International Dateline -- Books Read by Apprentices

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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.”

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. 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. 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. Dice’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 books 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 to 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. The list of books he consumed would delight bibliophiles, and probably surpass the breadth and depth of reading of most of 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 knowledgeably written that he bought 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 “declaratory 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. 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 Coleider (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 best 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:
“Thou 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.”

“My it is 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 tone 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 couplets are so perfect in polish and diction, so scintillating in point and epigram, that one cannot always withstand a nod of keen approbation.”

Before breakfast the next day Rex limbers up with Whitte r’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 Bonython. 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 skilfully 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...
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 boisterous 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 Cigando — 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 worn 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 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 Leanto’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 Pedantisme, 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 illu

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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.”

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. 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 wit and wisdom 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?”

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!

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.
9. Will King, as a poem in 1913 and in his Diary 4 January 1925, MBC.