

The House of Blackwood: Author-Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era

David Finkelstein

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“Young and foolish, I thus began a journey into the unknown,” says the author of his decision to study the vast, uncataloged collection of papers belonging to the famous nineteenth-century publishing house, William Blackwood & Sons. More than ten years later, with the publication of this slim academic volume, he admits that his knowledge of the Blackwood material still “barely scratches the surface.” His ruefulness is clear as he wishes other potential researchers “the best of luck in their travels.” One wonders how there can be so much material that ten years of excavation have barely made a dent.

The answer is simple, and Finkelstein touches on it repeatedly throughout his book. Blackwood & Sons was an enormously influential Scottish publishing house that operated for most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Publishing both books and the well-known *Blackwood's Magazine*, the company was no small player in the complex world of British publishing. And over those many years, masses of correspondence, bills, receipts, manuscripts, and much more were built up, stored—and forgotten.

Because of Blackwood's prominence, scholars have at times dipped into these materials, delicately extracting a letter here, a business record there, for support of a thesis. Finkelstein, on the other hand, regards the Blackwood papers as his main business, finding facts, assessing them, and drawing forth conclusions on myriad subjects relating to the house's operations.

That this is a book for the academic, there can be no question. Literary critics will find the discussion of writer-publisher politics interesting, and Finkelstein goes into helpful depth on Blackwood's consistent efforts to build a family of loyal writers who were on friendly personal terms with the publishing house leaders. The author also traverses less familiar ground in Blackwood's history. Each chapter is essentially a case study on a new topic, such as the strong conservative slant the publishing house habitually took in accepting and editing, or the difficulties the firm encountered as a younger generation of Blackwoods took charge. He even tackles the role that the new profession of literary agents played near the end of the nineteenth century, as well as Blackwood's self-perceived house identity, and the memoir that arose as a result.

Altogether, *The House of Blackwood* offers as much meat for the nineteenth-century historian, the student of business history—even present-day publishing executives!—as it does for the literary critic.

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