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International Dateline-A Nest of Singing Birds

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Beyond the Insouciant and Long-Lived

The poet, scholar and future Jurist Sir Basil Blackwell, who had that “wisest and wittiest of contemporaries,” Beeching, the moving spirit in Benjamin Henry’s first 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 Borrow’s The Country Parson for Benjamin Henry. Most famously he collaborated with Robert Bridges and H. E. Wooldridge to produce the Yattendon Hymnal (words and music). 4 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 Vaughan 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.’” 2 Basil’s father, no doubt, would have had happy memories of Basil’s utterance was ‘beastly bath.’”

It is not well known that the young John Buchan, who went on to combine a literary career with one in public life which culminated with the post of Governor-General of Canada, made his literary debut through the good offices of Mrs. Humphrey Ward. 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 15th 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. The first Arbiter, 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).” Important though the literary exercise was, the social side was not to be a mere convention. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests. 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, members were forbidden to invite guests.

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 relishing 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.” 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 continued on page 82

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Eschewing, in the main, the more boisterous or devout occupations afforded by the south side of Broad Street, students and academicians from around the world came through the front door of Blackwell’s. “It is on record that the American writer Oliver Wendell Homes,” emerging from the Bodleian clutching a 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, dramp, religion, history, biography, foreign language texts, reference books (the *Encyclopedia 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 texts, 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.

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When Benjamin Henry published his *Book of the Horace Club*, in June 1901, it featured Hilaire Belloc’s “rebus” design with the motto: *Simile casuista nigris da fortibus haus tus*, which stands as a continuing reminder of Mr. Blackwell’s importance. 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 Blackwell 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.” 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, poet; and 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. F. Zimmer, a Professor of International Relations at Oxford; A. D. Godley, writer of humorous verse in Latin, Greek and English; J. S. Philimore, 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. continued on page 83
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 Norrisington 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.

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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.
4. All the way through the early accounts books there is evidence of the costs of production for Mensae Secondae, 2 pounds 8 shilling and ten pence in January 1880, for example, but nowhere a sign of any profit!
5. Several Editions from 1895.
11. Daily Mail, 12 November 1924.
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.