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International Dateline-The Good Bookman

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International Dateline — The Good Bookman

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>

Rita Ricketts goes back to the writings of Sir Basil Blackwell to inform the current debate on the future of physical books and bookshops.

In the last installment, we encountered some of the former inhabitants of the old houses on Oxford's Broad Street. By 1939 many of the houses, going East from **Blackwell's**, were destroyed and replaced by **Gilbert Scott's** iconic powerhouse of books: the **New Bodleian**. At the same time the **Bodleian's** esteemed neighbour, **Blackwell's**, had expanded and renovated its own old shop. **Sir Basil Blackwell** hailed the result as "a symbol of our hope for the future ... if our civilisation must go down in the havoc of war, it will be to the bookshops, or the ruins of bookshops, that the men of the future must turn to find knowledge and inspiration to build a better world. There is our hope; and long may this building and this firm stand to bring that hope to fulfilment."¹ And the public seemed to concur: a journalist at *The Oxford Chronicle* pronounced: "We have all grown up in the habit of taking **Blackwell's** bookshop, like other good things in life, very much as a matter of course. But I still remember the impression made on me when I first knew Oxford. In its strange capacity for making you feel as though you were at home in a vast library, of which some generous patron of letters had given you free rein, it seemed like a book shop from a happy dream...." Yet while the great libraries, such as the **Bodleian**, seem unstoppable: physically expanding and virtually extending their reach, the future of physical bookshops, like **Blackwell's**, is being called into question.

It may seem surprising, but there is nothing new about this. In 1938, **Sir Basil** wrote, "we might have said, with an echo of **Dr. Johnson**, 'No man will be a bookseller who has contrivance enough to get himself into a workhouse.' Individual booksellers were trading at a loss, and proprietors of family bookshops warned their sons against following this calling, and they themselves were anxious to sell out while they still had something to sell." Speaking in 2004, at the celebrations to mark the 125th anniversary of the Broad Street shop, **Julian Blackwell** reiterated his father's view that it is books themselves that ensure the timelessness and future of bookshops. In his time, **Sir Basil** would have added, it is the good bookman who will ensure the future of both books and bookshops. Yet in this age of eBook readers and tablets, not stone but digital, there seems to be an almost daily debate in the media about the future of paper books and the shops where they are sold. **John Makinson**, the chief executive of **Penguin**, has no doubts about the future of physical bookshops which "provide a cultural focus for communities, introducing children to the joy of reading. We would be poorer, in every sense, without them." But, **Waterstone's James Daunt** warns, "if the bookshops go, they will never come back."²

Hastening the demise of many high street bookshops is the tendency for customers to browse in them, and then buy on the Internet at a lower price. Perhaps this is more of a trend, a further diversification of the book trade, rather than a death rattle? Browsing had, after all, long been the hallmark of good bookshops like **Blackwell's**, and it was accepted that customers will browse, copy out requisite information and then return the book to the shelf or leave it on the coffee bar table, just as they now try **Google** for a quick, and effortless, answer. And booksellers themselves have long been unofficial research assistants. It was this propensity that caused **Merton Fellow Hugh Dyson** to dub **Blackwell's** "one of the better colleges." In short **Blackwell's** was doing what **Google** and

Internet bookshops now do, long before they were dreamt of. But just how serious a threat do these new kids on the block pose? Malthusian prophets of doom, who see no future for physical bookshops, are missing vital clues. Bookshops are still sources of unlimited free information; the very atmosphere breathed by customers lightens their day and provides them with social contact, if they want it. Doubting Thomases would do well to "observe the sheer delight of booklovers who, dropping into a bookshop, pick up a book that takes their fancy, pay for it and carry it off under their arm."³ **Sir Basil** was writing this some forty years ago, but current booksellers are echoing his sentiments.

In a recent article in *The Guardian*, **Tim Waterstone** describes physical bookshops as "lovely, tactile, friendly, expert, welcoming places ... (where) physical books can be seen and handled." Added to which, he argues, it is in physical bookshops "that new authors (and publishers) build their customer base."⁴ **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, who opened the Broad Street shop in 1879, had known this from the start. Publishing works by new writers "unknown to fame," he established **Blackwell's** as the first port of call for new authors who were at the same time his customers (readers).⁵ When **Sir Basil** took over from his father he too saw the umbilical-like dependence of authors, publishers and readers on the bookshop. But he also knew instinctively that the bookshop had no independent life without its authors, publishers, and readers. They were in what **Sir Basil** termed a "cultural partnership": between them "they make a bookshop a place of intellectual exchange in a sense which no school or college or public library can." Digging deeper **Sir Basil** invoked **Emerson's**: "Tis a good reader who makes a book," capping him with "tis the good reader (bookman) who makes the good bookshop." **Sir Basil** may be wrong about modern libraries and "schools," but is he right in thinking that good bookmen will go on making good bookshops? Will they go on buying books in physical bookshops? Will they forego the sensual pleasure enjoyed there: the feel of the paper, the smell of the ink, the visual excitement of new dust-jackets, the comfort of finding old friends in new editions? Has the bookman/reader/customer changed from the one **Sir Basil Blackwell** had known?

Just who was the "good bookman" and what was the nature of his relationship with the physical book? In an essay written in 1945, **Sir Basil** attempts some definitions and explores the importance of the book for the reader and writer.⁶ Like **Milton**, **Sir Basil** believed that books were not absolutely dead things, but "do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them." The reader, **Sir Basil** explains, reads because books are living things: they confirm his own story, as well as that of everyman. Books are the medium through which the reader inherits *Man's story ... which is Truth enshrined in beauty and forever by the miracle of written speech. So, by the Waters of Babylon, some homesick Jew, brooding upon the fate of his little nation, now ground between the huge millstones of Assyria and Egypt, now swept whole into exile at the whim of her great conqueror, set pen to parchment and wrote a song which moves our hearts to-day, when the might of Egypt is remembered in its tombs, and Babylon lies a mystery beneath the desert dust. For as much as I have yielded an echo to that song which my*

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*Pictured here is Sir Basil among his books
cc MBC, Merton College, U. of Oxford.*

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neighbour might hear and repeat, or an image of its beauty which my neighbour might catch and reflect, I, Tomlinson, protest before saints and devils that I have not lived in vain.

According to **Sir Basil**, it is because books preserve the stories of Mankind that they acquire a "spiritual value" in their physical form, and it is this that "attracts the reader." "Your bookman proper," **Sir Basil** continues, "believes with **Wordsworth** that books 'are a substantial world both pure and good.' Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood, Our pastime and our happiness will grow; with **Carlyle** that *In books lies the souls of the whole past time the articulate and audible voice of the Past*; and with **Milton** *A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.*" Will eBooks downloaded on a long-discarded e-reader, iPad or iPhone have the same value as for example the much-venerated seventh-century Gospel of St. Cuthbert, now on display in the British Library; said to be the oldest book in England? Dipping into such an elegant, beautifully bound volume, the reader is lead to consider its author, publishers, and distributors. All these parties share common ground, "believing in," what **Sir Basil** describes as "the power of the book." But what of the power of bad books, he asks? He is alluding to *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and also to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which, he argued: *debauched and distracted a nation of sixty million souls... a nation whose scholarship and intellectual attainment was once deemed to be the greatest in the history of Man ... To-day we have to admit that five hundred years after the invention of printing, when literacy is almost universal and libraries in every town and shelves in countless homes hold books which enshrine the accumulated experience, the distilled wisdom and the sublimest achievements of the human spirit, civilised man turned on himself and with circumstances of spiritual enslavement and of unequalled barbarity, shattered, perhaps beyond recovery, the cultural heritage of four thousand years.*

Despite his abomination of books that corrupt, **Sir Basil** defended the right of booksellers to sell them. He tells of a certain bookshop in London that sold pornographic books in brown paper covers. Kept under the counter, they had to be asked for in a hugger-mugger way. We, at **Blackwell's**, he insisted, do not intend to practice this subterfuge. **Sir Basil** looked to **Milton** for support for his view. In his 1664 Tract *Areopagitica*, **Milton** argued forcefully against the Licensing Order of 1643. Looking to earlier Greek and Roman traditions, he noted that censorship had never been a part of the classical tradition. **Sir Basil** too looks to his classical education for an answer to his conundrum: how to oppose censorship while not corrupting the "living intellect" of the book and the mind of the reader. "The truth," he asserts, is that *all power is two-edged. The knife can kill or cure, gas may be a minister of mercy or of torture. Aristotle built his theory of ethics on this 'potentiality of contraries' in*

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all the faculties of the soul of man. The Greek mythologists divined it before him: 'O father of all of us, Paian Apollo, Destroyer and healer, hear! This 'potentiality of contraries' in the physical world has reached its apogee in the atomic bomb. In the spiritual world the book, if not atomic in its possible effects, has by virtue of its permanence great power for good or ill.' Releasing the good, rather than the evil, argues **Sir Basil**, burdens the author with 'a formidable responsibility ... (And) the author's living intellect is fallible at best.'

Perhaps the author, in the act of creating a book, is merely its mouth-piece? In support **Sir Basil** offers his own rendition of **Martial's** health and safety clause, included in the dedication to his book of epigrams, "good things, some not so good, more frankly bad, this book contains; that's how all books are made." But what of Authors, who definitely in control, use their power to mislead and manipulate? Even if they are well intentioned, might they not unwittingly release a monster; the scientists that split the Atom never intended that their efforts would produce a bomb to destroy civilisation? There are many such examples of written work that had unintended consequences. **Sir Basil** cites some rather eclectic examples of writers who mislead, intentionally or not: **Charles Forbes René de Montalembert** – "the historian betraying the reader"; **Lytton Strachey** "and his biographie de valet which is a literary distortion"; **Trelawny** in *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* "who misconstrues a case of Achilles Tendon as 'the feet and legs of a sylvan satyr'"; **W. H. Hudson** "as a nature writer who has a tendency to fictionalise"; **St. Luke**, poet, socialist, lover of parables and paradoxes writing in Greek, who has his own "imaginative" versions of New Testament stories. Going down this line of inquiry, **Sir Basil** finds himself "beginning to understand why the earliest Christians may have chosen to rely on the oral tradition." Given then the fallibility of the writer, is it the reader who must discriminate? But how, asks **Sir Basil**, can the reader discriminate when he is surrounded by traps, stumbling blocks, and confusion? Once more we face the question: Is our faith in books fallacious? How have they betrayed us... or have we betrayed them? If we have betrayed books then how far are we culpable?

Although the potency for confusion is common enough in the literature of all ages, "for the most part the potency for good prevails," **Sir Basil** explains. What then happens to books: to readers, writers, publishers and booksellers in a dark age? "If overall literature is a force for good, then perhaps this is why literature in the period between the Two World Wars was so poor? I have amused myself by imagining how the social historian of the future may treat this era, and I suggest he may write as follows: The period between the Wars was among the most barren of creative genius in the history of English Literature. The flower of a whole generation of authors had perished, leaving the tradition of our Letters to the dwindling body of late Victorians, now mostly in decline, and a school of precocious writers whose work, uncertain, cynical and impatient, reflected rather than informed the spirit of those ignoble years. The deference of their elders, unnerved by War in their time, and the venality of prosperous journals exempted these neophytes from the castigation of just criticism, and the enterprise of publishers, hungry for their forced crop, accorded them more than their need of encouragement. For the domain of publishers was now invaded by numerous aspirants, who deemed that a capital sum would serve to exonerate them from the hard schooling required of those who follow this precarious career; and looked to thriving writers to establish the fortunes of their firms rather than to their own skill and discernment to win fame and prosperity for the authors of their choice. There was a contention for successful writers, an occasion which the literary hucksters were not slow to seize; the bidding ran higher and higher, often beyond the dictates of prudence or the reasonable hope of recovery; and as the pace grew hotter, so grew the need of speedy reimbursement."

In this climate, **Sir Basil** continues, "publishers gambled for a spectacular success, as brief usually as it was brilliant; the technique of publishing, criticism and bookselling was progressively addressed to this ephemeral market; and the most individual products of the human spirit grew to be regarded as merchandise to be handled in the bulk. So vast was this febrile output of novelists, travellers and biographers, so few are its vestiges to-day, that it is hard to evade the reflection that,

as the Victorian giants fell, they were succeeded by sort of mercenary gnomes. If this is a fair estimate of the literary history of the 'years between,' I suggest that it was we bookmen who between us betrayed books. Today, after tremendous perils and endurance, we stand at the crossroads. One way leads to cynicism, disintegration and despair; the other to a destiny as splendid as that of Athens after the Persian wars. Like us for a space she stood alone and saved western civilisation – shall we, like her, blaze into a new heroic age of Literature? Can we bookmen help to give impetus and direction to the Literature of this new age? What must we do to be saved?

Let us examine our membership in turn ... author, publisher, bookseller and reader and see what part they have to play. Clearly the Author's responsibility is cardinal. All turns on his motive – and he should remember that it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck than that he should cause one of the least of his readers to stumble. The author stands sub specie aeternitatis, and his motive always should be the presentation of truth. The publisher's first duty is to believe in the value – in these days of paper and labour shortages, in the necessity of the books he publishes. The power of choice is his, and how carefully that choice may be made is shown in **Charles Morgan's** account of the **House of Macmillan**. But he has not only to choose he has to initiate. He must know what his public want before they are aware of their need. The Bookseller has much less power of choice. He can give prominence to a book, back his fancy by buying large numbers of it and constantly recommending it; but his duty is to supply any book that is to be obtained; conversely, it is not his duty to exercise censorship, save in exceptional and obvious cases. (N.B. the awful outlook of Mr. Joy.) It is the Reader who really counts. He is free from the commercial motive. He is free to read for relaxation or for stimulation, with zest and intelligence, enjoying by understanding. He attends to the views of critics, but judges for himself... He remembers the fable of the Emperor's clothes. He is wary of false prophets and especially of any kind of writing that cannot be parodied. He is quick to detect insincerity in an author, and to reject one whose motive is unworthy. He recommends convincingly a good book, for he knows it when he finds one ... It is this discovery by the individual reader of the 'good book,' and his commendation of it to his fellows from generation to generation, that makes of a book a classic."

In **Sir Basil's** definition a classic is a book that survives. This I find to be the most heartening fact in the whole world of books. The bad books do not survive; the good ones do, because always and everywhere some good reader is discovering them afresh and telling the good news of his discovery to his neighbours. Let us take one instance: **Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans**, best known to most of us in **Sir Thomas North's** admirable translation. This great book makes its appeal from generation to generation because good readers recognise and acclaim its worth. The author's motive was good, his theme was noble, he treated it worthily. Now in the digital age such books, like the **St Cuthbert Gospel** in the **British Library** or the exquisite volumes displayed as part of the *Romance of the Middle Ages* exhibition in the **Bodleian**, can be viewed in any part of the world or any place where it is possible to go online. The ever-widening accessibility of books, in all forms, has ensured not just the survival but the exponential growth of **Sir Basil's** species: the "Good Bookman."

So we arrive back at the beginning, trying to answer the question: will readers ensure the survival of the physical bookshop, or have they become Internet and eBook junkies? The answer must be that the reader is a reader is a reader and will read books in any form possible. The physical bookshop no longer has a monopoly over the supply of books, but indeed it never did: **Sir Basil** and his father were continually bugged by the postal book clubs and other "contrivances" for price cutting and circumnavigating shops. A famous example (1934) concerns an exchange between **Sir Basil** and **Bernard Shaw**:

Dear Mr Shaw;

When Constable and Co. published 'The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw' at 12s 6d. net, they assured the trade that there would be no reprint. This statement was freely used by booksellers in selling the book to their customers.

The publication of 'The Complete Plays,' by Odhams Press for sale solely to subscribers of the Daily Herald (at 3s 9d. plus six

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tokens) has placed those booksellers in the unfortunate position of having deceived the public.

It must be admitted that the new edition differs from the 'Complete Edition' in containing three more plays (though this is small consolation to the original purchasers!); but apart from these extra pages and the WARNING FROM THE AUTHOR, apparently the new edition is in fact a reprint from the plates of the Constable's edition.

I can hardly suppose that Constable gave the booksellers their assurance without your consent. It would help those booksellers (already sufficiently penalised) who are charged by their customers with a breach of faith, if you could arm them with a statement exonerating them from complicity.

Bernard Shaw would have none of **Basil Blackwell's** polite wheedling. He responded, October 25, 1934, like a hornet:

Dear Mr Blackwell,

In future, when a customer asks for a book of mine, say 'Thanks very much,' wrap the book up nicely in paper for him (or her), take the money, give the change, say 'Thanks very much' all over again, and bow the customer out.

If, out of pure gratuitous incontinence, you prefer to enter into conversation and give unsolicited assurances, of an obviously idiotic character, about my business intentions, you do it at your own risk; and it turns out subsequently that I never had any such intentions, you will have to exonerate yourself as best you can.

I have given Constable a letter to the effect that they took no part in *The Daily Herald* transaction except to oppose it with all their might. I can do nothing for the booksellers but to tell them not to be childish.

In America I have lately had two copies of 50,000 copies each from Book Clubs, to be given away to their members for nothing, as a bonus. Of course I accepted both.

I am looking forward to an order from Woolworths for a six-penny edition.

Would you, Basil, refuse any business if it came your way?

And have you no bowels of compassion for the millions of your fellow-countrymen who can no more afford a twelve and six-penny book than a trip round the world? You should see some of their letters.

I am really surprised at you. When we met at Bumpus's, you seemed quite an intelligent youth.

Faithfully etc.⁷

The resonance of the above hardly needs comment. In his time, **Sir Basil** survived the snub and the competition, and the bookshop prospered by leaps and bounds. Today his "good bookman" is alive and well, even if the *term* is arcane, and his bookshop will survive despite its competitors. Just as the **Great Bodleian Library** continues to provide physical books for the academic community, while displaying its wares for all to see, virtually, so **Blackwell's** remains a "book shop from a happy dream," habitual for anyone living in or passing through Oxford, whose stock can also be browsed, digitally, around the world. **Sir Basil's** mantle has long since passed to his sons and grandsons, but **Julian Blackwell**, in his ninth decade, is as determined as his father that "this building and this firm" will continue to be one of the "good things in life." He is doing everything possible to ensure that the experience of the physical bookshop will continue to be as rich a one as his father described, where the good reader is "as eager to read as to acquire these treasures." Whatever the competition, **Blackwell's**, in his father's words, "is a place where the individual products of the human spirit will not be regarded as merchandise to be handled in the bulk." Having the last word, **Sir Basil** liked to remind his colleagues, in the book trade, that it is the reader (or good bookman) who will be the judge. And the books and writings he left behind, which now contribute to the study of the History of the Book and can be found in the **Merton College and Bodleian Collections**, have much to contribute towards an informed judgment.

In the next installment **Rita Ricketts** will take us on a tour of **Sir Basil's** workroom, in his beloved Board Street shop. It was here that "bookmen" from all walks of life met and where **Blackwell's** own publications line the walls. 🌿

Endnotes

1. **Sir Basil Blackwell**, Minute Book of B. H. Blackwell Ltd, p 402, Merton Blackwell Collection.
2. **Zoe Wood**, *Guardian*, Thursday 5 April 2012.
3. **Basil Blackwell** — notes — MBC.
4. *The Guardian*, 6 April 2012.
5. **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All*, p 4 Blackwell's, Oxford, 2004
6. See **Rita Ricketts** *Adventurers All* and various copies and amendments of *The Good Bookman*, 1945, in the Merton Blackwell Collection (MBC).
7. The letters remain among **Sir Basil's** papers, and are printed in full in *The Publishers' Circular and The Publisher and Bookseller*, November 3, 1934, MBC.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com/2012/08/announcing-the-2012-harrassowitz-charleston-conference-scholarship-winner/>

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