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The Dairies (1918-1927) of An Antiquarian Bookseller, Book-reading Man, Quaker and Poet

by Rita Ricketts

(Rex) King was born near Cirencester, some 35 miles from Oxford. Basil Blackwell described his origins “of plain peasant stock, the son of a baker who peddled cakes at County fairs.” Rex, Basil tells us, “was of middle height and slender build; he had a fine head with a profile reminiscent of Henry Fielding’s save that Rex showed signs of suffering and meditation.” Like Benjamin Henry his new Master at Blackwell’s, who had learnt Latin and Literature on daily runs around Christ Church meadows, Rex was self-educated. As soon as he was able, he had walked backwards and forwards to Cirencester to consult a shop “which dealt in used books.” There he spent many hours reading and choosing for his collection such volumes as his few pence could purchase. Recovering from the illness that had left him unemployed, Rex came to Blackwell’s where, Basil tells us, “he was as happy as a difficult home-life with a Xantippe and two discordant children would permit.” Basil observed that his marriage had been a case of “the nymph pursuing the faun pursued,” and “the nymph, under the stress of hard times and a jealousy of Rex’s intellectual and spiritual prestige among the Quaker community, became a scold. Escaping each day to Blackwell’s, he walked and talked with scholars and men of letters (he was an authority on Coleridge).” But at the close of the day, Basil recorded, he returned “to something like a penitentiary which, as the years passed and his wife’s health declined, became increasingly exacting. His loyalty nevertheless was undeviating. Occasionally he would confide in me, but I never knew him to betray the stern principles, stoic and Christian, in which he had schooled himself.”

Subject as Rex was to Theages’ Bridle, Basil found his strength of character all the more remarkable: his “spiritual strength was his reaction to physical frailty.”

His speech,” Basil wrote, “was spiced with the sly ironical humour which is typical of Glosters folk, and instances from the store of his vast reading…Only once I had him at a loss, when I quoted ‘Give him Long Sartor Resartus, which after several attempts remains for me but musty fodder.’ Toward the end of his life he honoured me increasingly with his confidence. I wish Rex had recorded, or that I might record as he told it to me, a hideous experience in his boyhood. His father, a small confectioner, used to visit fairs and other gatherings offering for sale his buns and cakes (young Rex and his brother would be paid 1d. a 100 for trimming currants of their stalks). From one such fair or fête champêtre at Chedworth, perhaps, or Fosse Cross, little Rex was dispatched home by train to Cirencester as the evening came on. He was alone in

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a compartment until a horrid fellow blind drunk and raving tumbled in as the train started. He saw the boy Rex and with threats to rip him open and tear out his guts made a lurch at him. Rex contrived to wriggle under the seat, where he listened to ogre-like threats and curses, and watched the brute’s hand and foot as he fumbled about in dazed search for his victim. He managed to escape at the next station, but the fearful memory was still vivid as he spoke of it some fifty years later.”

Little of Rex’s early trials are revealed in his diary. Nonetheless, for Basil Blackwell it reveals “the constancy of an austere spirit loyal to the Quaker discipline and to that of Marcus Aurelius — the spirit of one stretched upon the ‘rack of this tough world,’ but in whom there was ‘no shadow of turning.’” Yet the diary, and Rex’s other writings, has also a lightness of touch, deeply personal and resonant, revealing the ups and downs of married and family life and of long days at the shop. Barely an entry, however mundane the subject matter, is left without food for thought. His first diary entry, on Whit. Sunday, 19 May 1918, finds Rex in full flood. He speculates on the nature of truth, love, and war, wrestles with a Chestertonian paradox, reports on his reading of the Letters and Journals of Caroline Fox, and after tea, takes his family for a saunter through the meadows: “one dazzling cloth of buttercup-gold, shimmering in the declining sun.” The Hawthorn hedges one mass of blossom, as though burdened with a sudden fall of snow. God never loses his ecstacy in the renewal of spring.” On the same day he attends the Friend’s Meeting, to enjoy “a quiet season of refreshment.” He values, above all, this “open ministry of the Friends” where the “expression of extravagant and ill-digested opinions — is of great value in so far as it creates a charitable atmosphere in which these views may be dispassionately judged. One is able in this way to discourse oftentimes a vein of truth in the crudest utterance.”

Rex gives an example of such a “truth” as the entry continues: “…at this morning’s gathering one speaker endeavoured to prove that the great European catastrophe was not the result of hatred, but of love — love that is of the different peoples for their own native land. Stated in this bald way it appears an absurdity: quite a Chestertonian paradox. It is in fact one of those partial truths which is more difficult to scoff than pure error. The fallacy arises in the comprehensive meaning of the word love — which may be used with a dozen different significations. It is evident that a love which leads to a long nightmare of mutual murder and unparalleled slaughter is not the love of which Paul gives a minute spectrum analysis in 1607 xiii… Another speaker gave an inspiring exposition of the blessings of those that make the most High their habitation. A man who is conscious of the encompassing presence of God will live in a mountain top atmosphere of calm. Exterior circumstances and conditions will have even less and less power to influence and unsettle his mind. One might even imagine that a vivid, persisting awareness of this encompassing presence — this divine aura in which we live, move, and have our being — would act as a shield against the germs of contagious disease.”

By the next day, Whit. Monday, May 20, 1918, Rex is already exhausting his readers:

“A perfect holiday, the joyous earth bathed in brilliant sunshine, and cooled by caressing breezes. The children and I had a very enjoyable climb to Shotover, where after basking lazily in the deep grass, we gathered two armfuls of blue bals; and then sat down again — the children amusing themselves in the making of daisy chains. What a wealth of innocent and costless pleasure is open to the childlike heart. What a wholesome food for thought. His first diary entry, on Whit. Sunday, 19 May 1918, finds Rex in full flood. He speculates on the nature of truth, love, and war, wrestles with a Chestertonian paradox, reports on his reading of the Letters and Journals of Caroline Fox, and after tea, takes his family for a saunter through the meadows: “one dazzling cloth of buttercup-gold, shimmering in the declining sun.” The Hawthorn hedges one mass of blossom, as though burdened with a sudden fall of snow. God never loses his ecstacy in the renewal of spring.” On the same day he attends the Friend’s Meeting, to enjoy “a quiet season of refreshment.” He values, above all, this “open ministry of the Friends” where the “expression of extravagant and ill-digested opinions — is of great value in so far as it creates a charitable atmosphere in which these views may be dispassionately judged. One is able in this way to discourse oftentimes a vein of truth in the crudest utterance.”

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battlegrounds of Europe! Mr. Presley was passed into Grade III at his medical examination this afternoon; and is thus liable to be called up for service in fifteen days… The evening news was of a more re-assuring character, and the defence appears to have settled down into some degree of stability. Continued my reading of The Essays on Shakespeare."

Sunday, June 2

“At the Meeting this morning my mind was exercised as to the nature of faith. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent to a creedal statement, or belief in any formulated scheme of salvation, or the adoption of a ceremonial cult. Men of a creed are all too plentiful, but men of faith are difficult to find. To have faith is to have such a deep-rooted assurance of the reality of God and the eternal realities that it affects one’s whole outlook and activities. One’s faith consists only in those things which determine one’s conduct and one’s valuations of life. To say that we have faith in the unseen, and then act as though our vision was limited by the worldly and material, is to give a lie to our affirmation. The man of faith launches out adventurously on the current of his deepest intuitions — not hugging the shores of personal comfort, nor veering with the wind to compromise with the conventions and usages of his time. The world and its honours are counted as dust in the balance… My thoughts were afterwards developed in striking fashion by Dr. Gillet…"

I regret that I do not take altogether kindly to the type of young man who frequent the Friend’s meeting — although of course, I am included in that indictment. Despite the touchiness of their consciences, they are in the bulk a pasty, effeminate, crotchety set. I must confess that those who in defiance of their religious traditions have donned the soldier’s uniforms are of a much superior type to their queasy-conscienced brethren. At the same time, one would not belittle the courage of the genuine objector — whose ordeal of contumely and scorn is not one easily to be borne. I have never, however, been able to accept unreservedly the Quaker attitude towards war — much as I hate and condemn it. Although adhesion to some religious body may multiply one’s opportunities of doing good, yet I hate the tyranny of a sect or an accepted body of beliefs. The only adequate bond for uniting a society is love. Why should we doff secondhand opinions?

Finished The Essays on Shakespeare. And found them much to my liking.”

Monday, June 3

“The intense heat has been tempered today by a delightfully caressing breeze. Enjoyed an hour in the company of Burns, through the medium of his letters — these reveal his kindly tolerance, his sturdy common sense, his poetical disdain of striving towards a set goal, and his delight in being able simply to poke his head into this wonderful universe. The letters written to his various patrons are not so pleasing as those written to more intimate friends. They are cold with a stilled meticulosity of style and sentiment, but under the smooth lines one can read the revulsion of a proud nature. Despite his repeated assurances to the contrary, I know Mrs. Dunlop — of the line of Wallace — must have been oftentimes a piece of glass-paper to his feelings.”

Tuesday, June 4

“A busy, trying day at business — Took over Mr. Hunt’s duties, and the new harness rubs a little for the time being. Moulded up a few potatoes in the evening; a few pages of Burns; and then to bed…”

Saturday, July 13, 1918

“On a light note is Rex’s exhortation:

“O! Ye early Victorians! I saw this night that which would have shocked respectable decorum! A buxom farm lass astride a man’s bicycle, and carrying her lover upon the step behind! What a blow to Mrs. Grundy! An awful sight upon a Sunday!”

At the other end of the spectrum are examples of his despair at the horrors of war:

Saturday, August 3, 1918

“Emi’s sister brought the sad news that Elyah, her youngest brother, was killed at the front last Saturday. Both legs shattered, and only regained consciousness long enough to give his home address… Mother sent news that Maggie had given birth to a strong, healthy daughter. Thus we get the whole cycle of birth and death in one day…”

The sight of a poor Australian youth — once, no doubt, sane and strong — gibbering and moping like a brainless ape in the High St has brought home to me the horrors of war and of its eternal devilishness more powerfully that the hundreds of crippled men about the streets.”

By the autumn Rex has cheerier news:

Sunday, October 13, 1918

“A bright autumn day after a procession of dreary ones. Everyone cheered by the news that Germany has virtually surrendered to the Allies and has accepted President Wilson’s Fifteen Points. I trust that the new world order that will arise from the blood and chaos of this terrible war will by worthy of it great cost. As Mrs. Gillett pointed out at the meeting this morning, it behoves us all to do our part in influencing aright the thought of the nation at this time. There are still many nations that openly flout the idea of a League of Nations and one thundering for a meaningful tariff and a boycott of enemy countries. God grant that the noise they make is in no wise commensurate with their insolenace.”

Sunday, November 10

“The Kaiser has at last abdicated, and the Crown Prince has renounced his succession to the throne. Read a few reviews by Edwin P. Whipple — an American critic of the mid Victorian era…his essays on Macauley have much of the rigor and effectiveness of Macauley himself. He hails G. P. R. James in an unmerciful fashion…”

Monday, November 11, 1918

“The armistice terms have been accepted by Germany, and the historic document was signed this morning at 5a.m. Firing on all fronts ceased at 11 o’clock — being the 11th hour of the 11th day of the eleventh month. Within a few minutes of the arrival of the glorious news, Oxford was in a wield ferment of excitement. Flags and noisy bands of youths and soldiers paraded the streets making a dreadful din with rattles, hooters, sticks and pans etc… The children walked down to Oxford to see the revellry and rejoicing, and arrived back about six o’clock tired, and wet through to the skin. Poor Weasel had a sound o’clock bed — surely a sorry ending to so memorable a day! A small band of Serbian students marched through the town about 8 o’clock singing ‘to set up his circulation,’ and was sent ignominiously to bed — surely a sorry ending to so memorable a day! A small band of Serbian students marched through the town about 8 o’clock singing with wonderfully impressive effect their national songs. A persistent drizzling rain dampened down any tendency towards mafficking.”

By winter, as momentous events are unfolding, Rex is wrestling with his conscience:

Sunday, December 15, 1918

“The gloom of the weather — its gusts, its storm, and its depression — have been mirrored in my own inner world of thought and feeling during the past week. On Friday — being the faithful thirteenth of the month — I had an offer from a local bookshop, which from the monetary point of view — and in the number of hours — was a great improvement upon my present condition. On the other hand, I have always experienced friendliness and consideration from Mr. Blackwell, and I know that to leave them at this particular juncture of affairs would cause him considerable inconvenience. At the same time, it is no use blunting the fact that my present wage is not sufficient ‘to carry on’ in these iron continued on page 81
times... and a rise of £60 was not to be winked at! Then too, when the fellows return from the army, they may regard me as having climbed into power and position over their backs. These and a hundred and one other considerations kept my mind in a perpetual ferment. At last, through the good offices of Mr. Hanks, I obtained a talk with Mr. Blackwell, who with characteristic tact and kindness brushed away the baseless fabric of my fears.”

Rex did remain at Blackwell’s for the rest of his life, and his love and respect for both Benjamin Henry and then his son, Sir Basil as he became, did not diminish. At his death, in October 1950, Basil wrote the following note for his staff: “Early in the year it was manifest that Will King’s health (always frail) was failing fast. We did all we could to lighten his duties at Broad Street, leaving him free to come and go as he pleased, and later giving him the status of consultant; but we were not able to aid him in the inexorable routine of his home. As his strength waned, his wife’s illness made increasing claims upon it; nevertheless, he spared himself no part of his duty, as he understood it (for loyalty was of the essence of his nature), and, sustained by some power which he could only ascribe to ‘a miracle of the Grace of God,’ ran his straight race to its merciless end. From time to time he honoured me with his confidence, and during his last weeks at home I had several talks with him on terms of simple friendship, though most, I think, was said, as formerly, in the claspings of hands. Anyone who knew of or worked with him must be aware that we have lost something irreparable in his mastery of his calling, and the knowledge and judgment which he drew from the store of his vast reading. But this is not all. As I reflect upon the witness of his life and conversation, and upon the meditations recorded in his journals, a question insistently presents itself to me (I write with no sense of exaggeration): have we at Blackwell’s these thirty-four years entertained at unawares one who may deserve the tremendous title of Saint?” And Rex’s famous writings, that “showed the whole working world was a great university,” were, by his own admission, used by Basil to write his many notes and speeches.

The next installment compliments Rex’s stories with those of other Blackwell apprentices, notably Fred Hanks whose long service at Blackwell’s was rewarded with an Honorary Degree of MA from Oxford University.

Endnotes
1. This work will form part of a contribution to An Oxford Education: Blackwell’s “alternative seat of learning,” which celebrates the life and work of the Blackwell family and their associates from many walks of life, their contributions to publishing, book-selling, to the ‘commonwealth’ of writers and readers both near and far, and to many and varied aspects of life in the City of Oxford. It will be published by the Bodleian in 2013-14 to commemorate the opening of the Blackwell Hall in the Weston Library, and in recognition of the gift by Julian Blackwell of the Basil Blackwell working library and the Blackwell publishing and book-selling archives to the Bodleian (Modern Papers and Printed Books and Ephemera) and Merton College (The Merton Blackwell Collection College). The editor and principal author is Rita Ricketts. It was also the subject of a paper to be given by Rita Ricketts at Merton College, 25 November 2010 as part of the Study of the History of the Book series: A Moral Witness.
4. Thomas Carlyle’s major work, Sartor Resartus (meaning “The tailor re-tailored”), first published as a serial in 1833-34.
5. Broad Sheet, Blackwell’s house journal, MBC.

And in this issue, Mark Herring (p.65) talks about Borders and contrasts this with changes that Barnes & Noble has made to their operation. He suggests that libraries should do likewise. And, on the ATG News Channel, Dennis Brunning mourns Borders’ demise. http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/03/atg-hot-topic-of-the-week-borders-bankrupt-some-borders-closing/