International Dateline -- An Insight into Publishing

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“I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.”

Introduction

The last episode followed Benjamin Henry as he started his own publishing business, while simultaneously opening his world famous bookshop “Blackwell’s of the Broad.” His first adventures in publishing took more the form of disguised “bursaries,” for would-be poets. Only too mindful of the pecuniary barriers facing those who yearned for literary recognition, Benjamin Henry determined “to remove from the work of young poets the reproach of insolvency.” The endeavour was risky and, in the short run, made little profit. The American poet Christopher Morley had recalled Benjamin Henry’s “little booklets … bound in paper and sold (if at all) for a shilling each.” Yet the way he pursued his trade enabled him to leave behind a business that his son, his family and heirs were to benefit from to this day. More importantly he laid the foundations of one of the most important independent academic publishers. Not confident enough to expand the business himself, Benjamin Henry sent his son Basil “to gain an insight into publishing” at Oxford University Press. Here Basil encountered some of the great characters and pioneers of early nineteenth century publishing and those who served them, and much of this article is drawn from his own memories.

Amen Corner

Towards the end of Basil’s time as a student at Oxford University, Sir Henry Frowde suggested to Benjamin Henry Blackwell that his son should spend a year at Oxford University Press (OUP) in London. Thus it was on a September morning in 1911 that Basil made his way to Amen Corner: “there to spend one of the most delightful years of my life.” Basil revelled in the freedom to dawdle in the London Library and the British Museum Reading Room. Here he had “all English literature to choose from, and drank insatiably of that pure fount so refreshing after the close and anxious studies of the Oxford School of Literae Humaniores.” Basil Blackwell recalled his “generous initiation” at the hands of Frowde: “the unequalled seller of Bibbes.” He was flattered and exhilarated by Frowde’s invitation to complete the selection of A Book of English Essays for inclusion in The World’s Classics, and to see it through the press. The task of selection had been three parts done by Stanley Makower, before his death, “and mine,” Basil wrote, “was to complete it … and … share the honour of the title page.” In Sir Basil’s view, “The World’s Classics, were without doubt the pathfinders for the Everyman Library launched by that shrewd idealist J. M. Dent … serving the same market, that great boon to poor students, the Home University Library.” Grant Richards had launched The World’s Classics at 1/-, and one year later the series had passed to Henry Frowde, publisher to Oxford University Press. In this august company Basil took his place, at a high desk in a small narrow office.

“Basil’s desk” had only recently been occupied by E. V. Rice, before he departed to India to explore the prospects of a publishing outlet; its next two occupants, coming after Basil, were Geoffrey Faber and “Gerry” Hopkins in succession. Adjoining Basil’s narrow office wasVeve Collins, nicknamed “Vera Historic,” whom he assisted in choosing samples to peddle around schools and universities. Collins edited texts to cater for these important markets, and was particularly interested in providing books for sixth formers and undergraduates: a growing market that he understood ahead of his time. Basil described him as “dedicated, kindly, humourless and pedantic.” Rigorously punctual, Collins would return from lunch, “cherishing against six o’clock the unburnt half of a cigarette.” If Basil was lucky, and he had to be very lucky, he would escape the eagle-eye of the resident of the inner sanctum, the legendary Henry Frowde himself. Frowde was a numerous figure with a spade beard and always dressed in a grey frock coat, except on occasions when a blue serge suit appeared signalling a luncheon appointment. On such momentous occasions, the cloakroom was out of bounds for a good two and a half hours. Basil remembers Frowde being guarded by a church-warden-like secretary, one Curtis, who was responsible for the Bible side of OUP. “It was Collins, rather than Henry Frowde, who was to be approached in matters pecunary.” The subject of wages, always a delicate one, could be broached if Curtis was appealed to in the right way. Curtis, Basil alleged, interceded with Frowde by “communicating that you were plagued with religious doubts and needed the aid of the great man inside.” That good man, Basil was advised by Curtis, “would then be at pains to set you right, in return for which the supplicant had to make his thanks for the intervention with the assurance that all difficulties had been removed: the removal of these ‘little difficulties’ was said to be worth five shillings a week!”

When occasionally Frowde crossed the threshold of his office, he passed “silently to and fro the office, recognising nobody. But when my father came to visit him,” Basil recorded: I was invited to join in the conversation. On one of these occasions Frowde asked Basil’s opinion of Humphrey Milford: “did I not think that he was a man of singular ability? I always agreed!” From Frowde Basil learnt to consider the book as a whole; learning at Amen Corner “something of the typographer’s art.” On the floor above Henry Frowde’s office “sat the kindly Frederick Hall, trained as a printer and later to succeed Horace Hart as Printer to Oxford University.” It was thanks to this master, Basil claimed, that he had been taught the rudiments of this trade: the mysteries of book production, such as casting-off. But whatever the department, and he tried his hand across the board, Basil’s lasting impression of Amen Corner was “one of reverence for scholarship and enthusiasm for any books which might advance its cause.” Yet Basil had little contact with the great Oxford home of OUP. His only knowledge of the great “Chapman” was of his initials “R W C,” which were occasionally employed in green pencil as a sign of disapproval. Seeing them, Basil admitted: “we believed and trembled.” In future years, “we hoped” to earn the esteem of Chapman, but he modestly explained “I have always thought that both he and Milford esteemed my ability beyond my deserts.”

Back at Amen Corner, Basil was dreading the end of his halcyon year-out; the family firm in Oxford beckoned. To his eternal delight, he was given a reprieve; Basil was invited to stay on a few further months “to instruct a young OUP graduate named Geoffrey Faber,” he recalled with a chuckle.

In the Second World War, when the London office of OUP moved to Oxford, Basil recaptured the ethos of his old London days in occasional meetings with his former colleagues, the poets Gerry Hopkins and Charlie Williams. When reunited, wrote Sir Basil, and “had conditions allowed,” they would have “tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.” Benjamin Henry, however, was not a man to relish his son at leisure; he wanted Basil to come into the family firm and expand his own publishing efforts. After his spell at Amen Corner, Basil needed no enticement to continued on page 88
Basil started his “publishing watching” as a small boy, when he would see his father’s “authors” creep, or sometimes, sweep, up the stairs. He became a watcher-in-earnest at OUP, and a custodian when he, later, became the President of the Publisher’s Association. From this “helm,” he found it harder to steer a straight course. “For a ship’s captain whose time was spent in watching and stopping leaks,” he explained, ‘might well come to think that his vessel was unsavoury and in present danger of sinking. But now that my voyage is over, and my harbour is in sight, I find, almost with wonder, that the ship still treads the waves. I mind that in the course of my Presidency more publishers than booksellers have founded, and that for all the worries and struggles which have beset booksellers in these hungry years, our fellowship has not dwindled but grown. We stand a small and slighted unit in a world distraught by folly and false gods—a world in deadly danger of overwhelming ills. Nevertheless, we stand as ministers of Literature, that slow invaluable cause where truth is enshrined in beauty and forever by the miracle of written speech. “So by the waters of Babylon some homesick Jew, brooding on the fate of his little nation, now ground between the huge millstones of Assyria and Egypt, now swept entire into exile as the whim of the great conqueror, set pen to parchment to leave for us a song of everlasting beauty, which stirs our hearts today, when the might of Egypt is remembered in its tombs, and Babylon lies in a mystery beneath the desert dust.” Dusty the old rooms at Amen House may have been, but they had revealed the mysteries of publishing.

Joining his father in Broad Street in 1913, Basil ran the publishing side as a more-or-less separate department. But he was always aware of his father’s watchful eye and “editor’s pencil”; he was respectful of writers who still came to his father for help with painstaking corrections. Within seven years Basil was stretching his wings, and the imprint on the books became “Basil Blackwell,” rather than “Blackwell.” Seeking for further adventure he joined forces with his old Merton College friend, Adrian Mott, who had replaced Dorothy L. Sayers; “more memorable for her literary fame, than her editorial gifts,” as editorial assistant. Basil had interviewed Dorothy Sayers, in 1916, at his father’s behest. He remembered: “a tall, very slim young woman, dressed in a formal blue serge costume, a formal yellow stock with a blue coat and a quart of whiskey.” Basil Blackwell dispensed with her editorial talents, some three years later, with a mixture of relief and reluctance and likened her employment to “harnessing a race-horse to a plough.”

Adrian Mott was another kettle of fish, he was steadfast; the brother Basil had never had, and always wanted, and “the keeper of his business and aesthetic conscience.” Adrian Mott, for his part, claimed that he never understood business, especially the “mysteries of finance.” “My role,” he wrote, “in the day-to-day running of the firm was a minor one: my work has been almost entirely editorial, or sub-editorial.” Their first mission, in partnership, was to rescue the Shakespeare Head Press, formed as an offshoot of the Blackwell Company in 1921. Although this was more an act of charity than a commercial undertaking, the two friends entered into formal partnership as Basil Blackwell and Mott Ltd., incorporated on 13 March 1922.

Under the B & M imprint, Basil added scope and depth to his father’s range, and profit into the kitty. To works of poetry, and a smattering of successful “new” classics, he had added such treasures as Joy Street, a series of children’s annuals, which ran for 13 years and introduced contributors such as Belloc, Chesterton, de la Mare, Farjeon, Mackensie and AA Milne. It was at Blackwell’s that Enid Blyton was first published. But there were disappointments too. Blackwell’s only received the crumbs from Blyton’s table when she hit the big time, and Richard Blackwell, was, later, to turn down Asterix! Yet some of Basil’s proudest achievements were to be found among children’s educational books, of which Marten and Carter’s Histories were perhaps the most famous. At first, Adrian Mott recalled, the retail side, still in Benjamin Henry’s time, “was a little inclined to look on the publishing side as a naughty baby brother and an infernal nuisance about the house—but that time soon passed.” Basil attributed B & M’s coming of age, and its passing into the serious ranks of publishing, to its staff. At the beginning, in 1922, the staff in addition to himself and Adrian Mott, consisted of S. T. Fenemore, three girls, and an odd-job boy. The “girls” consisted of the famous Gladys Lovelace: the “Auntie Gald whose comfortable presence smoothed away many difficulties,” Mabs: who everyone had “a soft spot for,” and Vera Higley. “Poor Vera Higley,” Adrian Mott reminisced, “kept up a hopeless struggle to reconcile the opposing interests and bitter theological differences between The Modern Churchman and Blackfriars.” Nevertheless, she was the firm’s “unofficial and unpaid Welfare Officer; disentangling love lives and doctoring collywobbles.”

By the traditions of that time, the odd-job boy was the Lynch-pin of any organisation; he had to do anything and everything uncomplainingly, and moving from pillar to post, continued on page 89
willingly, he became the eyes and ears of the place. The first “odd-job boy” at Blackwell’s was one Frank Fogden, who was as far from the idealised model as could be imagined. He was never to be found when he was wanted, preferring to escape to a hidey-hole where he could play his ukulele. Frank, swiftly released from his duties, was replaced by “James,” as Basil called him. And this “odd-job boy,” rose to become a Director, and Secretary to the Company. James Sherbourn, from nearby Witney, was a classic Blackwellian: self-educated and a self-starter. Born into a family of nine children, he watched his father struggle to keep them all on his railwayman’s wages. But James was very keen on books and libraries, and “he had extraordinarily neat handwriting which came in very useful, later on, when he annotated, and drew maps, diagrams and marginal drawings for Carter and Brettall’s (B & M)’s Geography series. Man the World Over. His first job was to fetch Chelsea buns from Week’s shop, in the Commarket, for the Directors’ tea, and they “noticed” him. Meanwhile, down in the stock room, he prided himself on his physical fitness: “six foot of whipcord and spring steel!” He was the world’s optimist and only once was he known to be depressed: “for a week he went about with tears in his eyes when his favourite football team were out of the FA Cup in an early round.”

Licking the assembled company into shape was S. T. Fenimore; or “Fen” as he was known. He organised everyone, including the Directors, and kept the warehouse like a new pin. Adrian Mott, writing in 1954, recalled him instantly: “he was brisk and dapper, with a precise turn of mind and a short turn of phrase”: “Keep moving, don’t let yer braces dangle,” he would command. Fen was a workaholic and set the old (Blackwell) bindery on its feet. But like so many of the early Blackwellians, he was at heart a poet, and followed the fortunes of others. When Edith Sitwell’s The Mother was selling so slowly it might have had to be pulped, he bought six copies, giving them as presents to his family and colleagues. There were other characters too, associated with B & M, who loomed large in the collective memory, such as Bertie Ashcroft, the printer. Adrian Mott recalled him clearly: “besides being one of the finest printers in Oxford, he was a bit of a villain; personally I like villains — I should have very few friends in this City if I did not. If ever you wanted something on the Black Market Adrian Mott observed, “then Bertie would be the man to know.” “I believe there is still a bit of a racket in nylon (this was still the time of rationing) and not wishing to risk an action for slander, I can only say that I have no proof he had anything to do with it.”

In the company of these rich characters, whose stories he loved, Basil had gradually assumed his father’s mantle; playing Pegasus to writers just as his father had done. At the end of his life he always acknowledged that “my aspiration to establish an independent publishing business sprang from my admiration of my father’s achievements.” “It was,“ he asserted, “his example which prompted me to adventure.” Benjamin Henry had sailed against the wind in giving his support to work that would not otherwise have been published. Although the poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, had impressed on the young Basil the importance of his father’s contribution, he cautioned Basil against departing from the quiet paths of book-selling for the more perilous seas of writing. Basil Blackwell was in awe of Bridges. “One had to walk delicately” with him, Basil recorded, especially after he had visited him in his garden at Boars Hill “to be greeted with the nipping end of a pair of secateurs, rather than an outstretched hand.” On another occasion, Basil found himself embarrassed: “My undertaking on the part of an unknown author to invite the Laureate to accept a copy of his book left me with difficult letters to write.” (Bridges would have none of it.) But neither Benjamin Henry nor Basil Blackwell were to be intimidated by either individuals such as Bridges or the grand publishing houses. In any case, neither Bridges nor the grandees of publishing would have taken a second glance at the amateurish manuscripts Basil and his father originally garnered. The Blackwells, intent on helping those “unknown to fame,” had left financial considerations at the door, and Bridges’ warnings unheeded. But it was their very independence of mind and enthusiasm that served to overcome the rigidities of the established publishing scene. Like his father, Basil was responsible for sending on their way famous names in scholarship and literature.

Column Editor’s Note: The next article will consider in detail those writers who Basil Blackwell, allusively, bore on their poetic “flights.” In serving them, Basil Blackwell served himself and created an independent academic publishing house that competed with the great university imprints. — RR