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Rita Ricketts

Bodleian Visiting Scholar, Rita.Ricketts@bodleian.ox.ac.uk

Lydia Weyers

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

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International Dateline — Worlds Apart

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>

and **Professor Lydia Wevers, ONZM** (Distinguished Literary Historian, Director of the Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand)

Introduction

When **Kipling** visited New Zealand in 1891, he famously described Auckland as “last, loneliest, love-liest.” Travelling around both the North and South Islands, he discovered that the distance, from England, had made New Zealanders’ “yarn power” distinctive.¹ But *what they read* put them straight back on Britain’s doorstep. **Rita Ricketts** and **Lydia Wevers** explore the similarities, and differences, of two special collections: one housed at the **Victoria University of Wellington** (New Zealand), the other at **Oxford University** (Britain).² The **Brancepeth** collection consists of some 2,000 books, which, together with their purpose-built wooden cases, was donated to **Victoria University of Wellington** by **Hugh Beetham** in 1966. He was the grandson of **William Beetham** who had left England to set up a sheep station in the North Island of New Zealand. The archives of the farm remain in situ. The **Blackwell Collections** comprise the library of **Sir Basil Blackwell**, gifted to the **Bodleian Library** by **Julian Blackwell** in 2006, archives gifted to **Merton College, University of Oxford**, by **Julian Blackwell** in 2003 and publishing papers and back copies donated to the **Bodleian** by **Wiley Blackwell**, 2007. It may seem that the **Brancepeth** and **Blackwell** collections are worlds apart, but they have interesting elements in common. The progenitors of both collections (**William Beetham**, 1809-88 and **Benjamin Harris Blackwell**, 1813-55) were Englishmen, whose families came from “trade.” **William Beetham** emigrated to New Zealand, where his son established a subscription library on their farm. **Benjamin Harris Blackwell** was the founding librarian of Oxford’s public library, 1854. His son made a collection of books that he used to start a bookshop. The bookshop flourished and *his* son was able to stock his own private library.

A preliminary comparison of the collections suggests that readers at **Brancepeth**, whether owners (the **Beetham** family), farm workers, Wairarapa Maori or swaggers seeking shelter, shared much the same enthusiasm for reading as those who attended at Oxford’s new public library or, later on, frequented **Blackwell’s** bookshop.³ Reading was no longer an elite preoccupation.⁴ Seeing this had, perhaps, prompted the **Beethams** to sponsor their farm’s library. But while the **Blackwells** were active in the education of their workers, albeit that it should be “suitable,” the **Beethams** provided works of fiction to encourage literacy, which would enable the workers to content

themselves during their leisure hours — short as they would have been. The **Beethams’** station clerk, **John Vaughan Miller**, born in England, was a more diligent and ambitious reader. His diary stands out in relation to the **Brancepeth** collection, just as **William King’s** does in the **Blackwells’** — **King** was a bookseller’s assistant at **Blackwell’s**. Their diaries, rare finds, illustrate how an intellectual life could be pursued under less than promising circumstances. Both diaries offer a critical portrait of the situated reader, which extended out to their social contexts. Taken together, they provide valuable material for historians, who must surely count themselves lucky to be able to call on special collections in libraries across the world.

An English Education

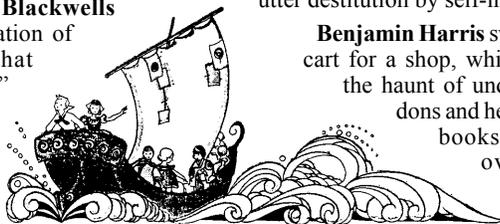
William Beetham, born three years before **Benjamin Harris Blackwell**, was a portrait painter who exhibited at the **Royal Academy** and was commissioned to paint a number of notable figures in England and later colonial New Zealand. Driven by the financial burden of seven sons and three daughters and an ambition to settle his sons on the land, **William** took his family to New Zealand in 1856 after a protracted debate about which colony to choose. **Benjamin Harris**, whose father was a jobbing tailor in London, also had aspirations. He, too, emigrated, but only as far as Oxford. He must have been bookish, and it seems likely that he helped out in the library of a London branch of the Teetotalers, where his father was a leading light. Having no intention of becoming a tailor, he may have followed in the footsteps of **Edwin Spears**, whose father attended the same church as the **Blackwells**; **Spears** was making a success of a bookshop cum licensed victualler’s in Oxford. **Benjamin Harris** set off for Oxford with little more than a handcart’s worth of books, hoping to set up a circulating library. Workers’ clubs also provided reading rooms, and shops, often selling wines and spirits or stationery, haberdashery and bric-a-brac, sold the new, cheaper, editions of books and often had a subscription book club. In 1850 the (English) Public Library Act made provision for free public libraries.⁵ Couched in High Victorian rhetoric, its aims were “that knowledge should triumph over ignorance” to become “the means of enlightenment against utter destitution by self-improvement.”

Benjamin Harris swapped his handcart for a shop, which soon became the haunt of undergraduates and dons and he started to export books to universities overseas, first to the U.S. Having also made

a name for himself promulgating teetotalism and worker education, he was selected as the first librarian of Oxford City’s newly opened public library. During the library’s first year over 13,000 books were issued for reference, and read by a daily (mostly nightly) attendance of over 400. The sight of so many men eager for self-betterment must have gladdened **Benjamin Harris**. As a child he had witnessed unskilled men fighting for even half a days work, **William Beetham**, growing up in an industrial town, Doncaster, must have also witnessed the struggle of working people to improve their lives in the midst of hardship and unemployment. Arriving in New Zealand at just the time free public libraries were springing up in England, **William Beetham** may have thought of setting up a collection of books to add to the collection he brought with him, but his sons certainly did, establishing the **Brancepeth Library** sometime in the late 1870s. Judging by the absence of self-help books in the **Brancepeth** catalogue, it seems unlikely that the **Beethams’** primary motive was autodidact education, but they were interested in worker literacy.

During **William’s** childhood displaced farm labourers workers had poured into the factories of new industrial towns like his own. But they were not likely to share in **Adam Smith’s** wealth of nations, and employers feared that they would be willing conscripts for revolutionary foot soldiering. American and French revolutions still weighed on the establishment’s mind, and books, such as **Paine’s Rights of Man**, of which more than a million and a half copies were in circulation in England, might, it was feared, radicalise.⁶ The *Bible* and **Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress** suggested that people should accept their lot, but **Blake’s** poetry delivered a stirring exhortation to build a New Jerusalem. **William Beetham** may have heard his parents talk of the Luddite riots, 1811-16, and the Peterloo Massacre, 1819 and the library contains a number of anti-Jacobin novels. Anti-Jacobins panicked when, in the mid 1830s Chartist pamphlets urged workers to combine (unionise), to demand parliamentary reform and the extension of the franchise. But could literacy necessarily be equated with radicalism? **Robert Altick** argues that education subjugated, rather than radicalised.⁷ It certainly did not improve their condition. Small wonder then, as **Kipling** wrote “... men depart/To seek the Happy Isles” (of New Zealand).⁸ **Samuel Parnell**, an English carpenter who arrived in Petone (Wellington) in 1938, won the right to an eight-hour day. It was a decade before the Ten-Hour bill, restricting hours of work in textile factories, passed in England, and even then it was not strictly enforced.

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Perhaps the **Beethams**, liberal though they were — in her research **Wevers** found evidence that they enjoyed excellent relations with the Maori, from whom their land was leased, and **Hugh Beetham** was well-known for his fluency in Maori — feared that too much education might produce “firebrands who would rock the tractors.” The **Blackwells**, even though they did much to improve their employees’ education and working conditions, would not tolerate a union shop: they held firmly to a love us or leave us policy when it came to industrial relations. For the **Blackwells** and **Beethams**, education, it seems, was a matter of appropriateness. Even by the 1940s, when the provision of state-funded education was almost universal in the UK, as the **Blackwell** publishing papers revealed, **Basil Blackwell** (**Benjamin Harris’s** grandson) and **John Betjeman** discussed what type of poetry to give non-scholarship, mostly working class, children to read. Was this evidence of class prejudice? The **Beethams** had certainly joined New Zealand’s “landed gentry.” **Benjamin Harris’s** son **Benjamin Henry Blackwell**, as his business prospered, set his family up in a large house in the new and very genteel enclave of North Oxford, giving his son **Basil** a university (Oxford) education in classics. **Beetham**, unlike **Basil**, did not join the family business, but they shared the same “cultural” landscape. He supported his wife **Mary**, and their ten children, through commissioned portrait work; he had exhibited at the **Royal Academy** by the age of 25 and is said to have painted at the court of the Tsar in St Petersburg. Making a living by portraiture went hand in hand with **Basil Blackwell’s** business of furnishing houses with books.

Good Readers

William Beetham did not live at **Brancepeth**, which was run by his sons, but the grand family house still holds the collection of books the **Beethams** brought out with them. These include editions of Latin and Greek classics, prize books, some religious books, poetry, some novels, histories, atlases and several manuals which instructed the **Beetham** boys in practical skills needed on the farm-carpentry, power generation, water systems, animal management.⁹ There is a record of the books collected by **Benjamin Henry**, while apprenticed to a bookseller, which also feature Greek and Latin classics amongst “modern” poetry, history and biography. He had acquired a copy of **Keble’s Christian Year**, an 1874 edition bound in calf, in exchange for a pack of cards and four pence! He used this “library” as security to take a lease on a small shop in Oxford’s Broad Street.¹⁰ It was his son, **Sir Basil Blackwell** (1889-1984), who established the collection now housed in the **Bodleian’s Weston Library**, and it was **William’s** son, **Hugh**, with his wife **Ruth**, who set up the subscription library at **Brancepeth**. It was for the use of family, friends and local people as well as workers on the sheep station, permanent and seasonal. Subscriptions were £1 per annum,

paid quarterly — rather expensive given that weekly wages on the station, even by the 1890s, ranged from 15s to 25s. The farm ledgers provide a record of who paid subscriptions, their occupation and income. Not all readers, however, were subscribers — the governess for example, is recorded as using the library frequently, and there were certainly friends and family of workers who borrowed copies from subscribers.

In its heyday, from 1884-1904, the farm had a population of over 300, and the library was well used, and abused. The books are stained, battered, torn and wax-spotted from candles, and several have scorched edges suggesting readers fell asleep by the fire after a hard day’s work. They were sometimes defaced and at least a third of the collection is ornamented with marginalia. In contrast, **Basil Blackwell’s** (private) “library” had suffered only the natural effects of time, dust, worm infestations, and sunlight, and its contents were treated with a reverence accorded sacred vessels. Some books had been his father’s, and had been proudly displayed in his workroom over the shop. They included works published by **B. H. Blackwell** — the imprint started by Benjamin Henry from 1879 — standard reference books and a sprinkling of rare specimens. **Basil Blackwell** developed the collection over a period of fifty years, housing it in his arts and craft house in rural Oxfordshire. But **Brancepeth’s** readers would not often have dipped into the same fare as **Basil Blackwell**. Their taste was more like that of readers at Oxford’s public library. At **Brancepeth**, newspapers were in high demand, and a time limit of fifteen minutes was imposed on readership. As well as books, which they could order from the catalogue when they ordered stores, extra copies of local papers were sent out to fencing gangs. **Benjamin Harris**, overseeing his flock in Oxford, had been disappointed by their preference for newspapers over other reading material. He was horrified by their voracious appetite for the stories of blood and gore that dominated the press during the Crimean War; **Brancepeth’s** readers would also have known of men who had served there, and they too would have experienced it vicariously though their more immediate experience was of the South African Wars.

Women readers, however, were not, at first, admitted to Oxford’s public library. **Jonathan Rose** observed that until the end of the nineteenth century, autodidact culture was overwhelmingly male territory. For girls, who were expected to help with the housework and the younger children, the opportunity to read was even more limited.¹¹ At Oxford’s public library women had to wait until a discrete, partitioned space was provided — a separation that continued until 1917. There was no such division at **Brancepeth**. There was a heavy concentration of novels by mid to late Victorian women writers, read by both male and female readers, who are visible in marginalia and records though few women were resident on the farm. The novels, which make up 88% of the library collection in cheap colonial editions, included a high proportion of romances and

sensation novels.¹² There was a smattering of non-fiction, mostly poetry, history, biography, geography and reference books. The framework of most authors, ranging from the famous to the now forgotten, was imperialist, Anglo centric, culturally conservative and bourgeois. There is a clear imperial periphery with strong representation from Australia, Canada, the USA, and a scattering of European authors (**Hugo, Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola** etc.) and a few “local” authors, who could be regarded as early pioneers of a distinctive corpus of New Zealand literature. But the vast majority of the fiction was British; the **Blackwells** were to publish editions, of the **Brontes, Trollope, Smollett** and **Swift**, similar to those held at **Brancepeth**.

Basil Blackwell’s library, which he described as typical of any constant and discursive reader, housed many authors popular at **Brancepeth**. Poets in common are **Milton, Coleridge, Pope, Tennyson, Scott** and **Arnold** — surprisingly **Brancepeth** had **Macaulay** but not **Basil Blackwell**. Storytellers **Boccaccio** and **Shakespeare** were present in both, but there was no **Chaucer** at **Brancepeth**. Other authors in common include **Walter Besant, Boswell, the Brontes, Wilkie Collins, Defoe, Dickens, the Disraelis, George Eliot, Fielding, Gibbon, Haggard, Hardy, Harraden, Jerome Jerome, the Kingsleys, Kipling, Charles Reade** (friend of **Benjamin Henry**), **Masefield** (also a friend of **Benjamin Henry**) **Scott, Stevenson**, and the works of **Mrs. Humphry (Mary) Ward**. **Mary Ward** was very much an Oxford character, living there when religious liberalism supplanted Catholic Tractarianism.¹³ In her novel *Robert Elsmere* she deliberately used fiction to discuss religious problems — her son, **Arnold**, collaborated with **Benjamin Henry Blackwell** to produce a volume of undergraduate verse. **Mary Ward’s** popularity may have had something to do with her radical inclinations; there is no mention of **Elizabeth Gaskell** at **Brancepeth** — perhaps some of the content in her novels were a touch too near the bone for British émigrés?

Dissident Diarists

A copy of **Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus** is listed in the **Brancepeth** holdings.¹⁴ **Carlyle** wrote that a book education was a *right*: it was “not for rich men alone but for all men” and *Sartor Resartus* advances the argument. **Carlyle** gives paramount value to the exercise of free will; his encouragement of readers to construct their own meaning of life equates *Sartor Resartus* with early existentialist texts. **John Vaughan Miller**, the sheep station’s clerk, like many educated Victorians, was an enthusiastic reader of **Carlyle** and often quoted him. Born a gentleman (1839) in Bexley, **Kent, Miller** was the eldest son of a dissenting clergyman (**John Cade Miller**) and was educated at the Grammar School in Birmingham. As part of his work at **Brancepeth**, **Miller** kept the station diary, which was the record of farm business. But he also used it to record a more personal narrative of his life on the farm, his opinions and feelings. His entries were, in tone, similar to those **William King**, an assistant on the

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Blackwell shop, made in his diary. King writes forcibly of his dislike for established religion. A copy of *Sartor Resartus* was one of his most valued possessions. His first copy “was in the wonderful series of cheap books **Cassell’s National Library**.” Some years later, on a buying expedition, he went to the house of the late **Henry Morley**, one of the first professors of English Literature (**University College London**), who had edited the series. **Morley’s** daughter showed **Rex** the originals “in red, yellow and blue covers with their advertisements for French Coffee, Borwick’s Baking Powder, Mellin’s food for infants and Woodward’s Gripe Water.” She told him that her father had received £5 for editing each volume.

King had come to **Benjamin Henry Blackwell’s** notice when he offered his “poor man’s library” for sale; many of the titles corresponded with **Brancepeth’s**. King had fallen into desperate poverty as a result of ill health, which lost him his job as a post office clerk. Being short-handed because of the War, **Benjamin Henry** invited King to work in his second-hand department. His diary gives an account of life during the First World War and provides an invaluable record of what he read.¹⁵ His mordant dissection of the texts amounts to a critique of English culture (circa 1910-50). **Miller**, like **King**, had known hard times. Before emigrating, he had been an Admiralty clerk. It is not clear why he left this job, though like many he was in search of land. But his attempt to establish a successful hop farm in Motueka, New Zealand, was doomed by a descent into bankruptcy and alcoholism. Going back to his old occupation, he was lucky to find a permanent position as station clerk. At **Brancepeth**, he was living two days travel away from his wife and nine children, and his reading and writing kept him sane (and sober). His commentary was wry, but though he came across as likeable and witty, he was also pedantic, stuffy, tragic (when his youngest son died of consumption, he noted that transport difficulties made getting back to Nelson for the funeral “hopeless”), and, above all, lonely. **King**, too, is a loner. He is shy, withdrawn, acerbic and, above all, poor. Frequently facing the bailiffs, and plagued with pain from his rotting teeth, he finds comfort in his books.¹⁶

Miller and **King** are characters worthy of the best fiction. In many ways they resemble **Hardy’s** protagonist **Jude** (the Obscure). **King**, born in 1886 in Chesterton, 35 miles from Oxford, won a scholarship to the local grammar school and worked as a teacher before he became a post office clerk; born in a subsequent age he would undoubtedly have been a scholar. He was certainly an intellectual snob. In his diary, he writes of his irritation with fellow bookselling assistants, academic customers, the idle rich (probably collectors and, of course, the public-school

student fraternity) and the monotony of the work he had to do when really he should be writing. The colonial workers that surrounded him on the farm irked **Miller**. He, too, was an intellectual snob who having had to learn, or feign, humility, allied himself with the underdog perhaps as a kind of penance, though he undoubtedly held strong views about social and economic inequality. **Miller** had, perhaps, hoped for a less rigid social hierarchy in New Zealand, but his role as a station clerk placed him in a dependent and inferior position that he resented. He expressed his frustration in the station diary, newspaper articles and in the margins of library books. **King**, however, studied the marginalia in the books he handled, mostly from libraries that were sold on at **Blackwells**. It gave him further ammunition for his attacks on the literary establishment. Writing in their diaries, both men tended to present themselves as “great and wise” readers, men of letters, who were equipped to critique literary and other writing. Both were published in a small way, which **King** thought was clearly less than his due.

Keeping a diary for both **Miller** and **King** provided solace as well as expiation. **Miller’s** diary was not, strictly speaking, “his.” It was the administrative record which he was required to keep. But like **King’s**, **Miller’s** station diary had a strong autobiographical component. **King’s** diary, like **Miller’s**, provides the reader with a rich tapestry of the people and the environments in which he found himself. Like most diarists, **Miller** and **King** also provide a record of change. **Hermione Lee** writes that it is necessary to re-tell stories for each generation.¹⁷ Such diaries make this possible. In the past such “marginal” material was neither valued nor preserved, but academic fashion has changed. The English historian, **David Kynaston**, for example, in his *Tales of New Jerusalem*, gives equal weight to the stories of ordinary citizens, to the “everyday as well as the seismic.”¹⁸ **Thomas Hardy**, whose family circumstances put higher education out of reach, championed the self-taught and the underclass, “humbly recording diverse readings” in his novels.¹⁹ **Richard Altick**, scholar and historian, collected autodidacts’ writing from the nineteenth century and brought it under academic scrutiny, unusual in the 1950s; one study yielded over 2,000 documents. **Jonathan Rose’s** exhaustive study of workers’ reading provided further fodder.²⁰ **Stefan Collini**, in his review of **Rose’s** book, sees this as a vital part of our history. “If we could recover the reading practices of past generations, we would be in touch with an experience that was at once intimate and formative.”²¹ Fortunately both the **Beethams** and **Blackwells** kept the diaries, and in the case of **Brancepeth**, the **Beethams** gave the library collection to **Victoria University of Wellington**, while the **Blackwell** diaries went to Oxford’s **Merton College**. Book and cultural historians will find rich pickings in both the **Brancepeth** and **Blackwell** collections. 🌿

Endnotes

1. **Harry Ricketts**, *Rudyard Kipling*, Radio New Zealand, 10 October 2013
2. This article is based on **Lydia Wevers** *Reading on the Farm, Victorian Fiction and the Colonial World*, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010 and **Rita Ricketts** *Scholars, Poets and Radicals: Discovering forgotten lives in the Blackwell Collections*, The Bodleian, University of Oxford, 2015. See also **Lydia Wevers**, “Reading on the Farm: a Study of the Brancepeth Farm Library,” *Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand*, 28:1,2 (2004): 184-194, **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, **Reid, Ricketts** and **Walworth**, *The Merton Blackwell Collection*, Merton College, University of Oxford, 2014
3. See for example **Richard Altick**, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, Ohio State Press, University of Chicago, 1957, p 39 taken from Lackington’s memoirs (a London bookseller)
4. See for example, **S. R. Fischer**, *A History of Reading*, Reaktion Books, London 2003 pp 287-9
5. The Public Library Act, 14 August 1850. **Joseph Taylor**, Oxford City Library, 1855-1954, pp 4-7
6. **Richard A. Altick**, *The English Common Reader, A History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, Ohio State Press, Univ. of Chicago, p 70
7. *ibid* 141-2
8. **Rudyard Kipling**, *The Song of the Cities*
9. Wevers, 58-60
10. **Benjamin Henry’s** “library” was valued at £126 (diary entry 24 December 1878), with a nominal sale price of £190
11. See also: **S. R. Fischer**, *A History of Reading*, Reaktion Books, London, 2003, p 272.
12. The Brancepeth library has some of the only copies in existence — see **Margaret Dalziel**, *Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago, An Unexpected Tract of Literary History*, London, Cohen and West, 1957
13. **Mary Ward** was the granddaughter of **Dr. Thomas Arnold**, the famous head of Rugby School, and the niece of the poet **Matthew Arnold**.
14. **Thomas Carlyle’s** major work, *Sartor Resartus*: meaning “The tailor re-tailored,” was first published as a serial in 1833-34
15. Records of what “ordinary people” read are scant — see **Stefan Collini**, in his TLS review of **Rose’s** book
16. As literary historian **Stefan Collini** suggests, books furnished the mind in a form the bailiffs cannot repossess.
17. “There are some stories which have to be re-told by each generation,” see **Hermione Lee**, her introduction, *Biography*, in *Virginia Woolf*, Vintage, 1997, p 11
18. See **David Kynaston’s** early work, *King Labour*, 1976, *Family Britain*, 2006, *Austerity Britain* 2007 also the work of distinguished New Zealand historians, **Michael King** and **James Belich**, for example.
19. **Thomas Hardy**, *Poems Past and Present*, 1901
20. **Jonathan Rose**, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001. Rose is indebted to the work of **John Burnett**, **David Vincent**, **David Mayall** et al *The Autobiography of the Working Class* 3 vols New York University Press 1984-89; see also **John Carey’s** *The Intellectuals and the Masses. Pride and Prejudice amongst the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939*, Faber and Faber; London, 1992.
21. **Stefan Collini**, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 23 No. 24, 13 December 2001, pp 33-35