
David Finkelstein. *The House of Blackwood: Author–Publisher Relations in the Victorian Era*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002. 199p.

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This book combines and expands on three articles previously published independently in journals of textual criticism. Though the added material on the rise and decline of the House of Blackwood from 1804 to 1912 will interest primarily readers concerned with the history of Blackwood's, the three core chapters presenting case studies of the relations of the firm with particular authors—John Hanning Speke, Charles Reade, and Margaret Oliphant—provide valuable insights into the ways in which Victorian editors and authors manipulated one another for both commercial and ideological ends.

The opening chapter of the book identifies its purpose—to examine the decline of the House of Blackwood from its “preeminence in mid-nineteenth century publishing and cultural history” to its “marginalized position as publisher of popular works for colonial and special service interest audiences at the start of the twentieth century” (5)—and distinguishes this book from previous studies that focused on either the origins of the firm or the lives of authors, such as George Eliot and Joseph Conrad, whose literary careers Blackwood's was instrumental in launching. And while briefly recapitulating the history of “Maga” from 1860-1910, Finkelstein makes it clear that his principal aim is “to place the firm in appropriate social and cultural contexts” (14) and to investigate “the implications of studying book history in the wake of recent, dynamic methods of theoretical analysis” (14-15) including models borrowed from the social sciences and literary criticism. Finkelstein then explains the procedure he will adopt in Chapters 3 and 4, applying these theoretical models to individual authors in order to “illustrate the interplay of economic, social, and ideological forces in the production of texts, the process of cultural colonization and the dissemination of its conclusions in Victorian society, and the general and intentional exclusion of women from the power structures involved in these processes and productions.” Chapters 3, 4, and 6—“Africa Rewritten: The Case of John Hanning Speke”; “Reade Revised: *A Woman Hater* and the Women's Medical Movement”; and “Creating House Identities: Nineteenth-Century Publisher's Memoirs and the *Annals of a Publishing House*”—vividly and persuasively illustrate these forces and processes, and are thus not only the strongest chapters in the book but those most useful to readers interested in Victorian ideology and society.

Chapter 3 examines the challenges Blackwood's faced in reshaping the journals of John Hanning Speke, famous for his claim to have discovered the source of the Nile, into a salable commodity. The journals, written in what John Blackwood characterized as "such an abominable, childish, unintelligible way that it is impossible to say what anybody could make of them" (54), had to be rewritten in a form that would not only be intelligible but, as Blackwood saw it, would portray their author as "a standard bearer for British values, the stern imperialist, paternal, and patient yet firm in coping with adverse circumstances and unruly porters" (62), while simultaneously "reiterating standard views of Africa that fitted generalized, European notions of the area" (68). This transformative process, says Finkelstein, provides a "classic example of how the Blackwood firm manipulated both text and author to serve ideological purposes, as well as to safeguard a commercial investment" (69). But in the case of Charles Reade, the author proved as adept at manipulating his editors as they did him.

In Chapter 4, Finkelstein demonstrates how the Conservative editors of Blackwood's and the progressive author Charles Reade successfully manipulated one another to achieve their own conflicting purposes. John Blackwood's eagerness to publish Reade's novel *A Woman Hater*, because of Reade's established profitability, clashed with his own distaste, and that of this perceived audience, for the feminist social agenda the work espoused in advancing the cause of women's medical education. Blackwood's solution to this conflict, says Finkelstein, was "to combine both aesthetic and commercial concerns by 'taming' Reade, restraining, channeling, and directing him to produce a text fitting the editors' conceived notions of appropriate fiction and satisfying the magazine's intended audience" (78). And drawing an incisive analogy between Blackwood's manipulation of Reade and the male-dominated medical profession's manipulation of women seeking to become doctors, Finkelstein observes:

Thus Blackwood, in his self-appointed role as arbiter of literary taste, consciously planned to subordinate and make compliant this potentially troublesome author, much like the male physicians—who considered themselves the sole arbiters of disease and its treatment—consciously sought to defuse the perceived threat of the women's medical movement. (78)

But just as certain women succeeded in manipulating the medical establishment to allow them to become doctors, Reade proved to be equally adept at manipulating his editors, conceding minor changes in language while leaving the central issue intact: though "'tamed' to Blackwood's satisfaction, Reade had succeeded in his goal of forcing the issue of women's medical education onto the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine*, and thus into the homes of an audience normally hostile

to such social and literary challenges” (90). And Margaret Oliphant would prove even less susceptible to taming by Blackwood’s editors.

Chapter 6 details the commissioning of Margaret Oliphant to write the official history of the House of Blackwood and the “conflicting demands of a firm intent on honoring its editorial acumen..., an author intent on celebrating individualistic authorial power, and a family focused on enhancing the reputation of its illustrious family members” (114). As Finkelstein illustrates, Oliphant’s long association with the firm, her persistence, and her indomitable character, along with her strategy of reproducing the established pattern of Scottish publishing memoirs by incorporating the themes of self-improvement, love of reason and inquiry, personal and religious faith, and Acivic nationalism” (115-116), allowed her to prevail in creating a house identity that satisfied her own individual agenda as well as that of her editors.

The remaining chapters of the book trace the firm’s declining fortunes from 1880 to 1912 and its attempts to solidify its colonial markets in the face of threats from the rival *National Review*, which targeted the same Conservative readers over which *Blackwood’s Magazine* had long held a monopoly. The final chapter includes brief case studies of the role of literary agents in the firm’s relationships with Margaret Georgina Todd, Beatrice Harraden, and Joseph Conrad, concluding that the agents “ultimately provided a much-needed financial service that extended beyond the capabilities of Blackwood’s and its directors” (149). The book ends, as it begins, with tables providing publishing statistics at various moments in the firm’s history.

Ultimately, my assessment of the value of Finkelstein’s book is mixed: although the extensive material on the firm’s history and the associated tables would probably be of little use except to readers engaged in the study of Victorian publishing practices or material culture, the chapters on John Hanning Speke and Charles Reade make compelling reading for anyone with an interest in Victorian ideological, political, and social attitudes and how these attitudes informed Victorian texts and the authors and editors who produced them. I cannot resist adding one quibble here, however. Figure 5 on page 103 is a reproduction of the cover of the Colonial Library edition of Douglas Blackburn’s *Richard Hartley, Prospector*, and in the caption Finkelstein deems it necessary to point out, “The apostrophe in ‘Blackwood’s Colonial Library’ is misplaced on the Blackwood cover, demonstrating that Blackwood proofreaders were not infallible.” In a similar vein, I feel compelled to note that in the running title for Chapter 3, Speke’s name is misspelled “Speck” throughout, demonstrating that Pennsylvania State University Press proofreaders are no more infallible than were Blackwood’s. But since when has

infallibility been expected of proofreaders? They, like authors, editors, and reviewers, are only human. ❁