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International Dateline — A Nest of Singing Birds

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>

"I sing of vain guests and the Grave – Fools tremble afraid..." — John Buchan

In the last installment we visited the Gaffer's Room, in **Blackwell's** famous Broad Street shop. It was in this room that **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, joined by his son **Basil** in 1911, developed the publishing side of the business. Today their published progeny furnish the Gaffer's Room, inhabit two Oxford Collections (*Merton Blackwell Collection* and *Bodleian Blackwell Collection*) and will continue to do so in perpetuity, in the **Blackwell Hall of the Weston Library**; to be opened by the Queen in 2015. This latest episode tells us of a group of young would-be poets who regarded **Benjamin Henry** as a mentor. Among them was **John Buchan**, who had not as yet any idea of his future adventures on the thirty-nine steps; still less that his creation, **Richard Hannay**, would be a prototype for the insouciant and long-lived **James Bond**.¹

A temple of the muses in its heyday, **Mr. Blackwell's** shop drew writers known and unknown to fame to its door. Those itching to see their lucubrations in print pinned their hopes on **Benjamin Henry**, and later his son **Basil**. In contrast to the establishment **Houses** in London, and **OUP** in Oxford, the **Blackwells** were receptive to the untried and untested. **Benjamin Henry's** own early struggles, **Basil Blackwell** recorded, predisposed him "to remove from new writers the reproach of insolvency." In so doing, the publishing side made next to no profit for many years. The resulting goodwill, however, was incalculable. "My father," **Sir Basil Blackwell** wrote, had a "deep reverence for scholarship and literature and a natural affinity with scholars and men of letters."² Even in his very first year of business, in 1879, this desire to be associated with scholarship led **Benjamin Henry** to risk a publishing adventure of his own. My father, **Basil** wrote, "soon divined that there were some brilliant young men at **Balliol**." This "divining" resulted in the appearance of the first title issued under the **B. H. Blackwell** imprint, some verses from **Balliol** students (men) sewn into a slim brown paperback entitled *Mensae Secundae*. **Benjamin Henry** remained dogged in the defence of new writing, ignoring fashion and the critics. "When he first published the yearly anthology, *Oxford Poetry*," wrote **Basil Blackwell**, "...people laughed, no doubt. That was before the (First) War, and it is still going strong." It continues, but not under the **Blackwell** imprint, as a well-known and much-collected series, and is still the preserve of undergraduates.

During **Benjamin Henry's** time, a contribution had come his way from one of the most famous of **B. H. Blackwell's** alumni, **Ronald Tolkien**. Years later, writing from his study in **Merton** and momentarily relinquishing his lands of myths and hobbits, **Tolkien** reminded **Basil Blackwell** of this fact. His first published

poem "Goblin Feet" had seen the light of day in a 1915 issue of *Oxford Poetry*: "So you (**Blackwell's**) were my first publisher," he wrote, "as I remember with gratitude."³ A quarter of a century before **Tolkien**, other literary luminaries had made their mark at the hands of **Benjamin Henry**. At the head of the queue in 1879 came the **Balliol** poets, reputed to be a nest of singing birds, led by the poet, scholar and future Bishop, **Henry Charles Beeching**. Described as the "wisest and wittiest of contemporaries," **Beeching** was the moving spirit in **Benjamin Henry's** new publishing enterprise, with **Bowyer Nichols** as accessory.⁴ After **Oxford**, **Beeching** stayed in close contact with his publisher. As a village clergyman, he edited an elegant reprint of **George Herbert's** *The Country Parson* for **Benjamin Henry**. Most famously he collaborated with **Robert Bridges** and **H. E. Wooldridge** to produce the *Yatterton Hymnal* (words and music).⁵ Arguably this was the most notably work to bear the **B. H. Blackwell** imprint, having an influence way beyond the rural parish for which it had been prepared. And **Vaughn William's** *English Hymnal* owed much to it. **Sir Basil's** childhood memory of **Beeching**, who had become a close family friend, was of his "telling us *en famille* that his first infant utterance was 'beastly bath.'" **Basil's** father, no doubt, would have had happy memories of those, like **John Buchan**, whom **Beeching** had brought to his door.

It is not well known that the young **John Buchan**, who went on to combine a literary career with one in public life that culminated with the post of Governor-General of Canada, made his literary debut through the good offices of **Mr. Blackwell**. When **Benjamin Henry** first encountered **John Buchan**, he was a promising undergraduate at **Brasenose**, having started his degree at **Glasgow**. The son of a Free Church Minister in Scotland, whose stipend left little to spare, he was much to the sober **Benjamin Henry's** taste. **Benjamin Henry** published his University work, the *Stanhope and Newdigate Prizes*, and then his early poems, which appeared in a volume put together on behalf of the so-called *Horace Club*. This esoteric club was the brainchild of **Arnold Ward**, a third-year undergraduate at **Balliol**. **Balliol**, at the time, was acknowledged as the intellectual heart of the university and **Ward** came with a writing

pedigree and a radical palette. His mother, the novelist **Mrs. Humphrey Ward**, was the grand-daughter of **Arnold**, the famous Head of Rugby, and the niece of **Matthew Arnold**. She was very much an Oxford character, living there when religious liberalism supplanted Catholic Tractarianism. In her novels, **Robert Elsmere** for example, she deliberately uses fiction to discuss religious problems. **Arnold**, however, was more in the mould of his grandfather, and had just won the Chancellor's Prize for his Latin verse. Having a liking for the lyric verse of **Horace**, **Ward** invited seven of his associates to join him in the formation of a club devoted to this genre.

The *Club* came into being on the 15 March 1895, when **Ward** invited seven men to his rooms. In addition to **Buchan**, **Ward's** associates were **Hilaire Belloc**, also a **Balliol** man and already entering the literary annals with the imminent publication of his first book: *Verses and Sonnets* 1895; **St. John Lucas**, from *University*; **Nowell Smith**, an avid Wordsworthian (who later edited the letters of

Sydney Smith); **Herbert Warren** (President of *Magdalen*); **James Williams** (Bursar and law coach at *Lincoln*) and **Professor F. York Powell** (Professor of Modern History). As **Sir Basil Blackwell** later recorded, "this was a literary club with a difference. Each (poet) was bound to produce and read to his fellows a poem written for the occasion in a well-known language, on separate sheets of paper, and not exceeding in length, not falling below in brevity, any poem of *Horace* (excluding the *De Arte Poetica*)."⁶ Important though the literary exercise was, the social side was not to be a mere convenience. Typical of the rituals of the more-leisured style of University life in Victorian Oxford, members of such clubs devised elaborate codes of conduct to govern proceedings. The rules of the *Horace Club* demanded the election of a President, and each meeting was to be presided over by an Arbiter chosen by the assembled company. Any outsider, attempting to infiltrate this rarefied company, had to pass muster with the Arbiter, who could exercise his veto. Keeping the circle exclusive, members were forbidden to invite guests on the spur of the moment. At the first meeting, **Herbert Warren** was elected President and **Arnold Ward** the first Arbiter. Subsequently Arbiters were to be chosen by lot with **John Buchan** the first of these. **Buchan**, alone of the Arbiters, invited women to attend.

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While the President's role was titular, the Arbiter arranged the next meeting. He invited members to read their poems in an order determined by lot, and footed the bill for any expenses incurred during his term of office. From his own coffers, he provided wine, water and cigarettes; members were bidden to bring nuts and fruit. Despite the influence of **Bacchus**, provision was to be made for the more reserved of souls. Shy members, it was agreed, may circulate their offerings rather than read them aloud. There was advice too for the light-hearted: "*Hor Sat 1* was to serve as the limit of comic vein." And plagiarisers had to beware: translations were not allowed. In the nature of such events, or readings, the *Club's* habitués met "not to discuss others' works, but to rehearse their own."⁶ Seeking someone to keep a weather eye on the proceedings, and doubtless to reign in egos, the *Club* astutely turned to **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**. And who better to sit in attendance and "keep the records" than that great "listener to poets?" Duly appointed "Keeper of the Records," **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** found succour among the very scholars, poets and writers he strove to help in his business life. For their part members of the *Club* accepted **Benjamin Henry**, always known simply as "**Mr. Blackwell**" even amongst his closest acquaintances, as being as near to a scholar as any self-educated man could be. Through no fault of his own, **Benjamin Henry** had been denied a formal education. His father **Benjamin Harris**, who opened the first **B. H. Blackwell** bookshop just across Magdalen Bridge in 1846 and was also the founding librarian of the newly-opened **Oxford Public Library**, died young from overwork.

Forced to leave school at the age of thirteen, **Benjamin Henry** began a bookselling apprenticeship as lengthy as **Jacob's** was to **Laban**. All the while he taught himself French, Latin and Greek, committed huge chunks of English poetry by heart on early runs around Christ Church Meadows and, as a long-serving chorister, steeped himself in church music. With hard work, thrift and a network of contacts in the second-hand and antiquarian book trade, **Benjamin Henry** was able "to open on his own account" a small bookshop, on New Year's Day 1879.⁷ From the first the shop was a success, a haven where booklovers from all walks of life could browse undisturbed. Above all it was **Benjamin Henry's** capacity to take infinite pains that made **Blackwell's**. The shop soon gained an edge on its much longer established competitors **Parker's** and **Thornton's**, also in the Broad. In no time a visit to **Mr. Blackwell's**, "the literary man's house of call," became an established custom. Surprisingly, it proved to be a bigger draw than its next-door neighbours: the **White Horse Public House**, the riding stables, the headquarters of the **Churchman's Union** behind the shop and the boxing coach's rooms where students could safely put the gloves on.⁸ Intermittently, browsers in the shop would be aware of "rapid footfalls and alarming spuds."

Eschewing, in the main, the more boisterous or devout occupations afforded by the south side of Broad Street, students and academics from around the world came through the front door of **Blackwell's**. "It is on record that the American writer **Oliver Wendell Holmes**," emerging from the **Bodleian** clutching an honorary degree, made straight for **Mr. Blackwell's**. "Finding a copy of his *Poet at the Breakfast Table* (2 Volumes), he autographed it and presented it to the proprietor." Although the pull for new undergraduates, the likes of **Ward** and his **Balliol** and "*Horace*" contemporaries, may have been the prospect of publication, rather than as regular book-buying customers, **Blackwell's** stock was an enticement and competitively priced. It was an ideal place to gain inspiration, and less rigid than the **Bodleian**. **Blackwell's** booksellers were also on hand to act as unpaid research assistants. By **Buchan's** time, **Blackwell's** stocked over 10,000 titles. New books featured alongside their second-hand rivals, and soon tipped the balance of sales. There was something to appeal to "all tastes and all ages": poetry, drama, religion, history, biography, foreign language texts, reference books (the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in twenty-four volumes), almanacs and annuals, including one for football! If we had followed **Buchan** around the shelves we would have seen 1,500 titles by established novelists and newer works by **Hardy**, **Kipling**, **Meredith**, **Lytton**, **Lever**, **Harrison Ainsworth**, **F. Marion Crawford**, **Marie Corelli**, **Hall Caine** and many others long since forgotten. A more expensive selection of scientific and general volumes was also on view. **Blackwell's** was the fortunate recipient of some 800 volumes of overflow, some containing the bookplate of **James Gibb** architect of the **Radcliffe Camera**, when **Dr. Radcliffe's** "Physic Library" was re-housed in the newly-built University museum in Parks Road, Oxford.

B. H. Blackwell's "Catalogue No 1" reveals the extent of choice that would have tempted the bookish members of the *Horace Club*, even the less well-off like **Buchan**. While the classics took precedence, the shelves were also graced by a number of nineteenth-century texts, and grammars and dictionaries were the stock-in-trade of undergraduates. At the top end of the market were a few very fine earlier editions, including two **Aldines** (5s and 5s 6d.) and a **Baskerville** (5s). Over two-thirds of the items in the catalogue were less than 5s, only forty-five cost over a £1 and these were often in two volumes. **Mr. Blackwell's** love of Oxford also shaped his choice of books. A large selection of books included **Loggan's Oxonia Illustrata** (1675), which at £5 was the most expensive single volume. For the book

collector were **Piranesi's Le Antichita Romane** (1756) in four volumes at £5.10s and a first edition of **Hobbes Leviathan** (1651) at 18s. But of all these, it was the Latin texts that **Benjamin Henry** favoured. And just as he nurtured and encouraged his young undergraduate friends in their study, so he determined his own son would follow them. Remembering that the father of the original *Horace*, also a tradesman, had sent his son to Rome and Athens for an education equal to that of an upper class Roman of the time, the **Blackwells**, **Benjamin Henry** and his school teacher wife **Lilla**, aspired to an Oxford education for their son. Like **Buchan**, **Basil Henry Blackwell**, started his education at a local dame school; both depended on scholarships for higher education. Duly **Basil** won a scholarship (postmastership) to **Merton College Oxford**, in 1906, and by the time of

his death he was hailed as one of the best-read men in England.⁹ But his father, **Benjamin Henry**, is much less well known; especially his role as a publisher.

When **Benjamin Henry** published his *Book of the Horace Club*, in June 1901, it featured **Hilaire Belloc's** "rebus" design with the motto: *Sumite castalios nigris da fontibus haus-tus*, which stands as a continuing reminder of **Mr. Blackwell's** importance.¹⁰ But "**Mr. Blackwell**," perhaps scarred by his early poverty and lack of formal education,

always dipped out of the limelight. He forbore to mention that he was the Black Well source from which many poets (*Horace Club* members included) had drawn their draughts. At the time of his death, however, he belatedly received some public approbation. The *Daily Mail* had pronounced that: "**Blackwell** did a very great service to Oxford in providing encouragement and a chance of publicity to young writers."¹¹ **Benjamin Henry**, though, like the *Horace Club*, is all but forgotten, but not so many of its names. In addition to the early "**Ward**" group, described above, were other "*Horace*" poets who have not languished in **George Eliot's** unmarked graves. **Raymond Asquith**, son of the Prime Minister, a poet in English, Latin and Greek; **A. M. Herbert**, politician and linguist; **A. C. Medd**, poet and fellow of All Souls; **E. Wright**, writing poetry in English and French, Vice-Principal of **Brasenose**, **Dr. F. W. Bussell**; **Harold Baker**, a Craven scholar in the company of **H. E. Butler**, a future Newdigate prize winner; **A. E. Zimmern**, a Professor of International Relations at Oxford; **A. D. Godley**, writer of humorous verse in Latin, Greek and English; **J. S. Phillimore**, of Christ Church, who went to **Glasgow** as Professor of Greek; **L. R. F. Oldershaw**, university actor and future founder of a coaching establishment at **Maidenhead**; **St.**

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John Lucas, of University, a barrister, novelist and editor of the *Oxford Books of Italian and French verse*; the **Rev. A. G. Butler**, a headmaster of **Haileybury** and a Dean of **Oriel**, who wrote drama and verse.

While all of the above contributed poems to the *Horace Club*, except **Bussell, Oldershaw**, and **Zimmern**, the honorary members were mostly just that. They comprised the **Hon. Maurice Baring**, diplomat and man of letters; **Professor Courthope** (Professor of Poetry at **Oxford** and Civil Service Commissioner); **J. Meade Faulkner**, industrialist, author, poet and local historian; **Sir Ronald Rodd K.C.M.G.**, diplomat, poet and author of books of classical subjects; **Owen Seaman**, poet, satirist, professor of Literature and editor of *Punch*; **Laurence Binyon**, art historian and poet; and **T. Humphrey Ward** father of the founder and donor of the “*Horace*” urn. None of these attended a meeting or contributed a poem. But there were contributions from “outsiders”: **Professor Hardie of Edinburgh University** contributed two Latin poems, **F. Y. Eccles** contributed one without attending a meeting and two Cambridge men, **Maurice Baring** and **Owen Seaman**, were admitted. Whatever their association, insider or stranger, the “*Horace*” poets played with similar themes and feelings, from love to war and death and the intransigence of politicians. They hark back perhaps to **Oxford’s** role in the English Civil War. **John Buchan** in his first “*Horace*” effort sung of

....lost hopes and old kings
And the maids of the past.
Ye may shiver adread at my strings,
But ye hear them at last.
I sing of vain guests and the Grave —
Fools tremble afraid...¹²

Yet the Collection has also strong resonance for the present generation of student poets, coming now to Oxford from many walks of life, cultures and continents. Even now they still have time, as in the words of **Arthur Ward**, to sit “in the sun and in the shade, scholar and athlete fleet the time, and search the truth.”¹³ And to help them in their quest **Arthur Ward** had invoked *Horace*:

*Horace, of old thou sangst: ‘From this earth
I shall not wholly die.....
Then teach us this thy art, whose works do stir
afresh the air of Rome....’*¹⁴

By 1901 the *Club* had dwindled to two members, a victim of the natural, transient cycle of student life. And perhaps the accidental breakage of the *Horace* urn was a portent? Presented by **Ward’s** father, the urn had presided over all the “*Horace*” meetings; from its not so *silvern* form the cycle of lots of readers had been drawn. But despite its short life and long obscurity, the *Horace Club* put several young writers, such as **John Buchan**, on the road to fame. This was just one way, among many others, claimed **Sir Basil**, that “the House of **Blackwell** acted as a literary accoucheur to many a young genius,” with names such as **J. W. Mackail**, **Gilbert Murray**, **Hilaire Belloc**, **John Buchan**, **Maurice Baring**, **Laurence Binyon** and **Robert Bridges** adorning publications in the earlier years. Happily the early efforts of **Ward** and his illustrious *Horace Club* associates, such as **Beeching** and **Buchan**, are not lost. Their poems saw the light of day under the **B. H. Blackwell** imprint. Assisted and encouraged by **Beeching**, the only fully active honorary member of the *Horace Club*, **Benjamin Henry** compiled *The Book of the Horace Club*. Of the sixty-three poems printed, from the original ninety-five, six were in Latin, two in Greek, one in French and the remainder in English. Making the final selection, under the guiding hand of “**Mr. Blackwell**,” **Beeching** included five of his own poems, the best of which is probably *Fatherhood*. When *The Book of the Horace Club* first made its appearance in the Autumn of 1901, the reviewers were kind. *The Times*, no less, judged it “almost invidious to select where almost everything of its kind is good.” Other reviewers rather predictably gave pride of place to the already famous “names,” but space was found to praise **Asquith**, **Belloc** and **Buchan**. Only five hundred copies of the book were published, and it became a highly prized collector’s item commanding a top price on the second-hand book market. Bound in white calf volumes, copies are to be found in the **Merton College Library** and the **Bodleian**.

For many years, until the rediscovery of the *Club’s* records in the **Blackwell** archives, *The Book of the Horace Club* was the only reminder of its short but sparkling life of three years. That it was ever published at all was a result of **Benjamin Henry’s** husbandry. In his meticulous way this man of few words had preserved the autographed copies of each of the poems, presented by “*Horace*” members at each meeting, which he had pasted into the two Kelmscott folios purchased by the *Club*. Some eighty years later **Sir Arthur Norrington** confided to his old friend **Sir Basil** that these records, “serving as a moving monument to Victorian wit and scholarship,” were a tribute to **Benjamin Henry**, who had been welcomed as an equal and much esteemed. If nothing else, his *The Book of the Horace Club*, published only eleven years after the launch of his small publishing house, stands as a fine example of co-operation between academia and trade. **Benjamin Henry** himself saw no gulf. Even if he suspected it, he would have no truck with those who sought to create a divide between town and gown. The cooperation between **Ward**, **Beeching**, other “*Horace*” poets and **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** certainly bridged any divide. It was one of the many positive associations which encouraged **Sir Basil Blackwell** to set out on further publishing adventures, when **Crompton Mackenzie**, **Julian** and **Aldous Huxley**, **Christopher Morley**, **Dorothy Sayers**, **Edith Sitwell**, **Wilfred Owen** and many more were added to **Blackwell’s** lists. These too have become part of literary history, but looking again at their predecessors, the last Victorians such as the *Horace* poets, helps to link “that earlier period with the younger writers of today and tomorrow.”¹⁵ For them, there are many treasures to plunder in the **Blackwell** archives.

Side by side in the Archives, and having no side, are stories of the privileged and the unprivileged. In the next instalment, in contrast to what must seem like the rarefied life of the *Horace Club* members, we take a further look at the life of the autodidact, antiquarian bookseller and devout **Quaker Rex King**. 🌿

Thanks to the executors of the will of Miles Blackwell, Sir Basil’s grandson, and the generosity of Julian Blackwell, Sir Basil’s son, the original folios of the Horace Club and other associated papers now form part of the Merton Blackwell Collection (MBC) deposited in Merton College Library, University of Oxford. The Collection was formally inaugurated in January 2004 to mark the 125 anniversary of the opening of Blackwell’s in Broad Street Oxford. — RR

Endnotes

1. A version of this story was written by **Michael Haslet** and **Rita Ricketts** for the **John Buchan Society**, Spring 2004; another by **Rita Ricketts** for the **Balliol Record**. **Michael Haslet** was one of the first formal “readers” of the *Horace* papers in the **MBC**.
2. **Sir Basil Blackwell**, from his own notes on the firm’s centenary, dated 6 September 1979.
3. Letter, **Professor J. R. R. Tolkien**, signed **Ronald Tolkien**, to “My dear **Blackwell**,” July 5 1973.
4. All the way through the early accounts books there is evidence of the costs of production for *Mensae Secundae*, 2 pounds 8 shilling and ten pence in January 1880, for example, but nowhere a sign of any profit!
5. Several Editions from 1895.
6. **A. L. P. Norrington**, *A History of a family firm, Blackwell* 1983, p 25.
7. Diaries of **Benjamin Henry** see *A Guide to the Merton Blackwell collection*, **Reid, Ricketts** and **Walworth**, **Merton College Oxford**, January 2004.
8. *Oxford Magazine* 1939.
9. *Times*, 11 April 1984.
10. *Oxford Magazine*, 1939.
11. *Daily Mail*, 12 November 1924.
12. **John Buchan**, May 1898, second poem in the first folio of the *Horace* records, **Merton Blackwell Collection**.
13. The first poem presented to **Arthur Ward** for the *Horace Club*; the author could not in fact attend the first meeting of the *Horace Club* on 11 May 1898.
14. **Arthur Ward’s** first poem as above, for the first “*Horace*” meeting, 11 May 1898.
15. *Books To Come*, April 1948.