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International Dateline -- Books Read by Apprentices

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International Dateline — Books Read By Apprentices

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 Remedy of Books

“All the glory of the world would be buried in oblivion unless God had provided mortals with the remedy of books.”¹

Richard de Bury is chiefly remembered for his *Philobiblon*, written to inculcate in the clergy the pursuit of learning and the love of books. His book is also considered to be one of the earliest to advance the study of librarianship. Centuries later, the first **B. H. Blackwell (Benjamin Harris 1813-1855)** had come to librarianship via a love of books, probably nurtured in his father's temperance rooms in London's East End. Opening a bookshop near Magdalen Bridge, he laid the foundation for an enterprise that nurtured its own scholarly workers as well as those of the universities. By 1879 **Blackwell's** was re-established in Broad Street by his son, the second **B. H. Blackwell (Benjamin Henry 1849-1924)**. **Benjamin Henry** chose his apprentices from those who showed an aptitude for and an early application to their books, despite coming from impoverished backgrounds and being educated only at a rudimentary level.² In the last instalment we followed the antics of some of these apprentices and discovered that the University deemed them worthy of honorary degrees: “Blackwellians were scholars of the world university, and of one of the better colleges — the one of **Blackwell's**,” wrote **Hugh Dyson**, Fellow of **Merton College Oxford**. Here we meet again with a member of this “college”: the autodidact **Will (Rex) King, Blackwell's** first specialist antiquarianist whose knowledge and love of books was legendary. **Rex** noted the books he read and studied in his diary.³ A brief glance at the long list of entries, and **Rex's** analysis of them, provides a measure of his scholarship. But for **Rex**, as much for his fellow book-selling apprentices as well as those with a privileged education, books were a constant companion. They were also a tried and tested remedy for loneliness and for overcoming difficulty.

For all **Rex** was a jobbing baker's son, he seemed to learn to read as soon as he could walk. On Sundays his pittance of pocket-money burnt a hole in his pocket all the way through Morning Service. Released from prayer, he set off to Cricklade Street (Cirencester), the site of **Mrs. Dike's** newsagent's shop, to blow the lot. Dressed in his Sunday best, in the manner of the times, **Rex's** sailor blouse with its loose, bulging cut and encircling elastic band, was admirably contrived for his nefarious purposes: “I never walked abroad without a supply of contraband literature concealed about my person; and my passion for these *half-penny bloods* became so notorious that I became known as ‘Penny Dreadful.’” His favourite became *The Union Jack*, famous for introducing **Sexton Blake**. Later in life, reading the *Sunday Despatch*, **Rex** discovered that **Sir Hugh Walpole**, in stark contrast a bishop's son, had read the same “penny bloods.” He, too, had hidden them under his sailor blouse and had read them secretly in his bedroom by candlelight. Nonetheless, from an early age, **Rex** was something of a writer too, and

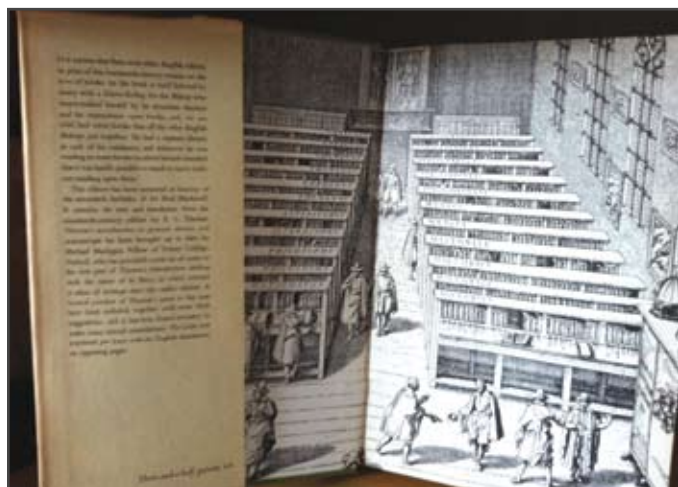
as an adult his poetry and review articles were published. But writing would not sustain a poor man with a wife and three children, and it had to take a back seat to his work at **Blackwell's**.

While **Sir Hugh Walpole** was well placed to live the life of a writer, **Rex** had to be content with making it his hobby. But he was never bitter; he bore “his mild yoke,” and worked for **Blackwell's** until he died. Books, themselves, were **Rex's** refuge and solace. His diary entries, during the period 1918-25, are dominated with explanations and commentaries on his reading.⁴ The list of books he consumed would delight bibliophiles, and probably surpass the breadth and depth of reading of most them. It would also cast light on the scholarliness of autodidacts before universal secondary education became the norm. And their subsequent sharing of this self-acquired learning shaped and improved the lives of many other workers. **Rex**, for example, became a regular lecturer at the after-working-hours Quaker school in Oxford; following in the footsteps of his mentor **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**. In fact it was at a Quaker Adult School meeting that **Rex** first encountered **Benjamin Henry**, lecturing on **George Herbert**. Delighted with the lecture, **Rex** had the temerity to send his comments to **Benjamin Henry**. **Basil Blackwell** recorded that his father found the letter so knowledgeable that he sought out **Rex**. Thus began his career in bookselling at **Blackwell's**. And by the time **Rex** starts his diary on Whit Sunday 1918 he has his feet under the table at **Blackwell's**.

It is through **Rex's** diaries, bequeathed by him to **Basil Blackwell**, that we are able to follow his metamorphosis from post office clerk to bibliophile. The books he consumed are too numerous to mention more than a sprinkling by title, ranging from the Greek and Roman Classics to an eclectic selection from English poetry and prose and even new outré works of “love that cannot be spoken of.” But the dominant and recurring subject-matter of his reading material can be summarized as follows: theology and the inner and religious life, Quakerism versus the “declamatory practices of High Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism,” pacifism, the utility of war, philosophy, the need for social and economic equality, politics, the position of women and the importance of education. **Rex's** serious diet was spiced with a re-reading of his favourite detectives, but not without a twinge of guilt for this “indulgence.” Although the subject matter and the titles of the books he read are interesting in themselves, **Rex's** extensive interpretation and comment is worth a closer look. Extracting references to books he read during only one working week and one holiday week, provides an introduction to this feast of literature and ideas and poses enough questions for a lifetime.⁵ His first entry (19 May 1918) reveals **Rex** in bed with the *Letters and Journals of Caroline Fox*. **Rex** describes them as “two delightful and entrancing volumes, disclosing a most catholic and charming character. We get, too, unforgettable glimpses of **Wordsworth**, **Tennyson**, **Hartley** and **Derwent Coleridge** (third son of **STC**), **John Welsh** and **Thomas Carlyle**, **John Stuart Mill** and **J. Sterling**, and many other notable characters.” The following day, Whit Monday, after a long walk with his family, **Rex** is off on another track: “in the afternoon, I read the earlier part of **Delolme** *On the Constitution* – quite a readable résumé of England's constitutional development, but one of legal phraseology.”

Reverting to **Fox**, **Rex** writes that the writing is “full of energy and rugged sincerity.” How bracing and purgative is the salt of his utterance. “And I went to Chesterfield, where one Britland was priest. He saw beyond the common sort of priests, for he had been partly convinced, and had spoken much on behalf of truth, before he was priest there; but when the priest of that town died, he got the parsonage, and choked himself with it.” **Rex** comments: “this gift of rural, picturesque speech belongs to all those who pierce the veil of convention and reach the bedrock of reality. How often does it flash from the pages of Thoreau: “...How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot!”

continued on page 83



Rex conjures up a picture of Fox “walking shoeless through the streets of Lichfield, in the depths of winter,” crying out “Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield,” and invokes Ezekiel the prophet: “who on so many occasions performed apparently foolish and grotesque actions at the behest of God.” “A striking parallel,” Rex suggests, “might be drawn between the experiences of these two God-intoxicated men.” Fox’s mission accomplished, Rex notes, he felt “the fire of the Lord was so in my feet, and all over me, that I did not matter to put on my shoes any more, and was at a stand whether I should or not, till I felt freedom from the Lord so to do.”

Rising at 6:30 am the next day Rex dives into Asensi’s *El Aeronauta*, before getting ready for work. Fifteen hours later, back from the shop: “too exhausted to enjoy any amount of reading,” Rex nonetheless takes up his pen to analyse an essay on Tennyson by Paul Elmer More “(the transatlantic critic).” What catches his attention is More’s comparison of Tennyson and Milton: Tennyson’s “prettiness” and spirit of compromise mar some of his most-quoted work. “This latter blemish,” Rex writes, is illustrated “from the stanza of the poet’s dead friend into the heavenly host:”

“The great intelligence fair
That range above our mortal state,
In circle round the blessed gate,
Received and gave him welcome there.”

Now turn to Milton’s *Lycidas*:

“There entertain him all the saints above
In solemn troops, and sweet societies,
That sing, and singing, in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.”

“Why is it that Tennyson,” More asks, “leaves us so cold, whereas at the sound of Milton’s words the heart still leaps as at a bugle call?”

The following evening, anxious for thought-provoking fodder, Rex reaches for More’s essay on *Criticism*, “which examines Matthew Arnold’s famous definition of culture, and draws a parallel between him and the Earl of Shaftesbury.” Reading on, Rex comments that More’s essay on Wordsworth “supports Jeffery’s dictum on *The Excursion*.” In his reaction to More, Rex reveals his own philosophy of poetry. He finds More “somewhat ultra-critical, and too austere in his application of strictly logical rules to some of Wordsworth’s finest passages. The syllogisms of logical reasoning are not the best instruments for the appreciation of poetry — which after all, is rooted in the emotions. There is a reason of the heart as well as a reason of the intellect — and one does not always desiderate a strict consistency in the poet. Still

one is glad to find a critic in the tradition of Matthew Arnold and Sainte Beuve.” Thus nourishing his literary appetite, Rex seeks “a moral tonic in the stormy pages of Fox’s journal. His emphasis on a practical, fruit bearing religion as opposed to a merely rational experience, and stern determination of the tradition-mongers are still needed today. We still want ‘men in leather breeches.’” At the end of the day Rex tries to enjoy Dryden, but with little success. “But yet, many of his cou-

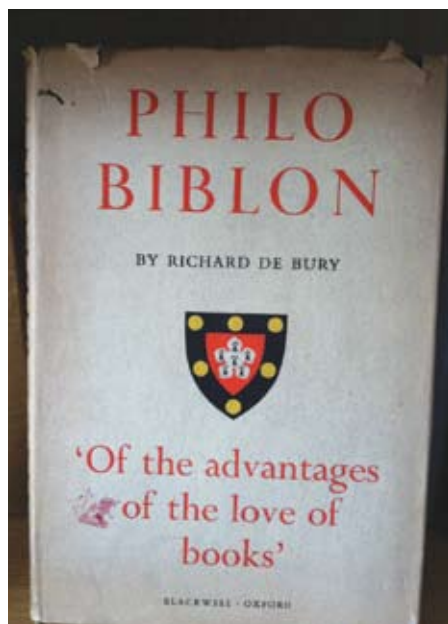
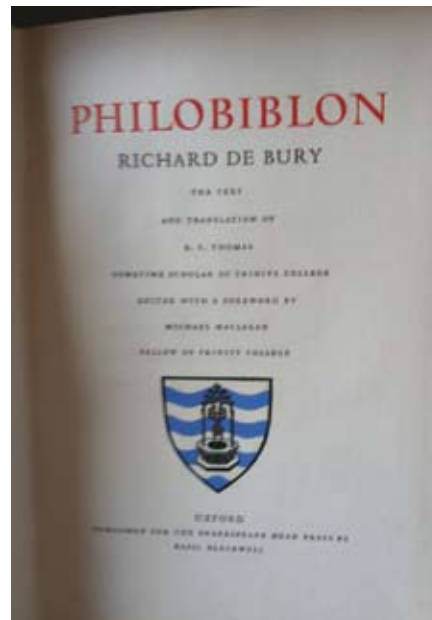
plets are so perfect in polish and diction, so scintillating in point and epigram, that one cannot always withhold a nod of keen approbation.”

Before breakfast the next day Rex limbers up with Whittier’s *Mogg Megone*. “In a short foreword, the poet informs us that the story of Mogg Megone has been considered by him only as a ‘framework for sketches of the scenery of New England, and of its early inhabitants.’ Notwithstanding this characteristic touch of self disparagement, the three stanzas of the poem form an artistic whole, revealing not a little skill in grouping and arrangement, but one feels that the piece is misnamed, for the interest is centered, not on Mogg Megone, but in Ruth Bonnython. Judged from an artistic standpoint, the chief weakness of the poem in my judgment is the tediously long passage of descriptive writing — which never rises above the mediocre — at the commencement of the second stanza.” Despite this, Rex is still enthralled: “how skillfully does the poet anticipate the revelation in a later stanza of Ruth’s criminal amour by a single adjective, which sets the reader wondering as to its suitability — until the whole story is ultimately disclosed? What thoughts of horror and madness whirl through the burning brain of that fallen girl?” Rex likens Ruth’s fierce cry “Give me the knife” “to the dread scorn and resolution of Lady Macbeth.” The reading of Whittier’s gruesome poem lasts another evening and is relieved by further extracts from Fox’s Journals.

It is hardly surprising that by the end of the week, with a heavy load of reading material and long days at the shop, Rex is confined to bed with a bad cold. Wasting no time, he seeks relief in the pages of *Sketches by Boz*, “but unfortunately struck a dark streak, in his descriptions of Gin Shops, Pawnbrokers, and Newgate. Even here, we may see the germ of those qualities which were to make Dickens so popular in later years. Keen observation, kindly sympathy, hatred of shams, touches of genial humour, are apparent on every page. Here, too, we find his characteristic playing upon two senses of a word in the tradition of Tom Hood... ‘There are some of the most beautiful-looking Pembroke tables that were ever beheld: the wood as green as the trees in the park, and the leaves almost as certain to fall off in the course of a year.’” Confined all day, Rex finishes his reading of Blackmore’s *Creation* in Cooke’s *Little Series of English Classics*. “This poem, in seven stanzas, is an attack on the philosophical schemes of Lucretius and Aristotle, and while not altogether devoid of merit, it is difficult to read with any degree of pleasure. Blackmore was widely ridiculed in his day and with other victims, was pilloried in the *Dunciad* of Pope. Judging from *The Creation* his fate was not undeserved.” As the week comes round Rex is still in bed and relishing two lectures delivered before the Royal Society of Literature. The one by the “gloomy Dean” on English Religious Poetry “... very rightly discounts the excessive laudation of Francis Thompson — that juggler in strange words and archaisms. As the Dean says, there is an odour of stale incense in much that he wrote. Commenting upon the fact, that the Roman Catholic religion has produced no supreme poet, he attributes it to the rigidity of their theological system.”

It is extraordinary that this vast adventure in the mind’s mountains takes place during one working week of Rex’s life; his working day started at 8:00 am and seldom finished until 8:00 pm! Compare this with

continued on page 84



his reading during a “holiday” week, which he describes as “paradise.” Monday, 12 August 1918: “sat out under the walnut tree all the afternoon and evening reading **Parson’s Sources of England’s Greatness**. This series of lectures by a minister of Ebley, Glos, published about 1850, are full of eloquence, and not without some merit. The author, a liberally-minded man, has the strain of prophecy in him, and has something of **Cobbett’s** fire and gift of strong satire — especially in dealing with the bench of Bishops.” Tuesday, 13 August 1918 finds **Rex** confessing to “delicious idleness spending the day with the *Bible* and **Thomas Dekker** — not quite such an incongruous mixture as might be imagined. There is a vein of kindly humour in honest **Dekker**, and one can imagine him as a boon companion of **Charles Lamb** in the Elysian Fields. His vivacity and sprightly humour irradiate *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, and care and worry are short-lived in the atmosphere of **Mad Simon Eyre’s** jovial nature. His merriment is contagious, and his oft-repeated ‘Prince am I none, Yet am I princely born’ gains our glad acquiescence. He has the free, blithe spirit of a skylark in the body of an alderman. His gift of invective is not so free and full-mouthed as that of **Falstaff**. His imprecations are but ‘stage thunder’ — the surcharge of his buoyant spirit. His man, **Firk**, has a lovely wit, but works on Freudian levels.”

The following day, not surprisingly, **Rex** complains of indigestion but alleviates it with a reading of the First Part of **Dekker’s Honest Whore**: “renewed my acquaintance with the meek Signor Candido — the apotheosis of patience — and **Bellafront**, the reformed harlot. The marriage of **Matheo** with **Bellafront** (recalling a similar piece of dramatic artifice in *Measure for Measure*) although tinged with a rough and ready poetic justice, is not altogether satisfactory, and I am soft-hearted enough to think **Bellafront** deserving of a better fate. The allusion to Christ — the friend of publicans, harlots, and sinners — in the last scene arouses no strong sense of incongruity — in fact, his tender presence seems quite natural...”

“The best of men

That e’er wore earth about him, was a sufferer,

A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit,

The first true gentleman that ever breathed.”

“One would like to know more of **Dekker** — there is an air of pleasant companionability about him.”

By Thursday, 15 August, **Rex** is onto the second half of *The Honest Whore* and *Old Fortunatus*. Refreshed and ready for a two-hour walk on Friday, he purchases **Robertson’s Elizabethan Literature** and the autobiography of **Benvenuto Cellini** and makes a note to read **Hooker’s Ecclesiastical Polity** and some of the prose works of **Nashe**. By Saturday the fine weather is at an end and **Rex** hides in the attic where he can “read in peace.” Alas, he finds **Dekker’s Witch of Edmonton** “poor, tasteless, stuff” but noteworthy “as a partially sympathetic study of a witch. The plot is full of absurdities: and whilst the parting between **Frank** and **Susan** is not without a certain sweetness — the latter’s oyster-like acquiescence in her own murder is stupid in the extreme. The whole murder scene is an artistic outrage.” Shaking off his distemper, he reads “**Middleton’s Trick to Catch the Old One** — a comedy which has affinities with **Massinger’s A New Way to Pay Old Debts**: a well-written robust piece of work.” In the evening he starts to read the earlier portion of **Benvenuto Cellini’s Autobiography**, continuing it on Sunday. By the evening he is ready for “a stroll with the loquacious Montaigne: ‘read again one of my earliest favourites *Of the Inconstancy of our Actions*. The need of an all-comprehending, all-dominating ideal in life becomes more and more insistent — unless one is to be content to dream and drift, blown hither and thither by the shifting winds of circumstance, or borne now here, now there, by the ever-changing currents of mood and desire. Nothing can thwart a single and unshakeable will. ‘Tis in ourselves, and not in our stars, that we are underlings.’ The difficulty is to choose amidst a multiplicity of ideals — all legitimate, maybe — but waging an internecine strife against one another.”

The day hardly begun, **Rex** tackles *The Changeling* by **Middleton** while his boots are being repaired. “Surely *Dr. Flores* is worthy to figure amongst the greatest character-creations of the dramatic art. The intensely moving scene between him and **Beatrice**, when he claims her

honour as the price of the murder is worked out skillfully and remorselessly. The naive surprise of **Beatrice**, so naturally and simply expressed is a touch worthy of **Shakespeare** himself.” After tea he enjoys **Middleton’s Chaste Maid in Cheapside**: “an uproarious comedy, chiefly notable for its lack of chastity. It is a feast of bawdiness and indelicate situations — but **Allurt**, the contented cuckold, is a character of some merit.” Counteracting this “feast,” on the following day, he reads **Middleton’s Women Beware Women** and *The Spanish Gypsy*:

“the former tragedy is one of the solution-by-massacre type, but contains one scene which is unsurpassed as a direct transcript from life. I allude to the scene between the scheming **Livia** and **Leantio’s** old mother. It is unforgettable in its almost surprising naturalness — the dialogue throbs with life. The opening of *The Spanish Gypsy* is also notable for its beauty and high finish.” After tea and the feeding of the hens, he spends “two hours in the company of **Benvenuto Cellini**, and found him vastly entertaining.” By Wednesday he has finished **Cellini’s** Memoirs, whose “antipathies are etched with an acid humour that bites into one’s memory.”

To cap **Cellini**, and ward off the “dread of next week’s work,” **Rex** indulges his love for **Montaigne** for the next two days, reading *On Pedantism*, *Education*, *Solitariness* and *On the Inequalities that there is between us*. He concludes his holiday with “various chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles*, ‘relating to **Paul’s** apprehension and imprisonment at Jerusalem, and his voyage to Rome.’ By what seemingly crooked ways was **Paul’s** earnest desire to go to Rome — expressed again and again in his epistle to the Romans — at last fulfilled. Many mighty conquerors, with their captives and spoils, had entered Rome along the Appian Way, scattering largesse amongst the turbulent rabble; but now here comes a solitary prisoner, bound in chains, hailed by a few of the brethren from Rome. The triumphal marches of the **Caesars** and **Pompeys** are now but a sounding tale, signifying nothing: but the world-wide effects of the entrance of that despicable-looking tentmaker into the Imperial City have been growing into the present day.” This commentary on the *Acts* reveals a theme much dwelt on by **Rex**: that of the ordinary man become extraordinary; the divine and eternal to be found in the common-place and in the inner-world. Partly, **Rex** himself suggests, this preoccupation stems from his feeling that he is an “underling” with “disappointed hopes” and “a sense of injustice ... which breeds feelings of heart-weariness... scepticism, cynicism, and unbelief.”

Through his reading **Rex** seeks a “remedy” for his condition, finding again and again that “riches, travel, and change” are “the great illusion.” “Riches in themselves,” he writes, “furnish us no escape from the commonplace. Rather the reverse. On the whole, the rich are far less interesting than the poor. Their money can, if they choose, bring them laziness, which they share with the tramp and to about as good a purpose. It can secure the indulgence of animal sensations with all manner of luxurious accessories. It is doubtful whether they relish their seven course dinner any more than the farm labourer relishes his crust of bread under a flowering hedge. Some fatal laws block the way to felicity along this line: the law of familiarity which robs sensation of its first flavour. Every indulgence brings in a diminishing return. We read of Roman Emperors who offered rich rewards to anyone who could invent new pleasures. One has only to read **Petronius** and similar authors to see how ingenuity was taxed: the world ransacked to find such pleasures.

continued on page 85



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International Dateline

from page 84

But they are at the last unable, from the whole complicated apparatus, to extract one satisfying drop.” **Rex** is equally dismissive about the benefits of travel and change of scene. “It is enough to rub shoulders with the average globe-trotter to be disillusioned on that head. **John Brierley** calls to mind how, at a Swiss hotel, when an expedition was being planned, a British tourist who was listening exclaimed wearily, ‘I suppose it is just the same there as here, a lot of mountains and that kind of thing.’ The Alps awakened in him no response. He wanted Paris or Vienna.”⁶

For **Rex**, who worked long hours and still found it hard to pay the rent and to feed his family, self-help is the only way. (He refused the chance to go elsewhere as a manager and stuck to **Blackwell’s** where he could be hourly among books and repay the kindness shown to him by both **Benjamin Henry** and **Basil Blackwell**). He lived according to **Montaigne’s** view that external occasions take both flavour and colour from the inward constitution, and **Marcus Aurelius** and **St. Paul** who teach that the only way forward is the inward way.⁷ And this, **Sir Basil Blackwell** wrote at the time of **Rex’s** death, is evident in the way he conducted his life. “Anyone who knew of or worked with **Rex** must be aware that we have lost something irreplaceable in his mastery of his calling, and the knowledge and judgment which he drew from the store of his vast reading. But this is not all. As I reflect upon the witness of his life and conversation, and upon the meditations recorded in his journals, a question insistently presents itself to me (I write with no sense of exaggeration): have we at **Blackwell’s** these thirty-four years entertained at unawares one who may deserve the tremendous title of Saint?”⁸

For the purposes of this short article we must leave **Rex** in the company of **St. Paul** and look to enjoy more of his reading adventures and

those of other apprentices in the next installment. But the last word must go to **Rex**, whose published poem is as passionate about books as ever were the works of the more famous **Richard de Bury**:

*Books! Aye, and more books! Here’s the thoughts of men who lived in Greece, three thousand years ago, or in the spacious days of England, when men’s minds were by contagion all aglow with wondrous tidings, ev’ry wind did blow! Here Space and Time are not, and I may flit to sandy wastes, whilst Job recounts his woe, or at The Mermaid, with Ben Jonson sit, or with the austere Dante tread the noisome pit!*⁹ 🐉

Endnotes

1. *Philobiblon* **Richard de Bury** — completed in 1344 and first printed in 1473.
2. The apprentices, like their Master, were given the 3 R’s at penny dame schools; this gradually changed after the 1870 Education Act which introduced universal elementary education (to the age of 12/13). At the same time accolades must go to the legions of working mothers who found the time to teach their children to read despite their hard lives.
3. *Diary of Will King* in the **Merton Blackwell Collection (MBC)**, University of Oxford.
4. *Ibid* **MBC**.
5. A more extensive treatment will be made in a book currently being researched by **Rita Ricketts**: *An Oxford Education* to be published by the Bodleian Library.
6. **MBC**, *Will King Diary* – loose inset.
7. **King’s** diary contains lengthy passages exulting the “ordinary” man to find good right under his nose.
8. **Basil Blackwell**, October 1950, in *The Broad Sheet*, **Blackwell’s**.
9. **Will King**, as a poem in 1913 and in his *Diary* 4 January 1925, **MBC**.