

June 2009

International Dateline -- An Insight into Publishing

Rita Ricketts

Blackwell's, Rita.Ricketts@ouls.ox.ac.uk

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



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

Recommended Citation

Ricketts, Rita (2009) "International Dateline -- An Insight into Publishing," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 19.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2319>

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 — An Insight into Publishing

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@ouls.ox.ac.uk>

*"I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky"¹*

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.²

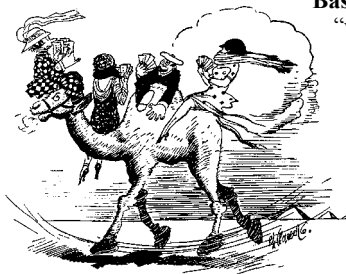
Amen Corner

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.**"³ **Basil Blackwell** recalled his "generous initiation" at the hands of **Frowde**: "the unequalled seller of Bibles."



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 sane market, that great boon to poor students, the **Home University Library.**"⁴ **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. Rieu**, 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 was **Veve 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 numinous 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 pecuniary." 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!"⁵

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!"⁶ 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 "**RWC,**" which were occasionally employed in green pencil as a sign of disapproval. Seeing them, **Basil** admitted: "we believed and trembled." In future years, **Basil** was 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."⁷ 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 **Oxford** graduate named **Geoffrey Faber**," he recalled with a chuckle.⁸

In the Second World War, when the London operation 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

take on a role in the publishing side of things. Finally on New Year's Day 1913, after sixteen months at OUP in London, Basil Blackwell joined his father in Broad Street. From this time, until the Thursday before his death in April 1984, Basil's feet hardly touched the ground. But Basil Blackwell never cut the ties with his alma mater and on his eightieth birthday, The Gaffer — as he had become known, was given Henry Frowde's coffee pot and an OUP tie. When he had left Amen House, the publishing world was as important to Basil as the bookselling world would become. Even when he took over as Blackwell's gaffer, at his father's death in 1924, he was still deeply involved with publishing, and, in just over ten years, he had finished a stint as the President of its Association.

Perilous Seas

Handing over the Presidency of the Publishers Association in 1936, Basil reflected on the twin trades of publishing and bookselling. "If I were bidden to sum up human life in a phrase," he explained, "I should say that life is experience understood too late; and now that the tale of my days as your President is told, I feel come upon me somewhat of that belated wisdom which is the tantalising heritage of man." Looking back on publishing as the established, and successful, bookseller he had become, he admitted 'I find that the publishers have shown a truer understanding of our (booksellers) difficulties than we have had of theirs; I find that misunderstandings for which there was no need, have from time to time hindered the work which Publishers and Booksellers together have undertaken. He suggested, predictably, that the "one thing at least we might do to mend matters is to increase the participation of the individual." Rejecting the idea of an *advocatus diaboli*, he argued for grass roots democracy: "we must offer to pay for the fare to London of one member of each Branch, of the Association, should he need it. By the same token, let us insist that one member from each branch shall in fact attend each meeting of the Council. For democracy today, in great matters as in small, is the precious but imperilled legacy of the nobler past — precious because it allows that every man is master of his soul and that his soul by itself has worth; imperilled because we have forgotten that the best gifts in life need ever watching."



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 unseaworthy 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 with informal yellow stockings." 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."¹⁰ 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, Mackenzie and AA Milne.¹¹ 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. Fenimore, 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 collywobblers."¹²

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

International Dateline
from page 88

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 **Bretnell’s** (**B & M’s**) Geography series, *Man the World Over*. His first job was to fetch **Chelsea** buns from **Week’s** shop, in the Cornmarket, 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.”¹³

Licking the assembled company into shape was **S. T. Fenmore**; 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.¹⁴ **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.¹⁵ 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 nylons (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.”¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ **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 bookselling for the more perilous seas of publishing. **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

Keep Watching the Skies!



American Science Fiction Movies of the Fifties, The 21st Century Edition

BILL WARREN

[928]pp., 2009, \$99 hardcover
(8½ × 11), 272 photos
(46 in color), appendices,
bibliography, index
978-0-7864-4230-0

REVIEWS OF THE FIRST EDITION:

“Highly recommended” — *Library Journal*

“Fascinating” — *The Washington Post*



McFarland

Orders 800-253-2187 • www.mcfarlandpub.com

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**

Endnotes

1. How **Basil Blackwell** described his days in London with the friends he made, from **William Cory** “They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead, they brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed. I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.”
2. Taken from **Rita Ricketts**, *Adventurers All, Tales of Blackwellians, of books, bookmen and reading and writing folk*, Blackwell’s, Oxford, 2002.
3. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes, May 1956.
4. Sir **Basil Blackwell** commemorated the work of **Dent** in the first **Dent Memorial Lecture**.
5. **Basil Blackwell** attributed this story to **R. M. Leonard**, who edited *The Periodical* and undertook sundry duties at **Amen Corner**.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Interview, *Oxford Times*, Friday May 25, 1979.
9. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes for a speech to the **Publisher’s Association**, April 22 1937.
10. **Basil Blackwell’s** notes.
11. **Joy Street** was the invention of **Ernest Parker**.
12. **Adrian Mott’s** notes for his retirement speech, October 5 1954.
13. *ibid.*
14. **Basil Blackwell’s** own notes, *Merton Blackwell Collection*.
15. His son was later very successful in the firm, as was **Henry Critchley’s**.
16. **Adrian Mott’s** notes 1954, *Merton Blackwell Collection*.
17. Sir **Basil Blackwell’s** own notes, undated.