The Greenwood Tree

The Somerset & Dorset Family History Society

Celebrating Our 50th Anniversary

First Steps in Family History

March 2025 Vol.50 No.1

Price when sold separately **£4.00**

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Volume 50 No.1 March 2025 **ISSN:** 0307 9872

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Editor: Paul Radford
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DEADLINES:

Edition	*Deadline*
June	**15 April**
September	15 July
December	15 October
March	15 January

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Front cover: 'First Steps' by Georgios Jakobides (1893).

The editor welcomes articles of any length but you are advised to contact him in advance if you plan to send one longer than 1,000 words. They should be sent by e-mail attachment with at least one photograph or illustration. Digital images should be scanned at a minimum of 300dpi.

There is no guarantee that an article will be accepted or in which edition it will appear. All articles may be edited and shortened as necessary for publication.

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Design, layout and printing by:
Creeds Design & Print
Mountfield
Bridport
Dorset
DT6 3JP

The Dorset Roots of George ORWELL

New Society member Darcy MOORE is researching George ORWELL's ancestral connections to Dorset and is seeking your help ahead of a trip to the county from America later this year. He has found aristocratic links and the existence of several 18th and 19th century portraits.

George ORWELL's many biographers have mostly neglected or misunderstood the significance of his family's origins in Dorset. Eric Arthur **BLAIR** (1903-1949), the Anglo-Indian author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, was born in India and assumed his famous pseudonym on the publication of his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933).

ORWELL's biographers do mention that his father, Richard W. BLAIR (1857-1939), was born in Dorset and that his grandfather, Thomas Richard Arthur BLAIR (1802-1867) served as the vicar of Milborne St Andrew. However, his aristocratic BLAIR, **FANE** and **MICHEL** ancestors in Dorset (and their connections to India and the Jamaican slave trade) are mostly ignored.

Rev Thomas BLAIR.

The first of ORWELL's biographers, Peter STANSKY and William ABRAHAMS who published *The Unknown Orwell* (1972), mention ORWELL's 2xgreat-grandfather Charles BLAIR (1743-1802) spent most of his married life with Lady Mary BLAIR née FANE (c1741-1813) at Winterborne Whitechurch and that a plaque on the north aisle wall of the parish church records 'the vicissitudes of the family'. They go on to say that Charles and Mary then relocated to nearby Blandford St Mary and leased Down House.

Henry FANE, Inigo JONES and Charles BLAIR by Sir Joshua REYNOLDS.

All subsequent biographers have agreed with STANSKY and ABRAHAMS that from "this epoch of affluence very little appears to have remained in ORWELL's family save for a portrait of Lady Mary Blair…".

My own research into the ancestral portraits that ORWELL and his parents owned has not yet uncovered who painted this portrait but has led me down some deep rabbit holes. The following artists were all commissioned to produce portraits of ORWELL's FANE, MICHEL and BLAIR ancestors in the 18th or early 19th century: Sir Joshua REYNOLDS (1723-1792), Thomas GAINSBOROUGH (1727-1788), Sir Nathaniel DANCE-HOLLAND (1734–1811), George ROMNEY (1734-1802), Thomas BEACH (1738-1806), Ozias HUMPHRY (1742-1810), Sir Henry RAEBURN (1745-1806), Philip REINAGLE (1749-1833), Sir Thomas LAWRENCE (1769-1830). DANCE-HOLLAND and LAWRENCE are strong contenders but Dorset painter, Thomas BEACH, is most likely to have painted Lady Mary's portrait for contextual reasons I will outline, although this is currently just speculation.

Aristocratic Leisure

Charles BLAIR married Lady Mary at Winterborne Whitechurch in 1762. This was around the time REYNOLDS commenced a commission which was to take five years to complete and became his largest group portrait. Lady Mary's new husband and her brother, along with a friend are represented in all their aristocratic leisure. BEACH, reputedly REYNOLDS' favourite student, worked with him in London c1760-1762 when the artist commenced work on this painting.

BEACH's 2xgreat-grand niece published a catalogue of his work in 1934 listing nine BLAIR portraits and four MICHEL ones as part of the MICHEL Collection. In 1901 they were owned by Major J.H. MICHEL and located at Dewlish House: 1 Portrait of a Boy (Thomas BLAIR), 2 Portrait of a Boy (BLAIR), 3 Portrait of a Boy (BLAIR), 4 Portrait of a Girl (BLAIR), 5 Portrait of a Boy (BLAIR), 6 Charles and Henry BLAIR, two boys playing, 7 Charles BLAIR 1777, 8 Charles BLAIR 1782, 9 Colonel D. R. MICHEL, 10 Colonel D. R. MICHEL, 11 Mrs MICHEL, 12 Mary MICHEL, 13 Grace MICHEL.

Portrait of Masters Charles and Henry BLAIR.

There is no Lady Mary listing in this incomplete catalogue. I do have some leads for the location of the painting (it was inherited by ORWELL's sister in 1950) which have not yet come to fruition due to the ill-health and age of the owners. However, three of the portraits by BEACH have been located and one provides a little more circumstantial evidence. BEACH painted Lady Mary and Charles' two sons, Henry Charles BLAIR (1775-1794) and, ORWELL's great-grandfather, Charles BLAIR (1776-1854) in 1782.

ORWELL mentions in a series of letters that he had a damaged painting restored which fits the description and dimensions of number 4 in the catalogue, Portrait of a Girl (BLAIR) – but this is in no way even remotely conclusive evidence and I have yet to locate the painting. It is also possible that Thomas GAINSBOROUGH was the artist. The portrait is unsigned, but he had also been commissioned to paint Lady Mary's brother and other members of the FANE family.

One brief aside. While researching these artists and paintings, the FANE, BLAIR and MICHEL estates, where these portraits hung, caught my attention – Down House (destroyed in 1941 by fire), Kingston Russell House and Dewlish House but also Brympton House in Somerset and Fulbeck Manor in Lincolnshire are sites I will visit later in the year.

Eton of the West

Another ancestor unknown in ORWELL scholarship, Arthur BLAIR (1846-1879), was a paternal uncle educated in Dorset. Although it is generally thought that ORWELL's father and siblings were privately tutored at home, Arthur was well educated at a reputable grammar school. He is listed on the 1861 census as a scholar attending East Street Grammar School (Milton Abbey School) at Blandford Forum which was praised as 'the Eton of the West'.

In 1859, Arthur attended a fête with his father and two sisters which a local newspaper trumpeted, under the headline, *Opening Of The National Schools*, as celebrating 'the completion and opening of a beautiful group of buildings in which it is intended to give the rising generation in the locality the full advantage of our national system of education'. It is evident that his education prepared him more than adequately for his career as a District Superintendent of Police. Arthur BLAIR successfully passed his 'police paper' in 1864,

Arthur BLAIR.

when he was 18 years of age. His siblings, including ORWELL's father, struggled with the examinations they had to sit for the Indian Civil Service not having had the same educational opportunities.

In a terrible historical irony, ORWELL's Uncle Arthur, District Superintendent of Police, died young of phthisis (tuberculosis), once thought to be a hereditary disease, in 1879. ORWELL, who followed in his uncle's footsteps serving as a police officer, died of the same disease in 1950.

I will be in Dorset during October this year conducting research in local archives and visiting sites of interest. I am particularly keen to learn from local people more about Dewlish House, Down House, Kingston Russell House, Brympton House, the Anglican churches at Winterborne Whitechurch and Milborne St Andrew, the FANE, MICHEL and BLAIR families during the 18th-19th centuries, including their military service (e.g. ORWELL's grandfather was a military officer before his career in the clergy), Milton Abbey School, the local politics of the Anglican church mid-19th century (ORWELL's grandfather was in conflict with Bishop **GRAY** which led to him departing South Africa for Milborne St Andrew in 1854).

Please get in touch if you can help or are generally interested. I can be contacted at dfjmoore@gmail.com or via my website darcymoore.net where you can read research into the life, times and work of George ORWELL.

Darcy Moore

Next Edition: 50th Anniversary Special

The June 2025 issue of *The Greenwood Tree* will be a special edition devoted to the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society.

We will have special features on the history of our Society, a look at how genealogy has changed over the last half century and some early recollections from founder members and those who joined in the fledgling days of the SDFHS.

But we would welcome contributions from all members of the SDFHS. Tell us what the Society means to you, how it has helped you in your research or how it has connected you to other people with family links.

You can do this in any way you like, either as a story or as a letter to the editor. If you are moved to write a poem, please feel free. We would like to have a wide range of contributions to mark this special occasion.

Please send your offerings to thegreenwoodtree98@gmail.com by 15 April. Where possible, send us a photograph or image to accompany it.

Paul Radford, Editor