

October 2016

International Dateline-Temple of the Muses

Rita Ricketts

Blackwell's Historian, Rita.Ricketts@bodleian.ox.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ricketts, Rita (2013) "International Dateline-Temple of the Muses," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 48.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6449>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

International Dateline — Temple of the Muses

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 Gaffer's Room: "the very soul of Blackwell's"

In her last installment, **Rita Ricketts** went back to the writings of the **Blackwells** to inform the debate about the future of physical bookshops. **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, opening his Broad Street shop in Oxford in 1879, wanted it to be a place for "intellectual exchange ... where the individual products of the human spirit will not be regarded as merchandise." When his son **Basil** took over in 1924 he saw its function similarly: as a place where writers and readers could come together in a "cultural partnership." There was nothing novel in this; bookshops had long provided this nexus. **Parker's** in Oxford was a free "gentlemen's club," and **James Lackington's** bookshop in eighteenth-century London became known as the "Temple of the Muses." Echoing his forebears in trade, **Tim Waterston** argues that "it is in physical bookshops that new authors (and publishers) build their customer base."¹ This does not, of course, deny that many relationships are now forged virtually through Internet booksellers and various social networks. Yet most of the world's famous bookshops, from **Unity Books** in New Zealand, **City Lights** in San Francisco, and **Shakespeare and Co.** in Paris, to mention just a few of the best, pride themselves on developing relationships in person, with and between customers and writers. Running exciting programmes of events and housing cafés which are talking shops every bit as vibrant as those that influenced intellectual life 300 years ago in the City of London, today's bookshops continue to provide a place where **Sir Basil's** "cultural partnerships" could thrive. In this episode **Rita Ricketts** looks at the history and geography of the workroom on the first floor of **Blackwell's** famous Oxford shop, where **Benjamin Henry**, and subsequently **Sir Basil**, received their customers and authors.

This simple workroom, which has been well-known for almost a century as the Gaffer's Room, was the hub of **Blackwell's** from the outset. Here **Benjamin Henry's** customers would find a sympathetic reception if they came either to talk about books or to offer their own lubrications with a view to publication. Holed up in this sanctum, after a long day of work

in the shop, **Benjamin Henry** would read and correct their submissions. Within months of opening his shop, **Benjamin Henry** produced his first publication: *Mensae Secundae, Verses Written in Balliol*. The American poet **Christopher Morley**, writing of his association with "Mr. Blackwell, of B. H. Blackwell's," recalled that he "made a habit of occasionally publishing collections of undergraduate verse." These "little booklets," he wrote, "were bound in paper and sold (if at all) for a shilling each." **Morley** remembered such volumes as *Ignes Fatui* and *Metri Gratia* by **Philip Guedalla** of **Balliol** and *Play Hours with Pegasus* by **A. P. Herbert** of **New College**.² Taking his cue from this more august company, **Morley** took the plunge and "risked submitting a little sheaf of his own rhymes." This, he remembered, was in October 1921 when **Benjamin Henry** was near the end of his days. But **Morley** was not disappointed. The elderly **Benjamin Henry** was as assiduous as ever and invited him "to discuss his work." "What I remember best of my bashful interview with Mr. Blackwell senior," **Morley** wrote, "besides his pink face and white hair and extreme politeness, was his asking me to put in some more commas."

He told **Morley** that he liked his poems but "there don't seem to be any commas in them. Perhaps you don't use commas much in America?"³ But **Mr. Blackwell's** bark was worse than his bite, and duly **Morley's** poems made their way onto the **B. H. Blackwell** list.

In the early days when **Benjamin Henry** brought his mother, and then his wife, to live over the Broad Street shop, he would take refuge in his workroom. Returning there after a simple supper, he endeavored to live up to the maxim that a day's

work had to be finished in a day, "not left until the 'morrow." Last thing at night, unraveling and folding, he habitually conserved the day's parcel string and packing paper. Finally, he would go down on his knees to say his prayers before creeping upstairs to bed. When his two children were born, in the bedroom above, the workroom temporarily became his wife's drawing room and a place for the children to play. Denied the run of the shop, the room became the focus of **Basil** and his sister **Dorothy's** childhood adventures and imaginings. Just looking out of the windows of this pleasant comfortable room



Pictured here is the Gaffer's Room.

was an exciting diversion for them. At the sound of music in the street below, **Dorothy**, three years **Basil's** elder, would "yank him up bodily so that he, too, could see the sights." He always remembered his sense of wonder at the spectacle of "the circus come to town": "there they all were, people in Moorish costume, **Britannia** in her chariot followed by those representing people from all parts of the British Empire going in procession down the street." At the start of a new term, too, there was pandemonium and diversion. "The din outside the windows was the result of horses' shoes and the iron-shod wheels of carts, coaches, and growlers grinding over the cobbles with which the street was paved." In the cabs "undergraduates, lounging back with all their impedimenta a-top" were being delivered to colleges and lodging houses. **Basil** remembered that "running behind each vehicle was a young hopeful who followed the equipage to its destination, with the prospect of earning a few coppers by carrying the toff's luggage up to his rooms."

When the **Blackwell** family moved to North Oxford, the room reverted to its former use. And as an adolescent, **Basil** took a keen interest in his father's literary callers. He would observe them as they either crept or swept up the stairs, depending on their stations, to the workroom. A favourite was **Dean Beeching**, who had been an undergraduate when the Broad Street shop opened in 1879. He had been able to publish his early poems thanks to **Benjamin Henry** and had long since become a close family friend. Just as important as the people and "names" who visited his father's room were the contents of the shelves that lined the walls, which proudly displayed his father's publications. This display, which gave would-be authors hope, was the start of **Basil's** own

continued on page 72



Pictured is Basil in his Broad Street Room.

interest in publishing. After his father's death **Basil** ensconced himself in the old workroom, where he proceeded to expand and develop the publishing house alongside bookselling. In many ways **Basil** was quite unlike his father; he was more daring, more impulsive, more sociable, and perhaps more of a risk taker. And, not surprisingly, the room played host to an incessant flow of academics, authors, customers, visitors from overseas, and friends whiling away an hour or two. But for all this, **Blackwell's** new Gaffer knew he had a serious business to run. Should he get distracted, he had only to look up at his father's portrait over the fireplace, and the cool, shrewd, dark-eyed gaze would steady him. In 1979 **Jan Morris** had interviewed **Sir Basil**, then aged ninety, in his room. She observed that "there was nothing ingenuous, or even nostalgic, to its ambience. From it, **Sir Basil** has created one of the most dynamic and progressive outfits in the entire book industry. Yet just as great restaurateurs often prefer to keep their check tablecloths and their grandmother's fish-kettles, so he likes to preserve at the apex of this forceful entity a savour of past times."

If the Gaffer should venture now from Elysium's Fields and seek the solace of his old room, its modesty would do little to remind him that it was from here that he had presided over an empire with a turnover of over £29 million a year by the centenary year of 1979. But the familiar books displayed on his shelves, examples from the various **Blackwell** imprints, would make him instantly at home. Once again he would be lost in the glories of English literature, which "had helped to shape the work of **Chaucer** and **Shakespeare**." That he was at home here, in what soon became known as the Gaffer's Room, impressed visitors and staff alike. Arriving each morning long before the shop opened to the public, the Gaffer would arrange a rose, grown by his wife in their Appleton garden, on his worktable and settle to the post. Dispatching its contents, he would emerge to escort visitors into his room. "Call me Gaffer" he would invite (he would seldom style himself "**Sir Basil**") as he treated them to a quick detour of the adjoining and ornate

Victorian bathroom, "still in full working order" with an authentic "Crapper," WC, and original Delft wall tiles, and the room above where he had been born. Having toured the "estate," he would start to pull down books and catalogues from the shelves. Drawing his visitors' attention to his "little volume" about bookselling, **Basil** would sit them down for a tutorial at this "unofficial college of the University." He would proudly discuss a recent publication seen through the press under his aegis: an edition of **Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae** perhaps, written by a Christian theologian in prison.

Although books were his mainstay, **Basil** was not averse to the latest technical gadgets. His room boasts an early switchboard, typical of **Blackwell's** innovatory bent, which today could be loaned out as a prop for a Second World War film. The black telephone, once state-of-art but long since made redundant by the Post Office, is only ever seen now as an ornament. On the wall is another poignant memento of a bygone age: a speaking tube through which **Sir Basil** used to communicate the day's orders to the counter staff some distance away. What the Gaffer would miss on any visitation would be the rariora he had collected around him, culled from a lifetime of communion with the learned: "La Venus sans bras cast in plaster, holding shadowy court in a corner behind the bookcase with.... an original block of a **William Morris** textile design (that had been presented to **Sir Basil** by **Sandersons**) still stained with woad and vermaille....; drawings of the half-timbered home of the **Shakespeare Head Press**, and a plaster bust of **A. H. Bullen**, its founder; on the desk a little commemorative silver pin-tray and a copy of a **Conan Doyle** historical novel." Thanks to the generosity of **Julian Blackwell** many treasured artifacts have found a permanent home at **Merton**, his father's beloved old College. But their absence would be more than made up for by the familiar **William Morris** wallpaper, *Powdered*; the original having been replaced with a reprint from the block first cut in 1874.⁴ The bookshelves and furnishings too are reminiscent of **Morris**, who **Sir Basil** had revered. They remain as they were first made, and fitted, by a local craftsman: "ordinary, utility furniture, but crafted."

Immediately beyond the Gaffer's room was the second hub of **Blackwell's**, the space where his secretary had been at his beck and call for the best part of eleven hours a day, and his "seniors" had hatched plans over tea and Chelsea Buns. Tea and coffee are still served in this area, in what has become the **Blackwell's** café. But the imbibers are a more leisurely breed: students of all ages in deep conversation, in deep thought, in mid-composition on their laptops, lounging on leather sofas lost in time or a book, probably as-yet-unpaid-for. This precedent of providing "some-where to sit" had long been established

at **Blackwell's**. The Firm's Minute Book of 1907 and the catalogue that was sent out to customers recorded: "A room has been opened upstairs, which may be found convenient by visitors wishing to examine books, write a note, or look through the literary papers; and may in some measure supply that lack of seating accommodation which, it is feared, ladies have sometimes found noticeable." It is here that hopeful young writers, many of whom are long forgotten, would have waited nervously to hear if they had received the Gaffer's endorsement, and earlier his father's. Now, outside the room, the latest generation of unpublished writers rub shoulders with the more established. Today's "names" are of a



Pictured here is the Gaffer's Room.

genre **Basil** hardly knew, except as a very old man: **Seamus Heaney**, **Tom Paulin**, **Jan Morris**, **Andrew Motion**, and **Geoffrey Hill**, to namedrop just a very few at the top of the lists. They walk unobtrusively, and usually unnoticed, in the footsteps of those who would have greeted aloud the Gaffer, in his time, as he climbed the stairs to his room.

Among the would-be writers, now famous, who had had their interviews in **Benjamin Henry's** time, were the likes of **Housman**, **Buchan**, **Rennell Rodd**, **J. St. Loe Strachey**, **MacKail**, **L. A. G. Strong**, **Sir Alan Gilbert**, **C. M. Bowra**, and other professors of poetry.⁵ Some claim that they were "launched" here, for example **Dean Beeching**, **J. R. R. Tolkien**, the **Huxleys**, the **Sitwells**, **Dorothy L. Sayers**, **Sir Alan Herbert**, **Geoffrey Faber**, **G. D. H. Cole**, **John Betjeman**, **Christopher Morley**, whose "Eight Sin" was published at one shilling and fetched at auction some \$60, and **Stephen Spender**. **Spender**, the Gaffer recalled, had from the start "intimations of immortality."⁶ All of them, going back to the first who visited **Benjamin Henry** in the 1880s, would find something familiar within or outside the present room. Its very simplicity, which does nothing to diminish the ethos of the **Blackwell** men, reminds the visitor of their humble origins; **Basil** was the first to point out that he was born above the room and that his grandfather, **Benjamin Harris**, who opened the first **Blackwell's**, was the son of a jobbing tailor in London's East End. **Benjamin Harris** would have felt just as at home here as he had been in his bookshop

continued on page 73



Pictured in this book is The Old Drawing Room.
Photo copyright Merton and Bodleian Oxford University.

in St. Clements, the offices of the **Temperance Society**, and the dimly-lit rooms of the Public Library where he had been its first Librarian. But he died young, and his son **Benjamin Henry** was of necessity forced to leave school early. He was nonetheless a classic autodidact, educating himself as he served his apprenticeship in other Oxford bookshops before re-establishing the name **B. H. Blackwell Bookseller**, over the door of the present Broad Street shop.

There are many from the Gaffer's time; he died in 1984, and a few who in infancy heard tell of his father still come into the shop and look up involuntarily as they pass the Gaffer's door. Its location at the top of the first flight of stairs still invokes the Gaffer, and if you ask for the Gaffer's Room not even the newest employee will be in any doubt as to its whereabouts. In the Gaffer's heyday this room seemed the centre of the universe, and now in its "retirement" it is a peaceful place more reminiscent of **Benjamin Henry's** inner sanctum. But as you come up what was once a Queen Anne staircase, the atmosphere and smell of bookselling still greet you as it did the Gaffer and his father. Come through the door, leaving behind the infamous Oxford traffic, the wind and rain, or the sun's brightness, and stand by the old fireplace. You may find yourself going back over a century to the time when the **Blackwell** children, **Basil** and **Dorothy**, played in this room, then their mother's sitting room. The view from the windows is not so different from the one they first knew. If you are young at heart, you might in your mind's eye see the circus procession coming down "The Broad," a sight **Basil** loved as a child. Out of the window are the same old Emperors of the Sheldonian and the same procession of visitors, customers, academics, and lifelong students. Undergraduates still appear much as they did to an American journalist before the Second World War: "they seldom carry books, and many of them have a vacant and unintelligent look, particularly when pedaling at high speed around corners and in front of automobiles on their antiquated bicycles."⁷

The Gaffer, not to be forgotten, is still sitting on his metaphorical bough among the books he published. Like the Cheshire Cat, as he described himself in 1971, **Basil** is watching what is happening.⁸ But the Cheshire Cat, even in his elevated position, had faded out, "starting with the tail and ending with the grin."⁹ But the memory of the old room where an autodidact and his more fortunate son built up a household name in the bookselling and publishing world will not fade. The Gaffer's Room in Broad Street was restored at the end of the 1990s and is open to the public. And from 2015 it is destined to be busy again. In memory of **Sir Basil Blackwell** and all **Blackwell's** staff, customers, and friends: past and present, old and new, it will be recreated in the **Blackwell Hall**; the thoroughfare of the restored **New Bodleian**, to be renamed

the **Weston Library**. Once again the publications begotten in the **Blackwells'** old room will be on display, together with some of their treasured artifacts and the books from **Sir Basil's** personal library. Once again it will be a resource for researchers, a place for would-be writers to find their muse, and for the casual traveler or adventurer to seek respite. Poets will come to read their work, hear that of others or find solace just as a heart-broken **Vera Brittain** had done during the First World War. **Basil Blackwell** would doubtless be pleased at all this effort to preserve the memory of the place he first knew as a child. But he would cast his first vote in favour of the preservation of the books. Books, he would have reminded us, are the life-blood of his trade, his ideas, and his dreams: "they provide the best chance of survival... they reveal the wisdom and the follies of ages past, to be our guides in years to come." Yet the books also invoke the soul of the man, the Gaffer.

It is to **Julian Blackwell** that we owe both the restoration of this room and, with **Bodley's** Librarian **Sarah Thomas**, and her deputy **Richard Ovenden**, the **Blackwell Hall**. It is their hope that visitors may not only enjoy the Gaffer's Room in the bookshop, but the opportunities that will be provided for both members of the University and the general public for their repose and continuing education in the **Blackwell Hall**. It is in the permanent book world of the **Bodleian** that the old working room of the **Blackwells** will survive for posterity. But it is perhaps the books themselves that provide the real timelessness of his family firm. When you visit Oxford, after 2015, pause awhile and reflect on the fact that "*All the glory of the world would be buried in oblivion unless god had provided mortals with the remedy of books.*"¹⁰ And who knows, on some serendipitous adventure in the Gaffer's Room or the Weston Library, you may draw your own muses from the **Blackwells**: "*Sumite castalios nigris de fontibus haustus.*"¹¹ You will find that the 'cultural partnership' between books, booklovers, and writers is alive and well, reaching out, digitally or in person, to a worldwide community where new generations will find their feet. You

BASCH Services for Libraries and Publishers
Subscriptions, Inc.

THE BASCH ADVANTAGE

- complete subscription management solutions
- a deliberate emphasis on service
- e-journal linkage & maintenance
- multiple platforms - for libraries and for corporate procurement
- BOSS (Basch Online Subscription System) for instant access to account information
- robust journal check-in module within BOSS
- support for print & electronic formats, memberships — domestic & foreign

BASCH SUBSCRIPTIONS, INC A Prenax Company
10 Ferry Street, Concord NH 03301 Ph 603.229.0662
www.basch.com

may, for example, read your latest work in the **Blackwell Hall**, just as many before you have in the shop. In the next installment **Rita Ricketts** writes of one such past encounter in the old **Blackwell** workroom, where **John Buchan** and his so-called Horace Club associates made their mark under the eagle eye of **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**. 🌿

Endnotes

1. *The Guardian*, 6 April 2012.
2. **Herbert** went on to campaign for the rights of authors, when, later, he was MP for Oxford, 1939-50.
3. An extract sent by **Jack Wolsdorf** from an essay, "Concerning the first edition of 'The Eight Sin'" by **Christopher Morley**, published by Colophon 1934, see **Blackwell's** Broad Sheet March 1985.
4. With presence of mind, **Julian Blackwell** had preserved a fragment of the original.
5. *Vogue* July 1950.
6. **Sir Basil Blackwell**, dictated memoir June 5 1963.
7. *Saturday Eve Post*, Phil, U.S., 7 April 1934.
8. Interview with the Columbus Dispatch, Tuesday, September 7, 1971.
9. **Ved Mehta**, Oxford and the Gaffer, Books and bookmen, January 1972, p 16.
10. **Richard de Bury**.
11. op cit, **Hilaire Belloc**.