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## International Dateline -- Tales Out of School

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## “One of the better (Oxford) colleges — the one called Blackwell’s”

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>

The last two instalments opened the door of the **Merton Blackwell Archive** to reveal two scholar booksellers: **Fred Hanks** and **Will King**. According to **Hugo Dyson**, a Fellow at **Merton**, they had counted themselves lucky for being in “one of the better (Oxford) colleges — the one called Blackwell’s.” Digging deeper into the **Merton Blackwell Archive**, and using first-hand accounts, **Rita Ricketts** looks at the achievements, lives and antics of other “freshmen,” many of whom became “senior fellows” of this “better college.” As **George Crutch**, apprenticed in 1921, wrote: “it may be said that to spend a lifetime working among books is to enjoy a general education in the Humanities kept evergreen by the constant flow of new publications... to live and work in the intellectual atmosphere conveyed by books must inevitably influence ones intelligence.” And it was not just “inmates” who recognised the scholarly worth of **Blackwell’s**. The *Oxford Morning Post* declared: “Many men will aver that the greatest educative influence of Oxford resides neither in the **Bodleian**, nor schools, nor tutors, nor lectures, nor college societies, but in the excellent management and most liberal facilities of one of the best bookshops in the world — **Mr. Blackwell’s (Benjamin Henry Blackwell – BHB)**.”<sup>1</sup> Going further, another source suggested that it was to **Blackwell’s** that the academic community turned in the making of scholars:

*“Though Dons and Schools make Pundits out of fools,  
They have come to Blackwell for their tools:  
And seek, to turn their dunces into Sages,  
The Delphic oracle of Blackwell’s pages.”*<sup>2</sup>

Parents too, looking “to place their children in the world,” turned to this “better college” under the mastership of **BHB**. His fatherly undertakings had started with **Fred Chaundy** in 1880, and **Fred Hanks** soon after. **Geoffrey Barfoot**, joining in 1913, saw apprenticeship as a means to acquire further education, having had to leave school at an early age. In this he set out from the same beginnings as his new Master, **BHB**, and his fellow apprentices. And, for all of them, it was a way to escape from poverty. It was also a start on the rung of a ladder which, in the cases of **Hanks** and **Barfoot**, led to directorships of **Blackwell’s**. **Barfoot** described himself as coming from “peasant stock.” His father had died when he was four, and **Barfoot** had vivid memories of his “pauper’s” funeral. “All the family resources,” he recounted, “had been used up in burying my grandmother. When my father died only two weeks later, there was scarce enough left for a coffin.” **Barfoot** described how the body of his father was conveyed on an open handcart in one of the last “walking” funerals to be recorded in Oxford City. Despite their straitened circumstances, the early **Blackwell** apprentices were chosen

on the grounds that they showed a certain aptitude for book learning, although their formal education was truncated at the Elementary stage. In **BHB**, these young men found someone akin to a college tutor; albeit the contact was over much longer hours and even more exacting.

As part and parcel of their training, apprentices were regularly sent opposite to the Bodleian to “do research”; if a customer’s enquiry could not be answered in-house. How the academics of **Oxford** must have delighted in the offices of these “un-paid” research assistants! Whether the scholars of **Oxford** appreciated them or not, **BHB**, and his son after him, expected the apprentices to back-up their knowledge as an enhancement of their usefulness. Severally they were encouraged to learn Greek, Latin, modern languages, and ancient and modern literature, and the money was found to pay any fees. Indeed the **Bookseller’s Association** had proposed its own examination system. But when the antiquarian **Will King** was asked for his opinion on this proposal, he professed “bewilderment”:

*Dear Mr Basil,*

*I must say that I have read the Proposed Outline Syllabus for the Certificate Examinations of the Education Board of the Bookseller’s Association, with growing astonishment — if not bewilderment. As you well know, I yield to no one in stressing the desirability of an intelligent and informed staff in a bookshop... (but) one cannot reasonably expect of an assistant that beneath his utility suit he should combine in one person the organising ability and business astuteness of a Field Marshal with the specialized knowledge and cultural acumen of a fully-fledged university professor of English literature? ... What exactly does the Education Board mean by “a background history of English Literature”? ... A “background history” eludes me — unless the Board means a history of the social, historical and cultural background of English literature... I have a shrewd suspicion that what the framers of this scheme have in mind is a skeleton or backbone history — a general view (conspectus) ... so that the candidate may be able to put any author or book into his/her or its proper setting. That is all very desirable and for that purpose Stopford Brook’s Little Primer should be sufficient. For the more elaborate and detailed knowledge of “the development of poetry, prose and drama from the earliest times to the end of the 19th Century” and a familiarity with the major classics and those writers whose work has influenced the development of our literature that is asked for in the last paragraph, that is another story. Is the candidate expected to study Ward’s English Poets from Chaucer to Rupert Brooke, in five volumes; Craik’s English Prose Selections, five volumes, together with Ward’s Dramatic Literature, 3 vols and in his spare time read Hooker’s Ecclesiastical Politie, Hobbes’ Leviathan, Hazlett’s Essays, Leigh Hunt’s Autobiography and Hume’s Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (to quote only a few names)? Then, too, the Candidate has to extend his knowledge to modern English literature and be able to state “what it owes to nature, tradition, and foreign influences” It is assumed that the Candidate must be acquainted with the major modern works (including Joyce’s Ulysses, Lawrence’s Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Doughty’s Arabia Deserta, Forever Amber and the works of T. S. Eliot) and “with the masterpieces of foreign literature which are well known in English translation” etc....*

*And now let me add without reserve how much I sympathize with this nostalgic pipe-dream (he is sure the Board is made up of elderly men). But alas the*



*Shown above is a photo of a picnic on the river for Blackwellians.*

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*scholar-bookseller is an anachronism in this giddy age ... is almost as extinct as the dodo — the few tottering old specimens I know are more or less museum pieces maintained and exhibited by wealthy firms who can afford their upkeep. Left to himself he would be quickly exterminated, for it was only in Victorian days when one could live on a few pence a day that a bookseller, like the one depicted in Beatrice Harradan's novel Ships that Pass in the Night, could ejaculate that as long as he had a shelf full of Gibbon and a box of snuff he was quite content.*

For all **Will King's** cynicism, the scholar-bookseller was still a reality in the days of **BHB** and his son, even though they were hardly of the "gentlemen-bookseller" class typified by the **Parkers**, who held sway on the other side of Broad Street. Nonetheless, **King** himself had been hailed as one such and his successor in Antiquarian, **Edward East**, who joined **Blackwell's** in 1923, was another. Renowned for imparting his scholarly knowledge, **East**, like **Hanks**, received due recognition: in 1973 he, too, was awarded an Oxford MA, *honoris causa*. **Merlin Bulborough**, apprenticed in 1938, was a grammar school boy from **Basil Blackwell's** old school: **Magdalen College**. **Basil Blackwell (BB)** deemed him "full of promise," but it was unfulfilled; **Bulborough** was the only Blackwellian to be killed in action in the Second World War. After the Second World War, new entrants were drawn from secondary school after matriculation. Such book-men as **Phil Brown** (the current head of Rare Books) and **Ken New** (recently retired) came as "school-leavers, with a string of creditable exam passes to their names." Getting a good job was for most families the only real alternative given the expense of staying on at school for two further years and going to university. As **Blackwell's** grew and the subjects it covered proliferated, some already-experienced staff were recruited. **Frederick Dymond**, who had been a consultant for the world-famous **Hirsch Library** in Cambridge, was invited to join the firm by **BB** in 1955. Here he established a music department that, at the time, was the largest and busiest of its kind in the United Kingdom.

**Christopher Francis** too, recruited in 1952, was already cast in the scholarly mode. He had acquired a wide knowledge of theology while studying to take Holy Orders. Failing to find a religious vocation, he came to **Blackwell's** and went straight to Theology. Theology had become a backwater, but **Christopher Francis** breathed new life into its dusty stock. He devised a new classification system for his comprehensive Theology catalogue, running to well over a hundred pages. His encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject was known to, and willingly made available to, theologians all over the world. In Oxford, the eminent theologian **Henry Chadwick**, revered the name of this **Blackwell** scholar: "For two decades, **Christopher Francis** has been integral not only to one of the greatest academic bookshops, but to the serious study of religion and theology in the world."<sup>3</sup> **David Ben Gurion**, the first Prime Minister of Israel, was an admirer and a keen Platonist, and one of his visits caught the attention of the *New Statesman*: "In an age of barbarism it is a pleasant thought that anyone who penetrated to the back rooms of **Blackwell's** last week and spied a little white-haired man on

the top of a stepladder would have seen a Prime Minister indulging his favourite vice." His fame may have spread, but **Christopher Francis** was a loyal Blackwellian; he had no ambition outside of this literary house. He was rewarded with a vice-presidency of **Blackwell's** in 1980 and an MA, *honoris causa*, from the University. His crowning glory was the production of his own work of scholarship: the *Catalogue of Theology and Church History*, 1978.

Reflecting on his scholarly staff, **BB** pronounced bookselling to be midway between a trade and a learned profession: "whereas other retailers work by weights and measures, a bookseller is concerned with an individual book." **BB** regretted, "given their knowledge, years of learning and specialisms," that his "fellows" were not remunerated as they would have been in other professions: "It may be taken for granted," he argued, "that the brains, energy, and long hours required of the bookseller would yield far richer results if applied in most other forms of business." Nonetheless, he concluded, the rewards for those who stayed the course were "greater than those in the more commercial world," and much more than just wages. Rewards in kind included fees for further education and the chance to take part in a range of activities which were associated with any other college of the university: cricket, football and tennis matches, rowing competitions, choral singing, and a dramatic society. The early apprentices were all steeped in the Anglican choral tradition like their Master, who would join them as they sung lustily to let off steam.

Life as a bookseller could be adventurous too. Arriving to value some books in a large Victorian house, **Tommy Templeton** (apprenticed 1926) was unhelpfully informed that the whereabouts of the books were uncertain: "it was decided that they were in a chest in the cellar and then the key to the cellar could not be found (and) the only means of access was by the coal chute! Not wishing to return empty handed, I accepted the challenge and precipitated myself into the cellar. Arriving with a thump, I discovered the chest in a corner and prized the lid open but was horrified when I saw the contents. They could no longer be described as books, for they had been reduced to a soggy mass... I turned away in disgust and then, feeling like the Count of Monte Cristo planning his escape from the Chateau, I contemplated my return to the world outside. The only way was to attempt the *ascent* of the coal chute. Fortunately I was then quite agile and in due course was thankful to breathe fresh air again though somewhat disheveled. However, the wages of booksellers' assistants in those days being very modest I was not wearing an expensive suit and my modest clothes could

scarcely be said to have suffered any irredeemable damage despite my undignified adventure."

Just as undignified was **Tommy's** brush with a local Mother Superior. Mistaking an invitation to value some books at an open order, he presented himself at the grille of a closed convent: "I was subjected to a severe scrutiny by a beady eye, and I was asked my business. I explained the grille closed and the keeper of the gate withdrew to convey my message. After some considerable delay I heard within the sound of bells ringing, the hurried scurry of footsteps, and the slamming of doors. It was the alarm — a male person was about to enter the convent and all the inmates had to withdraw from any possible contact. When eventually all was still, I was admitted and led through long bare cor-

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*Shown above is a photo of Martin Bulborough, apprentice killed in Second World War.*



ridors to the Mother Superior's sanctum, where I met with a very frosty reception." Discovering his mistake, he was duly escorted from the premises by the keeper of the gate, whose beady eye expressed even greater disapproval than before. "Fortunately my proper destination was quite close-at-hand, so I arrived in reasonably good time and was very relieved to discover that it belonged to a much milder order. Moral — always read your instructions carefully."

Health and safety went literally out of the window at **Blackwell's** where there was an ancient apple tree reputed to have been planted on the site of a cesspit. **Templeton** recorded that "the apples, which owed something to their breeding or feeding were of a magnificent flavour as I can testify having speared many a one from the window with a knife tied on the end of an umbrella. A little to the right stood two pear trees against the old Union building. The fruit was hard and never much sought after."<sup>4</sup> On a sunny afternoon staff would be urged "to take a frisk," which meant being sent on shopping errands, and not being asked to account for "any delay in returning." When the doors closed to the public on Thursday afternoons, Blackwellians often played indoor cricket, on a pitch that had the benefit of a "good run-up," positioned as it was in the English department, on the ground floor; screwed up balls of paper sufficed for these games and similar ones of "footy."<sup>5</sup> All this was good practice for the annual matches against the **Cambridge Booksellers**, and there was always great anxiety among the younger members of the staff until the teams were announced.

Another more singular source of competition between the staff involved seeing how high up the rungs of the bookshelf ladders anyone could spring at a single jump. One of **Tommy Templeton's** particular accomplishments was to hang headfirst down the spiral staircase suspending his feet from the top rail, one ill-timed performance scared the wits out of an unfortunate customer on the way up! A less dangerous and favourite "sport" of the **Blackwell** paparazzi, men and women alike, was to "hang out the front windows and spot the passing toffs, royalty, politicians, poet laureates, and other notables, on their way to University ceremonies." More to the point, some of these dignified figures were known not to have paid their bills. "Oh, he'll come up" **Charley Field** would advise!<sup>6</sup> Among the miscreants were the Lord Chancellor of the University, and subsequent High Steward, whose three-figure account had not been settled since his student days. The **Earl of Birkenhead**, too had suffered from this deficiency; he had brought books "by the yard" and had them sumptuously rebound; a practice that must have depressed rather than enhanced the value of many first editions. Other University figures were also seen in a "bad light." Sent to collect some books from the rooms of **Charles Dodgson**, in Christ Church, **Fred Chaundy** had called early only to find the author still in his bedroom. Hearing the door, **Dodgson** emerged clad only in his shirt. Turning his back, he stooped down to recover a pile of books from the floor. But his shirt was only a "cutty-sark" — it had no tail. This provided a sight for sore eyes no doubt, and another story to enliven the long evenings in the shop.

There were lively, and not always sympathetic responses to the "fire alarms" set off by the pipe-smoking **Tommy Templeton**. Forgetting his pipe, **Tommy** was renowned for his attempts to lure young ladies down to the safe where the company's ledgers were deposited at the close of each day. Tales were told of consequent "adventures" in the basement, but we had best draw the curtain on these, just as **Fielding** did over the doings of his hero **Tom Jones**. Women were, for longer than acceptable, a decidedly delicate matter at **Blackwell's**; **BB's** first editorial assistant **Dorothy L. Sayers** being an exception. **BB** recalled that the first young woman to work in the office, and to undertake secretarial duties for his father, "had proved too upsetting for the male staff," and the second "a discreet red-haired maiden who lived in the odour of sanctity," was claimed by the holier estate of matrimony. But the shortage of hands during the First World War led the young **Basil** to advise his father to actively recruit girls. Cultivating relationships with local secondary schools, and judiciously indulging in a little talent spotting, he found his "peerless secretary of nearly forty years" via this route. By the Sixties, mature women entrants, seeking to go back to work to supplement the family income, were admitted.<sup>7</sup> A stickler for

the old order of the working week, **Sir Basil** had to adjust to patterns of work that were better suited to working mothers: part-time and flexible hours. He was worried about absent mothers. His grandmother had earned the family's living, but her workshop had been at home. Despite his misgivings, he accepted that change was inevitable even though his own wife (**Christine**), with a First in classics, stayed at home.

The staff enjoyed great parties at the **Blackwell** family home. And if anyone had been seriously ill, they convalesced at Osse Field and were attended by **BB** and his wife.<sup>8</sup> As the roses darkened, the shadows lengthened under the apple trees, and **Basil** left off from his incessant scything of the long grass, the chattering insect life would be drowned out by the sound of madrigals, performed by the **Blackwell** singers and led by educationalist and publisher **John Cutforth**. If madrigals were a little too esoteric, then would-be musicians, with or without sight-reading skills, could try handbell-ringing as an alternative. Other traditions such as the annual "Christmas Box" did pass by the 1970s; **BB** accepted that the younger staff no longer wanted to queue up to shake hands: he was aware that it smacked a bit too much of the old benefaction system. Did staff feel patronised; a question raised from time to time in the records? There can be no conclusive answer but evidence suggests that, at the time, the predominant feeling was one of gratitude. Yet nearly twenty years after **BB's** death (1984) the eyes of **Blackwell** pensioner, **Jim Broadbent**, filled with tears at the memory of his days in the *family* firm. None, it was agreed, had been barred from the inner sanctum of the Gaffer's office or his library at Osse Field. Listening to their concerns and tales, if comfort was required, **BB** would sharpen his pencil and trigger the mechanical sharpener's jingle "*a Double Diamond Works Wonders!*"

We will not dwell on the apprentices' love of the fruits of Ceres, or on the fact that a public house lies next door to the famous **Broad Street Shop**. Rather the intention in the next installment is to tell more of the books these scholar-booksellers read and treasured as a source of consolation and education. Truly they kept alive the long "Oxford" tradition personified by **Chaucer's** poor clerk, with only his threadbare cloak and "forty books bound in red and black." **BB** never forgot that his own father had known real poverty and hardship, but he always wanted to elevate the mundane concerns of the book trade to another level. "For in this grasping age when the world of men appears to be divided between those who strain for more profits and others who strain for more pay, there is, as I see it, a Third estate, unorganised, unvocal, unpredatory, being the commonwealth of those whose commerce is in sharing delight in the noblest products of the spirit of man, in the visual and scenic arts, in music... and, need I add? — in books. It is this commonwealth, which we serve, and in serving win our reward." More cynically-inclined readers might be tempted to regard **BB's** view as a justification for the low levels of pay. A close reading of **Will King's** diaries reveals that the early apprentices struggled to make ends meet: for example **King** recounts not being able to afford holidays and dentistry. But such hardship is by-the-by for him. His text is dominated with explanations and commentaries on a range of books that would delight any bibliophile and far surpass the depth of reading of most them. **King** would be the first to agree with the good **Richard de Bury** who wrote in his *Philobiblon* "All the glory of the world would be buried in oblivion unless God had provided mortals with the remedy of books." Drawing on the **Merton** and **Bodleian Collections**, the next installment will introduce the reading material which informed the autodidact **Will King** and his fellow scholar booksellers. 🌿

#### Endnotes

1. *Oxford Morning Post* 1906.
2. Ode to Scholarship, Poona, April 1912.
3. Conversation, Christchurch, August 1998.
4. **Tommy Templeton**, apprenticed in Jan. 1926, notes **MBC**.
5. Interview *ibid*.
6. **Charles Field** was another recruit who made it to director. He suffered from malaria caught in Gallipoli during the First World War, came to work when he should have been in bed, and died sooner than he should have.
7. **MBC**: **Basil Blackwell's** notes on Kaye.
8. Interview **Angela Melvin** and **Phil Brown**, Oxford 11 June 2001.