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Jake's Black Box

Roger E. Stoddard



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JACOB BLANCK HAD MANY BLACK BOXES. Except for the box under discussion here, they were cube-shaped, with hinged lids, handles, cornerpieces, clasps, and locks. They were a foot square, fashioned out of tough black fabrikoid, and they were fleece-lined, like old solander cases. When Jake was ready to go on the road, he would pack his loose-leaf notebooks of raw data into the boxes and send them ahead to the libraries he would visit along the East Coast. Each notebook bore a bookplate like the one illustrated on p. 81. At the end of a tour he would return to his office at Houghton Library where he and an assistant would prepare printer's copy for the new volume of *Bibliography of American Literature* (hereafter *BAL*). The photograph by Parkman D. Howe shows him entertaining company there.



Figure 2. JB in his office at Houghton Library. Photograph by Parkman D. Howe.
Gift of Roger E. Stoddard. 3¼ x 4 ½ in. (image). Added to b*2009M-46

JB (1906–1974) was projector, author, and editor of the bibliography, now the standard authority for the work of nearly three hundred American authors, and he was stationed for most of his tenure at Harvard, where he had access not only to the collections of Houghton Library, but also to those in Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library. After exhausting the library resources of Cambridge, Boston, and Worcester, he would travel to collect as much additional data as he could. A special issue of *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* is devoted to talks on BAL delivered at a conference in Houghton Library.¹

The non-standard box fell into my hands when Ken Gloss, proprietor of Boston's great public utility, the Brattle Book Shop founded by his father George, telephoned me on March 13, 2007, to announce that he had been called out to Cambridge by a relative of the Blanck family to pick up a box of Jake's things. Immediately I recalled a conversation with Jake's daughter Rosamunde (Roz) about just such a stash when she had come up to Boston for the funeral of her mother Stella (Stell). I made a date with Ken for the next afternoon, and I appeared with a luggage carrier, just in case.

1 Vol. 86, no. 2 (June 1992).

Ken joined me on the third floor of his shop, the “rare book room,” bearing a box of the usual black fabrikoid, but shaped more like a shirt box, 6” in height, 12¾” wide, and 19½” long. It had a lid, straps with buckles, metal corners, and two frames for labels (“to” and “from?”). Perhaps it was a trial design, the Ur-*BAL* traveling box. It was full of ephemera, with a couple of books at the very bottom. Everything all mixed up, it looked like the one-time contents of a drawer in a desk or bureau, the sort of place where you find *Flugblätter* of trade unions and fraternal organizations. Jake’s lodges were bookstores and libraries, his union the antiquarian booktrade, well demonstrated by the contents of the box.

Before proceeding with a description I should explain that after Jake’s death, two of his former assistants and several Houghton Library buddies (William H. Bond, Roger E. Stoddard, Carolyn E. Jakeman, Sidney E. Ives, Leslie M. Oliver, and Earle E. Coleman) chipped in to purchase from the Waltham bookseller Harold Burstein all of Jake’s copies of his own publications as a gift to Houghton Library (*75-1030-1068 in the accessions books). In 1971 Jake gave to the library an assortment of letters from friends on bibliographical subjects (1923–1935) (MS Am 1868). More to our point here, in 1973 he had given to the library his correspondence with the sage of Mansfield, Ohio, Ernest J. Wessen (1944–1973) (bMS Am 2541) and his complete set, with the supplements, of Wessen’s legendary book catalogs, *Midland Notes* (complete through no. 94, with unnumbered supplements) (*65-213F). The letters, rich of anecdote and opinion of the trade, are a perfect representation of the camaraderie that pertained among the dealers in those days. Then, at the completion of *BAL*, the Bibliographical Society of America presented the archive of correspondence and data to the library (*91M-0071) (MS Storage 300)). Those three *fonds* establish a frame, broad and thick, around what could be found in the black box. Here is a tally.

Journals, correspondence, and ephemera follow Jake’s career: he retains stray proofs from *Peter Parley to Penrod* (1938), his bibliography of classic American children’s books; he is appointed Bibliographer (Lilly Grant) in the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress, April 1, 1940–December 31, 1942; Mr. and Mrs. J. K. Lilly deliver a poinsettia to the Blanck family upon their arrival in Indianapolis at Christmas in 1942; there is a party for JB at the Grolier Club, January 17, 1942, to celebrate publication of the 4th edition of *American First Editions*, edited by JB; *BAL* staff (JB, Louis D. Barron, and Laurence [i. e., Geoffrey J. L.] Gomme) is housed in the Bowker Co. rare book

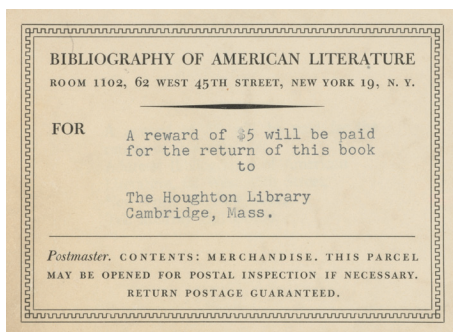


Figure 3. Label from one of the loose-leaf notebooks in which the worksheets of *BAL* were kept both in the office and on the road. 4¾ x 5¼ in. b*2009M-46

department in 1947, while JB continues to edit the Rare Book section of *Publishers' Weekly*; Jake goes house-hunting in Boston in 1949; JB is author of a children's book, *Jonathan and the Rainbow*, illustrated by Louis Slobodkin, 1949; Edward Morrill issues a prospectus for vol. 1 of *BAL*, 1955; JB appears on WNYC's Festival of Books radio program with Richard Wormser, Ben Grauer, John Gordan, and Madeleine Stern, April 8, 1957; he participates in a panel discussion with C. W. Barrett, C. K. Shipton, R. S. Wormser, and L. B. Wright at the BSA meeting in the John Carter Brown Library, October 10, 1959; JB pays tribute to Frank C. Willson (1889–1960) in *AB Bookman's Weekly*, May 9, 1960; JB lectures on "The Title-Page as Bibliographical Evidence," April 5, 1965, in the Howell lecture series at the University of California School of Librarianship; JB lectures on "The Juvenile Reading of Certain Nineteenth-Century Worthies" at the Massachusetts Historical Society, April 27, 1967; he is named Doctor of Humane Letters by Brown University in 1969; JB is elected to honorary membership in the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, 1970; New England /Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America holds a tribute meeting for JB, December 1970; BSA President T. R. Adams congratulates JB on the publication of *BAL*, February 11, 1974; Jenkins Bibliography prize for 1975 is awarded posthumously by Union College; JB's paper on "Problems in the Bibliographical Description of Nineteenth-Century American Books" is collected in *The Bibliographical Society of America 1904–79: A Retrospective Collection* (1980).

Friends and acquaintances send offprints and ephemera, mostly inscribed: Mark Carroll, Paul S. Clarkson, Thomas de Valcourt (2), Richard B. Harwell, Herbert Kleist, Roger Levenson, John S. Mayfield (2), Leona Rostenberg (2), Paul S. Seybolt, Rollo G. Silver (6), Madeleine B. Stern, RES (4)—"For the greatest bibliographer of American literature, who, I trust, shares my respect for C F Harris," Colton Storm, Eleanor M. Tilton (2), William B. Todd (2), Joe Vancouver ("L. M. W."), Lawrence M. Wilson, Paul Weer, Ernest J. Wessen (2)—"To Jake Blanck—a real bibliographer with the kindest regards of a tyro," John T. Winterich, and Jacob Zeitlin (4)—"This is not of the high level of our opus on *Der Grunion und Das Bezuchung Bie Die Pazific*."

There is a wealth of obituaries of JB: Frederick M. Meek, (funeral oration), *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 86 (1974); W. H. Bond, unpublished typescript, also *The Harvard Librarian* 11, 2 (Winter 1974–75); Jacob L. Chernofsky, *AB Bookman's Weekly* (January 6, 1975); 1975 *AB Bookman's Yearbook*, "Jacob N. Blanck Memorial Volume," (1975); RES, *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 85 (1975); *American Libraries* (April 1975); *The Boston Globe* (December 25, 1974); *Boston Herald American* (December 27, 1974); *The Brookline Chronicle* (January 2, 1975); *The New York Times* (December 26 and 27, 1974); and, *Publishers' Weekly* (January 20, 1975).

Then, toward the bottom of the box were two very sentimental items: Roswell Field's charming romance of a bibliophile and his indulgent wife, *The Bondage of Ballinger* (Chicago, 1903), inscribed "To Stella from Jack—this first edition of 'Ballinger' 1929," and an offprint from 1966 inscribed "For Mummy [Stell] with love—Pop [Jake]."

Views and Interviews on Journalism. Edited by
Charles F. Wingate. N.Y., 1875. * Bryant, pp 49-51.

A BIBLIOGRAPHY.

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The Gospel in the Trades. By Alexander Clark. With an Introduction by W. C. Bryant. 8vo. Philadelphia, 1871.

(Edited.) Picturesque America; or, the Land we live in. A Delineation by Pen and Pencil of . . . our Country. Illustrations. 2 volumes (or 48 parts), royal 4to. New York, 1871-74.

N.E. Society Celebration. [1872, N.Y.]

The Story of the Fountain. Illustrations. Square 8vo. New York, 1872.

The Little People of the Snow. Illustrations. Square 8vo. New York, 1873.

Orations and Addresses. 12mo. New York, 1873.

A Memorial of the Inauguration of Ward's Statue of Shakespeare in the Central Park. [With address by Bryant and poems by R. H. Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, John Brougham and others.] Illustrations. (Privately printed; 40 copies.) 8vo. New York, 1873. Also 12 copies folio.

Celebration. Chicago Literary Club. 1874.

Reception of Peter Cooper. N.Y., 1874. Among the Trees. Illustrations. Square 8vo. New York, 1874.

Proceedings at Dinner to S.B. Chittenden, Mar. 9, 1875. Bryant's address, pp. 18-20.

(With Sidney Howard Gay.) A Popular History of the United States, from the First Discovery of the Western Hemisphere by the Northmen, to the End of the Civil War. Preceded by a Sketch of the Pre-Historic Period and the Age of the Mound Builders. Portraits and illustrations. 4 volumes (or 51 parts), 8vo. New York, 1876-81.

To William Cullen Bryant at Eighty Years, from his Friends and Countrymen. [Addresses by Bryant, pp. 21-24, and 43-45.] Frontispiece. 8vo. New York, 1876.

Poems [including many now first collected]. Collected and arranged by the Author. Portrait and illustrations. Square 8vo. New York [1876].

Studies in Bryant: a Text-Book. By Joseph Alden. With an Introduction [pp. 5-10] by W. C. Bryant. 16mo. New York, 1876.

New York Centennial Celebration. 1876.

A Happy New Year. Carriers' Address, 1877. [The Flood of Years.] 8vo. [New York, 1876.]

*. Also issued with illustrations. 8vo. New York, 1877.

The Second Battle of Bennington. By C. S. Forbes. Illustrated. 16mo. St. Albans, 1877. Bryant's poem at p. 54.

In Memory of William Cullen Bryant...

Square 8vo, pp. 72, gray wrappers.

[Evening Post Steam Presses., N.Y., 1878.]

Contains "The Friar of Letters," by Stedman, pp. 27-36; "The Poet," by R. H. Stoddard, pp. 37-45; Bryant's last oration, pp. 53-54

Semi-centennial Celebration of the Church of the Messiah...

Mar. 19, 1875. [New York, 1875.] 8vo, pp. 42, brown wrappers.

Hymn, pp. 2-3: "As shadows cast, by cloud and sun..."

Proceedings of the Mass Meeting of Citizens... March 24th, 1874. 8vo. New York, 1874.

Figure 4. A page from Foley's *American Authors, 1795-1895*, with the manuscript notes of Louis Barron. 9 1/2 in. Collection of Roger E. Stoddard

There are three photographs: JB smoking a pipe at home; the old-time Boston bookseller Jack Neiburg, who named his catalogs “Phantom Firsts”; and a dreamy picture of Frank C. Willson, stamped by the Boston photographer Ernest Halberstadt (one of the original photographers for *BAL*). Frank, an expert on Mark Twain among much else, was a beloved member of the Boston trade: prints of this photograph hung in George Gloss’s shop and in the shop of Ernest Starr and his son.

Next to the bottom, beside some tape recordings that remain to be investigated, was Jake’s *vade mecum*, a booklet of plastic envelopes, about 4¾” x 2⅞”, with a flap at one end to tuck into a wallet.² Some of the notes are specific wants for *BAL*: “LMA: OFG: No advts on copyright,” “WANT: Seven Gables date 1852,” “H B Stowe / Lay /



Figure 5. Pages from JB’s *vade mecum* marking historic moments in the history of American graphic processes. b*2009M-46

Newton, Mass., May 1878,” or “JGW: Child Life in Poetry 72 / 1: Child Life impt copyt. / 2: Either no impt on copt or impt other than Sutton. WANT.” Other notes track the first or early American use of technical process: “Electrotypes,” “Book illus. with photos,” “stereo,” “machine set type,” “1st chromo in an Am. book,” “Steel Engraving,” and “Web Press Printing.” Then there are some reminders, such as “Analectic. 1819: Bass Otis; 1814: Nov. SSB.” Our Jack is not a dull boy, as we can see in the penultimate note: “Straight flush / 4 of a kind / Full house / Flush / Straight / 3 of a kind / 2 Pair / 1 Pair.” But the final note brings him back to work: “Original: / Cancelland / Replaced by: / Cancel / Cancellans.”

Finally, on the very bottom and slightly damp, was a copy of the avatar of all bibliographers of American literature, a Foley. To be explicit, *American Authors 1795–1895: A Bibliography of First and Notable Editions Chronologically Arranged with Notes*. By P. K. Foley (Boston: Printed for Subscribers, 1897). Copy number 37 of seventy-five

2 When William A. Jackson went book-hunting in Paris, he carried a small pocket diary in which his assistant Sidney E. Ives IV had inscribed the holdings of the authors he was following. Some years later I tried the same thing until I discovered a collector’s guide to French authors which I could annotate. When I hunted in Germanophone places I carried an annotated collector’s guide that my predecessor James E. Walsh had used, but also a select list of “high-value” desiderata. Parkman D. Howe always carried a pocket notebook of desiderata; when he showed it to me, I spotted a rare Bronson Alcott then held by a local dealer—so he reduced quite effortlessly his list by one.

copies in royal octavo, it bears the bookplates of Saml Bancroft Jun^r (Rockford, near Wilmington, Delaware) and Jacob Blanck. Inserted are copies of Foley's prospectus for the book, 1897, an ad for his services, June, 1904,³ and an offprint of Donald Gallup's article on Foley and the Yale book collector Owen F. Aldis, inscribed to JB.

A Boston antiquarian bookseller, Foley (1856–1937) accumulated and edited an amazing amount of data on nineteenth-century American authors, and his lists inspired a generation of amateurs and librarians to build collections. His book was the obvious place to start the new bibliography.

The copy is marked up: "The annotations made by Foley himself are in red ink and large numerals. The annotations which I transcribed from the two copies of Foley (at the American Antiquarian Society) are in red ink. The annotations which I transcribed from Wegelin's annotations⁴ (in the miscellaneous Foley material at AAS) are in black ink. Louis Barron September 11, 1945 The American Antiquarian Society copies of Foley were sent to the New York Public Library for our use."

Foley's autograph corrections are few in number. Nearly all of them are corrections of imprint date or place of publication. His ink is often darker than Barron's, his line finer, and he uses the insertion bar, a sweeping line of connection, and a distinctive deletion sign. Corrections in black ink from Wegelin's notes are hardly more numerous, perhaps because they duplicated Foley's.

Barron's transcriptions from the two copies of Foley at AAS overwhelm the lines and margins with new titles, including new publications through 1910. This shows how Foley was keeping up with his authors, both great and small. He pioneered the collecting (and bibliography) of books, including gift books and annuals, to which his authors contributed poems and stories. Difficult to find, this branch of American literary bibliography was taken up by *BAL*, much to the benefit of literary studies. The additions show how powerful the bibliography would have become if Foley had published a second edition. Completely transformed are the lists of Bryant, Clemens, Curtis, Emerson, Harte, Hawthorne, Higginson, Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell, Pierpont, and Whittier. What a boon to the *BAL* office!

This copy of Foley, enriched with the findings of former practitioners, must have been the principal building block for *BAL*, even though it is not mentioned in the preliminaries to the first volume.

3 To prove the results he can deliver to collectors, Foley boasts of a string of classic books he has supplied to customers since publishing his first catalog in September 1897. Among them are Aldrich's "'The Story of a Bad Boy' (special large paper issue of six copies, of which only three survive)," Emerson's "the only copy sold of 'Oversongs,'" Hawthorne's "'Fanshawe' (four copies); 'The Sister Years' (three of the four copies known in private collections); 'Times Portraiture'; 'The Celestial Railroad,'" etc.

4 This confused me at first, as I possess Wegelin's heavily annotated copy, but I see from notes and papers inserted in it that Wegelin had transmitted all his notes to AAS.

So, Jake's Black Box tells a story or two if you look closely. Now that I have described it as best I can, I report that Kenneth Gloss and I have presented all but the Foley to Houghton Library and the duplicate printed materials, with copies of the newspaper clippings, to the Grolier Club. For the time being I hold the Foley in order to make comparisons. I offer these notes for the sake of those who continue to pursue the subjects opened by Foley and his followers and established so clearly and thoroughly by Jacob Blanck.