and tell you that at the age of nine I became a choir-boy in **S.Philip** and **S.James** church... **Mr. Blackwell** was a senior chorister, and I sat in the bench immediately in front of him. I suppose that like most boys I tried to make the most of my appearance by using some sort of hair lotion. This particular lotion (bless it!) must have had a rather offensive odour. Anyhow, one Sunday morning after the service **Mr. Blackwell** spoke to me for the first time and asked me nicely and kindly if I would mind not using this particular hair lotion. The next Sunday I obediently turned up in my usual place with my hair in its natural and inoffensive state, and you can imagine my surprise when after the service **Mr. Blackwell** spoke to me for the second time, thanking me nicely, and at the same time placing a shilling in my hand.... In the course of time, hearing that **Mr. Blackwell** required an apprentice I boldly applied, and whether the hair-oil did the trick or not I don't know, but at any rate on July 1883 my indentures were signed.... I hardly knew what it was to have a father, and I like to feel that by the kindly interest he took in me **Mr. Blackwell** tried to some extent to fill that gap...

Upon arriving at 50 Broad St., the business was in its fourth year and occupied only a few square yards... Summer vacation had just begun, and I remember it was occasionally very difficult to find enough to do. Not so today! Fortunately a duster was promptly placed in my hand accompanied with a very significant comment that it would be an essential part of my duties to make a daily use of it. Having made myself more or less efficient in this part of my training, I was duly instructed as to the most useful and economical method of opening parcels, which were delivered each morning... Economy was strictly observed, and I was taught that when unpacking parcels this could be practiced by carefully cutting the string in such a way as to preserve as much of it as possible for use in outgoing parcels. Packing paper, too, had to be saved and used again. While on this subject I cannot refrain from mentioning that **Mr. Blackwell** himself, taught me how to pack a parcel. This, to some, may appear to be a trivial detail, but it was not so considered by him to whom tidiness and attention to small matters were characteristic,

and I shall always remember with gratitude his instruction in small matters..."

Mr. Blackwell was also a man of hobbies, and "one of these was the steam engine, of which he possessed two models." **Fred** recalls assisting him in taking them to pieces, "cleaning the parts and putting them together again, and eventually share the pleasure of seeing them working". Another "holiday" occupation was the preparation of the educational catalogue, commonly known as the "potboiler." "This was also the time to give the stock a thorough dusting. There were no such mechanical



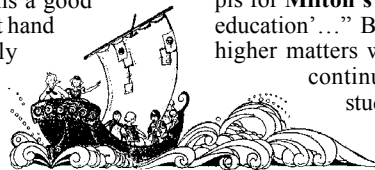
Shown above is a photo of Hanks as Captain in the **Boys Life Brigade** (a more militaristic version of the **Boy Scouts**).

implements as 'Hoovers' in those days to assist us, so we had to devise our own methods for carrying out the job. We accomplished this by taking two packing cases out into Broad St., in front of the shop. On these boxes we placed a long board. The books were then carried out — an armful at a time. We then arranged that one of us was to dust while the other was to carry. Here again the proverbial duster was brought into action, and in addition to this we took two books in our hands and banged them well together. As the same course was taken by the bookseller on the other side of the road, the noise and reverberation which resulted can well be imagined. It is difficult to believe that such a disturbance would be tolerated now-a-days..."

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Within no time, as his apprenticeship continued, **Hanks'** abilities were put to more serious use: "I had not been long at **Blackwell's** before I saw that my little knowledge of French and Latin was going to be very useful. So far, I was able to cope fairly successfully with the titles of books in these languages, but when a customer asked for a German book it was necessary to produce a pencil and a bit of paper. This was a state of affairs I could not tolerate for long, so I began to look about for a teacher, and I don't remember quite how it came about, but before long **Mr. L. A. Selby-Bigge**, then a fellow of **University College**, came to my aid. I used to visit him once a week, after business hours, sometimes as late as 10 o'clock, and together we did a little German. He used to say, very kindly I think, that while he taught me to read, I taught him a little grammar. That may have been so, for at that time I was ploughing through **Otto**.² I had a wish to go to Germany when I had finished my apprenticeship, but *res augusta domi* prevented this, and as the French proverb says *ou la chèvre est attachée il faut qu'elle broute...* But I was surprised and very much pleased when my dear old chief, anxious as ever to encourage, rewarded me by giving me a bonus on the turnover on the sale of foreign books and bookbinding. Please don't assume from this that I was merely and only a foreign book assistant. I was this, of course, but it was not by any means my chief occupation. It really was my hobby, a good deal of the work which it entailed being done after ordinary business hours."

Alongside running "Foreign" and the acquisition of "a little learning," **Hanks** was expected to write letters as well as "keep the books:" "every letter had to be written by hand, a state of affairs which we cannot imagine existing today... Previous to the introduction off the Lamson-Paragon system of book-keeping all credit sales were entered into a day-book, and later transferred to a ledger. In order to prevent errors of misposting, **Chaundy** and I spent a considerable amount of time checking the one with the other. One of us called out the items from the day-book, while the other checked the entry with the ledger. This not only helped to while away some tedious hours in the vacations, but seemed well worth doing, as it saved many errors appearing in the 'accounts rendered' at the end of term. An interesting feature which I believe I am correct in recording, is that Ledger No. 1 contains a good deal of **Mr. Blackwell's** neat hand writing..."³ But these daily routines were as nothing compared with the hustle and bustle of the beginning of the academic year. "As it approached there was always a great awakening... Travelers' orders had a very regrettable habit of arriving one on the top of another at the last moment, and as all books had to be marked and put away in the



shelves, so that we could start term in apple order, overtime was essential... All new books had to have a little white label stuck in on the bottom right-hand corner of the front cover before they were put into the shelves. This practice, I regret to record has gradually been allowed to lapse, and a profitable means of advertising our books both at home and abroad has been lost."

While on the subject of this "little white label," **Hanks** recalled a story which was told to him by the late **Mr. I. U. Powell** at a luncheon given in his (**Hanks'**) honour at **St. Johns College**:

A certain Balliol undergraduate was spending a holiday somewhere on the Island of Papua. In the course of his travels he lost his way and wandered into a wild part of the Island, where he was captured by some natives and taken before the Chief. In the course of the enquiry, and just as the sentence of death was about to be pronounced upon the young man, the Chief noticed that he held a book in his hand, and demanded that it be handed over to him. On opening it, his attention was attracted to the neat "little white label" which was stuck in the book.

"Hullo" said the chief. "I see you deal at Blackwells.

"Yes," said the young man. "I do."

"Then," said the Chief. "I supposed you know Mr. Hanks."

"Yes, quite well," he replied. The Chief then ordered the young man to be liberated, and a banquet prepared at which he was given the place of honour!

A few days before the beginning of each term "it was **Mr. Blackwell's** custom to take a trip to London, in search of some fresh and attractive second-hand books for stock. His favourite rendezvous for this purpose was **Stibb's** shop — alas! no longer in existence — where he generally managed to find a considerable number of books in nice bindings. These always provided an attraction for the first-week-of-term window show, and needless to say were quickly disposed of. It is a matter for regret that the interest taken in these old scholarly classical private presses has sadly declined. From careful observation it would appear that the study of Classics at Oxford, and I believe elsewhere also, is on the downward path. It has been suggested that the transformation of the study of the humanities to other more utilitarian branches of education is to be attributed to the last two world wars and their resulting effects. If this is so, tant pis for **Milton's** conception of a 'complete education'..." But the time for reflecting on higher matters was scarce as preparations continued for the influx of new students and scholars, of whatever "new" disciplines.

"The beginning of term naturally put an end to early (6 o'clock) closing, and although 8 o'clock was the normal closing hour, little or no notice was taken of this, and the day ended only when the day's work was done..."

It was a rigid rule that service in the shop was regarded of first importance, and attention to anything, however urgent, was generally regarded as a secondary consideration, to be dealt with after the shop was closed. The staff being still quite small we naturally turned our hands to anything... serving in the shop, packing parcels, and on very busy occasions, such as the first few days of term, hoisting a sack of parcels on one's back in order that they could be delivered at the porter's lodge before the gates were closed at 9 p.m. I should explain that this was quite a voluntary effort... Those were the days before the invention of motor cars, typewriters and all the other mechanized apparatus now so necessary in our business... Instead of a business car **Mr. Blackwell** had what was known as a quadracycle, a type of cycle now obsolete, and I don't wonder, for it was very hard work if, as frequently happened, we had to go any distance on it. When a library had to be bought we used to pack the bags on behind, and off we went on our expedition. Having bought the books (which as far as I remember we always did) we would pack them in the bags and leave directions for them to be sent by rail. As the purchasing of the libraries increased the available space became used up, and not unlike the present time, we were always troubled to find room. I would like to assure the members of the staff that this trouble is old as the hills — so cheer up!"

Writing of the age old problem of space, **Hanks** recalled the development of **Blackwell's** premises. "After some years **Mr. Blackwell** purchased the adjoining premises, then a tailor's shop (under the name of **Lockwood**), and you can imagine our delight when we drew up the blinds of No. 51 and exposed two windows to the public gaze for the first time. This gave us a very welcome extension as far back as the big window overlooking the backyard. It was not long, however, before we were crying out again for more room. The premises behind were then occupied by a young men's club known as the **Churchmen's Union**, a caretaker's cottage, and a dispensary. In course of time the young men's club fizzled out, and the Union Room was eventually added to our premises... This room, before we had sufficient books with which to furnish it, was let out for various purposes. On one occasion it was utilized for a reading by **Verlaine** the French poet. The room was quite bare with no other lighting than that supplied by 2 candles. The only other person present was the late **Prof. Yorke Powell**, and both of them were seated round a very small table. I obtained this information by a peep through the key hole. Another and very different use was made of this Room when it was let to a professional boxer, who gave lessons to undergraduates. There were occasions when boxing competitions took place in the evenings, and the state of the floor in the morning was evidence that much blood had been spilt."

Fire, as well as blood, was associated with the Union Room, in **Hanks'** mind: "on one particular day, by good luck, I happened to be

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at that end of the shop when I was amazed to hear a terrible screaming by a female at the same time a vivid flash of light passed by the window. I ran out as quickly as I could and found the daughter of the keeper of the Union on fire and about to enter the house. By good luck I arrived just in time to prevent this, and having seized her I rolled her on the mat just inside the Union passage and at the same time tore away the burning pieces of her dress. I found afterwards that she had just been dusting a table in the reading room and that while she was standing with her back to the stove her dress had caught fire and that she rushed in a panic out into the yard. Had she succeeded in entering the shop one shudders to think of the possible consequences. She thanked me very nicely, and at the same time placing a shilling in my hand." Elsewhere in the archives are descriptions of the Union Room being used for discussions, meetings, concerts, and other entertainment, before it was incorporated into the main shop... "The only bit of property which now stood in the way of further extension, was what we call "the dispensary"... where doctors attended three of four mornings a week to dispense medicine to the sick and needy. It was not a cheerful sight to see the wretched specimens of humanity crowded into our backyard waiting for the doctors to arrive. In course of time, this too came to an end, and **Mr. Blackwell** promptly purchased the building. It then became possible to knock away the ground floor of the caretaker's cottage and get a way right through the dispensary into the big Union Room. This, with the exception of the Trinity basement, is very much as we know it today..."⁴

The physical building of **Blackwell's** is not so different, even today, from the one **Hanks** knew, but he never missed a moment to remind his colleagues of the benefits they enjoyed in the modern firm: "I sometimes wonder whether our young men of to-day realise and appreciate the changes and benefits that have taken place in business since the early eighties (1880s). They might reasonably be tempted to ask what happiness we get out of life. My reply is that we acquired a good deal of happiness and pleasure by having an intense interest in our work, which continued to increase as the business developed." After his retirement **Fred** set out to record more of his stories: "now that 'all is safely gathered in and shadows of the evening steal across the sky' I hope to use these longer evenings by cudgeling my brains in the endeavor to revive more old memories which, by the way, are very dear to me (and he turns his head to his memory of the days when **BHB** lived over the shop): On the few occasions when **Mr. Blackwell** had to spend the night out of Oxford, I was honoured by being entrusted to act as a sort of bodyguard to **Mrs. Blackwell** and the children. I remember the bedroom, which I occupied on the second floor back. It was when **Mr. & Mrs. Blackwell** were taking their summer holiday that other less important but pleasing duties fell to my lot. I refer to certain domestic trifles, such as watering the window boxes and feeding a much prized cat, in addition to taking charge of the shop generally."

Overseeing the comfort of the **Blackwells** was as important to **Fred Hanks** as his beloved "Foreign and Oriental" department. A rival, **Williams and Norgate**, on the other side of the street, had for a while threatened **Blackwell's** and **Fred Hanks'** supremacy in the *foreign* field but all was well: "On the 26th

of September 1901 I received a letter from **Mr. Blackwell (Benjamin Henry)**, who was then taking a few days' 'holiday' at Princes Risboro' dealing with the stocktaking books: 'Messers **Williams and Norgate** have now come to an end, and as I recognise the fact that you have done all you could in the way of fostering and developing our foreign and Oriental business so that no more than you could help went across the road I am sending the enclosed, just to show you that I am not unmindful of good service rendered in my interest.' I might add that the 'enclosed' was a cheque, which, of course, was very welcome and useful, but that was transient: the extract which I have just read is imperishable in my memory." Just as permanent was **Hanks'** memory of 29 May 1889: "This day, although 44 years ago, still stands out clearly as if it were but yesterday. It was a beautiful day in summer term, and I well remember the many frequent and anxious visits which **Mr. Blackwell** made up to the second floor front, and his final reappearance with the announcement that he had a son.

"Much, of course, has been written and said about that once newborn babe," **Sir Basil Blackwell!** But of "Father" **Fred Hanks** there is much less in the public domain. He died at the ripe old age of 89, still "hale and hearty." He too, like **Rex King**, is a fine example of an autodidact who gained formal recognition during his lifetime. And his mother's modest wish, at his "binding" ceremony, that 'he should be a good boy' has been more than fulfilled. A tangible example of his influence is perhaps the bookseller's bible he constructed for the training of apprentices. Advice includes: "do not confuse *Beowulf* with *Brer Rabbit*... The apprentice must master **Stopford Brook's** Primer of English Literature... must be able to advise on available editions of a given book and to know its value in pounds shillings and pence and in the realm of scholarship... Do not direct a wealthy American to the Travel department when he asks for *The Tours of Dr Syntax*..." The latter entreaty was just as well, since as the business developed **Blackwell's** saw the arrival of a considerable number of American visitors! And long may they come! 🌱



Shown above is a photo of **Fred Hanks** and his fellow apprentices.

In the next installment, **Rita Ricketts** looks behind the bookshelves at **Blackwell's**, telling tales out of school of the antics of other early apprentices. And it is thanks to the **Bodleian** and **Merton College** that the people and their stories have been rescued from untimely burial in "unknown tombs."

Endnotes

1. More detail on **Hanks'** situation, so near to the early life experiences of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, can be found in **R. Ricketts, Adventures All, Blackwell's**, Oxford, 2002.
2. A compendious German grammar.
3. Now in the **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
4. The 1940s.