The Life and Times of Mary, Dowager Duchess of Sutherland

The Life and Times of Mary, Dowager Duchess of Sutherland:

Power Play

By

Catherine Layton

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Life and Times of Mary, Dowager Duchess of Sutherland: Power Play

By Catherine Layton

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-0550-2
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0550-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations viii

Acknowledgements x

Introduction 1

Chapter One 6
She Began Life Humbly Enough

Chapter Two 19
Scenes from an Oxford Childhood

Chapter Three 31
The Wider World

Chapter Four 39
The Bloom of Youth

Chapter Five 42
Arthur Kindersley Blair

Chapter Six 55
Leisured Lives

Chapter Seven 62
Relatives, Friends, Deaths and Rebirth

Chapter Eight 73
Introducing the Duke

Chapter Nine 84
Resuming Living, 1875–1877

Chapter Ten 98
Rollo's Record, 1878

Chapter Eleven 103
From London to the Highlands

Chapter Twelve 113
A Duke's Life, 1875–1883

Chapter Thirteen 124
Events at Bohespic, 1833

Chapter Fourteen 129
Whither Thou Goest

Chapter Fifteen 138
Mysteries

Chapter Sixteen 152
Uncertainty, 1887

Chapter Seventeen 182
Examining the Diary

Chapter Eighteen 192
Edward in Siam

Chapter Nineteen 196
Wanderlust

Chapter Twenty 202
Changed Circumstances

Chapter Twenty One 220
May's Dangerous Years

Chapter Twenty Two 233
Disasters

Chapter Twenty Three 243
Dueling Stags

Chapter Twenty Four 246
A Woman of No Importance

Chapter Twenty Five 264
War

Chapter Twenty Six 282
Sir Albert Kaye Rollit (1843-1922), LLD, M.P.

Chapter Twenty Seven 295
May's New Beginning, 1897–1900

Chapter Twenty Eight 309
A Changed World

Chapter Twenty Nine 319
New Horizons

Chapter Thirty 330
May's Final Chapter

Appendix A 338
Genealogical Information
1. May, her siblings and their children 338
2. May's maternal relatives 339
3. May's paternal relatives 340
4. Arthur Kindersley Blair's maternal relatives 340
5. 3rd Duke of Sutherland's relatives 341
6. Sir Albert Kaye Rollit's relatives 342

Appendix B 344
List of Abbreviations (Newsprint Sources)

Manuscript Sources 348

Bibliography 349

Index 392

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1-1. May's father, Rev. Dr. Richard Michell (1805-1877). Portrait (after Edis 1860). Reproduced in *The Graphic, 15* (1877), p. 356.
Fig. 1-2. May's mother, Amelia "Emily" Michell née Blair (1811-1896).
Fig. 1-3. The Michell siblings with Sir Albert Kaye Rollit, c. 1896.
Fig. 3-1. Rue de Rivoli, where May's brother Edward had been lodging, after the fights and the fires during the Paris Commune.
Fig. 4-1. Capt. Arthur Kindersley Blair (1834-1883), May's first husband.
Figs. 5-1, 5-2. Arthur K.'s parents, Caroline Blair, née Brooke (1803-1868) and Henry Martin Blair (1799-1880). Photographs by Hughes at Ryde, Isle of Wight.
Fig. 7-1. View from the north end of the terrace at Dunrobin towards the sea. Lady Paget would have had just such a vantage point.
Fig. 8-1. Entrance Hall, Stafford House, now Lancaster House.
Fig. 8-2. George Granville Sutherland Leveson Gower, 3rd Duke of Sutherland (1828-1882). Albumen carte de visite, 1862, by Lock & Whitfield.
Fig. 8-3. Trentham: the remains of the sculpture gallery.
Fig. 8-4. Dunrobin Castle.
Fig. 9-1. May's father, Rev. Dr. Richard Michell, not long before his death.
Fig. 9-2. Punch cartoon with the caption, "The Lion's Share: Gare à qui la touche!" Disraeli handing British government money to the Khedive (Egypt being the key to India).
Fig. 11-2. Detail of the Savage Club Ball, quite possibly May as Swiss maid, and escort (Arthur K.?). *The Graphic*, 21 July 1883, p. 64.
Fig. 13-1. Dalreoch Burn, where Arthur's body was found.
Fig. 14-1. Three-masted Steam Yacht, *Sans Peur*, reverted to its original name and leased out by 4th Duke, the *Catarina*. "Le Yacht Catarina, qui porte Jen Gallay, Mme Merelli et leur fortune." *L'Illustration*, samedi 26 août 1905.
Fig. 14-2. May Michell, by unknown artist, c. 1885.
Fig. 14-3. Sir Edward Carson (1854-1935), who was forced to leave the Duke's yacht in the Azores, winter 1885/1886.
Fig. 15-1. John Bigelow (1817-1911), who wrote a journal covering the Panama Canal visit and corresponded with and about May.

Fig. 15-2. John Bigelow's diary entry (extract), Saturday 20 February, 1887, p. 37.
Fig. 15-3. Panama Canal Company photograph of F. & C. de Lesseps and party outside the Maison de Lesseps, 1886. Engraving by Rico, 1887.
Fig. 15-4. Miss Irene Blair, 23 June 1887. Carte de Visite by Elliott & Fry, 55 & 56 Baker Street.
Fig. 15-5. Panama Canal Company photograph of F. & C. de Lesseps and Party Outside the Maison de Lesseps, 1886. A. B. Nicholls Panama Canal Collection Notebook (1882-1905).
Fig. 17-1. May's 1887 diary starts...
Fig. 20-1. Episcopal Church at Dunedin, Florida, with separate bell-tower, at which Duke and May married in 1888. *Episcopal church building-Dunedin, Florida*, c. 1911. Black & white photonegative.
Fig. 20-2. May in her silk wedding gown trimmed with Chantilly lace.
Fig. 21-1. May, at home in her superb diamonds, c. 1890.
Fig. 21-2. Miss Irene Blair, aged 18 (1894).
Fig. 22-1. What remains of the Helmsdale Harbour extension, opened by May in 1892.
Fig. 24-1. May's portrait placed above an illustration of *A Woman of No Importance*. *Illustrated London News*, 29 April, 1893, p. 516.
Fig. 26-1. Sir Albert Kaye Rollit as painted by "Haggerston Bennison" in the Guildhall, Hull.
Fig. 26-2. Sir Albert Kaye Rollit, Hon. Lieut. Col., Humber Militia Division of the Royal Marine Engineers.
Fig. 26-3. May in mourning, possibly a sketch for the painting hung at the Royal Academy by Samuel Luke Fildes, R.A. (1843-1927), 1898.
Fig. 28-1. Painting of May by an unknown artist, July 1901. Bruno Bubna-Kasteliz Collection.
Fig. 30-1. May in later years.
Fig. 30-2. Carbisdale Castle, with its complex roofline.
Fig. 30-3. Trentham Mausoleum.

The Publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce these illustrations: Alamy 15-3; Bridgeman Images 26-1; Charles Brull 7-1, 8-1, 8-3, 8-4, 13-1, 22-1, 30-2, 30-3; Bruno Bubna-Kasteliz 4-1, 5-1, 5-2, 14-2, 15-4, 17-1, 20-2, 21-1, 21-2, 26-2, 26-3; 28-1, 30-1; François Michell 1-1, 1-2, 1-3, 9-1; Mary Evans Picture Library 24-1.
Images retrieved from websites: British Empire 9-2; Florida Memory 20-1; Gutenberg Press 14-1; Linda Hall Library 15-5; The New York Public Library 15-2; Royal Albert Hall 11.1; Wikimedia 3-1, 8-2, 14-1, 14-3, 15-1, 20-1.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a starting point, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Bruno Bubna-Kasteliz, Mary Caroline's great grandson, without whom this biography would not have been possible. His records and family lore confirmed my challenge to received conceptions about her, and opened the door to yet more sources. His detailed attention to my drafts has turned this work from an imaginative reconstruction into a definitive biography based on a strong trail of evidence. I wish to add special thanks to Gillie, Bruno's wife, for her kind hospitality and the Eton mess when we visited.

The work of Ian Mitchell, who developed the site http://www.devon-mitchells.co.uk deserves particular acknowledgement. His carefully curated genealogical records attracted contributions by both Dr. Bubna-Kasteliz and his cousin, François Michell, and it was Ian who put me in touch with both of May's descendants.

Four of the six archives accessed have involved individualised attention. Firstly, the records at the Staffordshire Archives are those stored on behalf of the ducal family, and are for private use only. Although not drawn on in this book, I would still like to thank the archivists, particularly Joanne Peck, for wading through some tedious household records on my behalf. Arundel Castle archives contain Lord Lyons' papers, and include letters written to him by members of the Michell family between 1858 and 1885, incorporated here with the kind permission of His Grace the Duke of Norfolk. Rebecca Hughes, the archivist, was most helpful in summarising this correspondence. Dr. Lucy Rutherford undertook a similar task with the Hertford College archives. Finally, Marlaine Deschamps of Union College, along with her associated staff, uploaded letters from, to, and about May that are located in "The Correspondence of John Bigelow" archive.

Several other people deserve a mention for their kindness. These include Tommaso Mari at St. Benet's Hall, Oxford, who showed me around this terrace house where May was born and raised. Sharon Finlayson (Assistant Event Manager) kindly spent an hour with me in Lancaster House in London, now the Foreign Office, another of May's homes (then called Stafford House). Tim Day (Housemaster) and Carol Givens (Matron) of Michell House at Rugby College, which brother Walter had built and of which he was housemaster, gave me a warm

welcome and a tour. Finally, Jonathan Goodwin, Senior Planning Officer at the City of Stoke on Trent, opened up the city's only Grade I listed building, Trentham Mausoleum, and swept the crumbling stone off the graves that mattered.

Thanks are also due to Dr. Michel Pharand in Kingston, Ontario, for his kindly copyediting. His feedback was most inspiriting.

Lastly and most importantly, I am indebted to my partner, Charles Brull. He saw the point of recounting May's story with a particular focus on her social and historical context. He also accompanied me around England and Scotland, a video camera in one hand and an ordinary camera in the other, building a record of our trip and the story.

INTRODUCTION

> One thing I shall touch upon will be the effect of politics on personal friendships. Few people realise how closely they are bound together.[1]

I came across the life of Mary Caroline "May" Michell (1848–1912) through what is now a common passion amongst the retired: family history. There had been intimations of a "good connection" on my mother's side, but I had rapidly disproved any such descent. However, it turned out that a cousin of my great-grandmother had married a Duchess.

The press was almost unremittingly derogatory, as were various diarists. Lady Paget wrote that the 3rd Duke of Sutherland left a million of money and everything he possibly could to the woman whose rapacity was boundless. "She led him a dog's life, but he, being weak, could not extricate himself from her toils" (Paget, 1924, p. 539). Even contemporary mentions of her perpetuate views of wronged wives and predatory mistresses, without any critical assessment of the social, political and legal context, nor in whose interests the original reports were published. May seemed to be condemned to remain forever Other.

Yet the more I examined her life, the more inadequate the stereotyped picture seemed to be. Living on the other side of the world, I turned to as many contemporaneous documents available to the sedentary historian as I could. Besides the standard genealogical research, which rapidly revealed the inadequacy of the descriptions of May's family background, I was lucky in that the era was one in which Reuters' telegraphic news service tracked the social activities of the nobility in England, and routinely covered at least some of their comings and goings abroad. These were now accessible in the collection of nineteenth-century British Library Newspaper Collection through websites such as findmypast. It rapidly became apparent that there were differing political allegiances amongst those who owned and edited the various newspapers and periodicals, and the majority of the coverage of May and events in her life was Liberal, when May came from a staunchly Conservative family. Although there were Marxist voices identifying the problems women faced as having a

[1] Society as Lady Warwick Sees It. *Dominion, I* (122), 15 February 1908. National Library of New Zealand.

base in societal structures and economics (Marx and Aveling, 1886), these were not widely heard.

In addition to these daily and weekly reports, there was also an extraordinary passion for writing and publishing journals and diaries. These ranged from gossipy insights into the lives of the rich and famous–the equivalent of women's magazines–to insights into exotic customs and places. Our current technology has put many of these old documents on line, and I particularly drew on archive.com, Google Books, the HathiTrust Digital Library, Forgotten Books and Project Gutenberg for such materials. Another key online resource is family histories, both within sites where one can do one's own research (in my case, familysearch and ancestry.co.uk) and posted by individuals covering completed research. All of these allow for cross-checking, once gaps in the story appear. Most importantly, though, it is through the devon.michell site that Dr. Bruno Bubna-Kasteliz and I eventually met. Bruno is a direct descendant of May's and has items and records that belonged to her. Suddenly, what had been a dilettante passion that I could interpret as I chose demanded a far more factual approach.

I am most indebted to Bruno. I am an interloper into May's life, and there would be no justification at all for my interest were it not for my feeling there is an injustice to be righted, and that I have some of the skills that could make this possible.

The nature of this biography

As mentioned above, most descriptions of May are unflattering at best, and often downright hostile. She was by no means the only mistress to fall foul of the press, and I think she felt, as others must have, that fate, the press and Society had treated her cruelly. Over time, the descriptions of May have become increasingly, rather than less, unbalanced. The scholarly foundations of recent works go just so far, relying as they do on the Sutherland family archives at the expense of seeking any contrary evidence. The most derogatory is the work of Brian Masters (2001). Bell (1996) attempted a more balanced, and very detailed, picture but his sources distorted the outcome. Yorke (2007) concentrated on Stafford House and the few remarks he made about May were antithetical. Hamilton (2011) had more material on May in covering the theft of her jewels, but again the picture that emerges is of a highly unpleasant woman. I have taken the opposite path and have relied on material other than that in the Sutherland archives. Bell and Yorke, in particular, drew on these, and so a wider net seemed advisable. There are, fortunately, several

relevant archives, including that belonging to Bruno. He has allowed me to use May's entire 1887 diary. As to other works, where writers are hostile I have used their work–but have also included much information that is neutral and some that is even favourable. Each chapter starts with a sample of quotations about the situations or people in focus.

The major work in developing this biography has been grasping the context of May's life and the forces at play. Her life does not make sense without knowledge of her family connection to Disraeli and the Khedive of Egypt, the Sutherland family's friendship with Oscar Wilde, or why Sir Albert Rollit (her third husband) might have had dealings with Reilly, "Ace of Spies". Power of many types comes into the story: struggles over control of universities, the issue of Empire and subjected peoples, of men over women, of the aristocracy over the lesser populace, over resources and countries on the international scene, and what constituted news at the time. The greatest leap I have taken is in teasing out the relationship between events in May's life and various literary works, including Wilde's social comedies.

Cautionary Remarks

My work rests on the assumption that others can read (and, of course, misread) the traces left by human activity. As Mrs. Florence Caddy herself put it in the days when "man" was a generic term and "she" was always subsumed in "he", "When records are scanty one works best by putting likelihoods together, by following his road and describing what he saw" (Caddy, 1887, p. 53). This biography reflects a painstaking process of reconstruction from multiple contemporaneous sources, involving continuous tacking between May's early and later life, to build a profile that might make later events an emotionally coherent consequence. Two and two hopefully keep making four, but there are several instances when Bruno and I have come to quite different conclusions, or when no conclusion at all is possible.

These differences of opinion are explicitly raised in the text because biography, like any other history, is a form of fiction. This is my recreation of May and her life as I understand it, and there are inevitable flaws. However fascinating and tantalising the materials are upon which I have drawn, they, like my version of events and motivations, must be taken with a pinch of salt. That there is information available does not mean that it is accurate, well understood by whoever wrote it, or even truthful, or that I have the historico-cultural or linguistic awareness to understand the implicit and arrive at "the truth" (Pherson and Pherson, 2012). Family lore

presents similar problems; it is akin to Chinese whispers, grains of truth possibly distorted by the passage of time and the different intentions and understandings of speakers and listeners. Diarists' accounts, including May's, John Bigelow's and her brother Rowland's, will have partisan viewpoints and may be constrained by concerns about privacy (even when unpublished), and edited diaries and memoires (such as those of Lady Paget and the Duke's brother, Lord Ronald Gower) may be more about bolstering the writer's image than revealing potentially embarrassing complexities. Some people in the news (including the Duke and Sir Albert Rollit) either owned newspapers or paid journalists to write about their activities, both of which limited what could be reported and how. This is indeed mute evidence, ripe for distortion.

Some matters have been quite simple to establish–which high-profile people went where, for example, although, even with this type of material there can be differences between sources. These are the nearest to "facts". With matters of opinion, the Admiralty Scale helps, albeit as a blunt tool: how credible and reliable is this source in the general scheme of things, but, more especially, how credible and reliable might it be in matters where the author is known to be partisan or vulnerable? Unpublished diaries present a different type of problem, as, despite the access one has to thoughts and feelings, the writer rarely refers to context and often uses nicknames and other personal reference points. The principle in dealing with such holes and discrepancies in qualitative data is triangulation: the use of a variety of sources to bear upon a particular issue. Some events have one source only (potentially biased), have conflicting reports, are only written of by later authors or are not confirmed by family lore. All of these can only be treated as questions or speculations. When several sources tend to converge on the one interpretation, then I feel on firmer ground and happily call them assertions (more or less tentative) rather than facts.

Still, many grey areas remain. May knew the answer to two enduring questions: how her first husband died, and what was in a letter she destroyed in the midst of the court case after the death of her Duke. She also knew who her friends were, how she came to meet the Duke and marry Arthur Blair, and had knowledge of various smaller matters, such as the cause of her young baby's death and why her third marriage foundered.

Whilst emotions transcend time–for they were and are spontaneous responses to situations that are biological and life-ensuring–values change. The "rightness" of the British Empire and activities such as buying slaves and bribing nabobs were taken for granted as normal and unproblematic, and balancing contemporaneous and contemporary understandings without

appearing to condone them is essential. However, as Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 25) once noted, it is difficult to push the bus in which you are riding, and so this is another area in which I might have made grave errors. But I have tried to base my imaginative leaps on scrupulous attention to historical sources, in the hope that others will examine the details and either accept or challenge what I have written on the basis of the historical facts.

And so?

This is not a Victorian moral tale in which there are clear-cut heroes and villains; all have "flaws" that make them as human as anyone else. Overall, May and those who fought against her survived as best they could in a society that may be better understood in hindsight than it could have been by those in the midst of the action. Nonetheless, it seems to me that, whilst one has to acknowledge the wide differences in values, attitudes and social practices, it is not enough to leave, for example, the denigration of May as a she-devil (Yorke, 2001, p. 158) unchallenged. One risks not learning from history and dealing insensitively with people whose lives now travel along unconventional paths. With any luck, May's story may go a little way towards illuminating our understanding of her era, the judgments that were made about her, and the relevance of the struggles she faced to contemporary public and private lives.

References

Bell, G. T. (1995). *A Prospect of Sutherland: The Building of a Castle and the Making of a Duchess.* Edinburgh: Birlinn.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge.* London: Penguin.

Caddy, Mrs. F. (1887). *Through the Fields with Linnaeus: A Chapter in Swedish History* (Vol. 1). Miami, FL: HardPress Publishing.

Hamilton, D. (2012). *The Unreliable Life of Harry the Valet: The Great Victorian Jewel Thief.* London: Windmill Books.

Kendall, P. M. (n.d.). Biography. [Encyclopaedia Britannica.]

Marx, E., & Aveling, E. (1886). The Woman Question. *Westminster Review.*

Masters, B. (2001). *The Dukes: The Origins, Ennoblement and History of Twenty-six Families.* New York: Random House.

Paget, W. E. H., Lady. (1924?). *In My Tower.* London: Hutchinson.

Pherson, K. H., & Pherson, R. H. (2012). *Critical Thinking for Strategic Intelligence.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yorke, J. (2001). *Lancaster House: London's Greatest Town House*. London: Merrell, p. 158.

CHAPTER ONE

SHE BEGAN LIFE HUMBLY ENOUGH

> OLD, UGLY, AND FASCINATING: [The Dowager Duchess of Sutherland] had a career which should be a positive inspiration to plain women. She began life humbly enough as regards station was concerned, and almost hopelessly as far as looks went. She was six-feet tall, raw-boned, and grim-featured. She married the gamekeeper of the Duke of Sutherland, Kindersley Blair.[1]

> Mary was the fifth child born of eight, and the youngest daughter. Her father was a successful private tutor and later went on to become the first principal of Hertford College. Although her origins as a daughter of the manse were in no way impoverished they were fairly humble, certainly a million miles from the world of wealth and privilege she would know later in life. Little is known of Mary's early years, and it is not until 1872 when she marries that life events begin to be recorded in the papers and magazines of the time.[2]

One summer morning in 1894, a fashionable crowd clustered at the door of the Probate Court in the High Court of Justice, Probate and Admiralty Division. They were anticipating at least a week of titillating scandal. The Prince of Wales was being called, but he was not necessarily the main draw card. The Dowager Duchess, to whom the Duke had left everything that was not entailed, had originally been the Duke's lover. Her first husband had been mysteriously shot. Better still, she had been sent to gaol for contempt of court just the year before: she had burnt a document, seemingly on an arrogant whim. The 4th Duke of Sutherland claimed she had exerted undue influence over his father, and, best of all, the only way a jury could be satisfied of her guilt was by the minute examination of the couple's daily life. How had this unpleasant and unprincipled woman arrived at this situation?

---

[1] *LTD*, 28 Dec. 1898, p. 3.
[2] Charles. (4 September 2012). The Jailbird Duchess. [History at Random.] 15 July 2016.

When Mary Caroline "May" Michell was born in 1848, British society was more medieval tower than townhouse. Most of the population was crammed into its cellars and, at worse, the oubliettes of the Antipodes. Fewer than 7,000 people owned four-fifths of the country. Most of the rest could be called "of humble origins". Rank mattered: even prime ministers could not sit in the Queen's presence, and reports in the papers of Society's comings and goings were structured so readers could quickly identify who was important in relation to whom. Queen, Princes and Princesses, Dukes and Duchesses, Marquesses and Marchionesses, Earls and Countesses, Viscounts and Viscountesses preceded Barons and Baronesses, in that order. The knighted, politicians, diplomats, clerics and military officers followed. At the time of her court case, May was very near to the top of the tower.

Beneath these vantage points, changes in land use and industry had created a complex and evolving hierarchy. The middle classes might ascend a landing. Some had become landowners and bankers, mostly in a comparatively minor way and connected to the need of aristocrats to shed some of their property. Overseas plantations in the West Indies, profitable government and judicial offices in the East and West Indies, and/or war bounties, had financed their purchases. In the days when politics involved land ownership and paying people to vote, such men could move up still further if they entered Parliament, especially when knighted for their efforts.

Both the nobility and the church were dependent upon income derived from property and agriculture, although latterly the aristocracy had benefited from industrial ventures on their vast acreages. Aristocrats owned manses and clerical "livings", taxes levied from tenant farmers and peasants that financed the life of the local clergyman. However, livings varied widely depending on income and isolation from the mainstream.

May grew up in the one street in Oxford (the nearby village manse in which her father later had the living was tied to Magdalen Hall; the family never lived there). The family home was a leased house conveniently located close to her father's academic work. In this university town, religion, rank, ritual, respect, and recreation steeped the ancient stones. Appearances of unity and conformity amongst academics were a mirage: social, religious, political and generational differences were cracking its foundations. May's father could be nothing other than a player in these schisms.

The Reverend Dr. Richard Michell[3] was born in Bruton in Somerset, one of eight children. His father Edward was a Master Extraordinary in the High Court of Chancery, for which the qualifications were residence in a particular location and being a practitioner of probity and integrity. He took affidavits on behalf of this court in matters of equity (trusts, land law and the administration of the estates of lunatics and minors). Richard's uncle was principal of Bruton School. Another uncle was Proctor at Wadham College, where Richard was elected an Exhibitioner in 1819. Connections mattered, certainly, but Richard was also scholarly.

He was only nineteen when he obtained a First Class Honours degree in classics. Admitted to the Middle Temple, he chose instead to pursue classics and ordination. He rose quickly. By the age of twenty-four, he was a public examiner, an office that he was to hold frequently. His outstanding results afforded him a sinecure (the Wells Fellowship) at Lincoln College from 1830, where he was bursar (1832) and tutor (1834-48). At thirty-four years of age, his Latin scholarship led to his election, from amongst four candidates, as the first Professor of Logic, with 218 votes of the 388[4]. His Crewian orations (delivered at Commemoration ceremonies) were noted for their excellent Latinity, but he cast his intellectual net more widely, extending his interests into natural history[5].

Richard was a man with the lightheartedness and geniality of the Georgian era, without the wig–or Whig: he was a leading manager of the Oxford Tory party (Fig. 1-1). He made friends easily, both with students and colleagues[6]. This was perhaps due to his overt enjoyment of all life had to offer–from Hymettus honey shared over breakfast with Classicists, port after dinner with the Fellows, to carrying a gun over his shoulder on moorland walks even when there was no likelihood of bagging anything[7].

---

[3] Reverend Richard Michell, D.D. (1805–1877) (see Appendix 1). All but Richard and a sister stayed in Bruton. Mary Ann Michell (1807–1862) married John Macquarie Palmer Esq. (b. 1814, a member of the Australian squatocracy) and subsequently lived and died in Parramatta, New South Wales.

[4] Oxford, June 5. *SGC*, 7 Jun. 1839, p. 3.

[5] *OUC*, 18 Dec. 1847, p. 3.

[6] May's father's students included Lord Lyons, diplomat and lifelong family friend (his son Rowland's – Rollo's – godfather); Lord Selborne, lawyer and politician; a trio of bishops, that is, of Manchester (the liberal educationalist Rev. James Fraser), of Norwich (Rev. Hon. John Pelham, D.D.), and of St. Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane (Rev. Charles Wordsworth, the poet's nephew and a fine athlete); two Liberal politicians (Right Hon. R. J. Mowbray and Viscount Sherbrooke); two Deans, Richard Church and Henry Liddell; and Professor James Froude, historian.

[7] Description derived from Dr. Michell's correspondence with Lord Lyons, his son Rollo's diary, and family lore.

His fondness for port had rendered him a trifle burly and florid and the occasional butt of student humour. He sounded rather hoarse at one graduation ceremony, and someone called out, "Give him a glass of water!" His own students shouted back, "He never drinks it!"[8]. More likely, though, it was his commitment to his students' learning, whatever their financial situation, that engendered admiration and loyalty through his vigour, tact and gentlemanly impartiality. He tutored Bishop James Fraser (whose widowed mother had little money) *gratis*. Wordsworth's grandson would call in the morning during his last term, and, at no cost, would be questioned on Rhetoric and Ethics whilst Richard shaved.

When May was very young, a lifelong political clash began between Richard and the Rev. Mark Pattison. Pattison had put up a Liberal competitor for the Wells Fellowship when Richard relinquished it on his marriage (Richard put up his younger brother, Rollo). Pattison described Rollo as "a wooden dunce, a reproduction of all his brother's Tory prejudices without his abilities"[9]. As to Richard, he was a disappointed man who had failed to live up to his promise and who, on the shelf as Vice-Principal of Magdalen Hall, the refuge of those who had run out of choices[10], was vindictive:

> […] he never lost an opportunity, private or public, of running me down. It was, I think, at the Gaudy of 1850 that in an after-dinner speech–Michell excelled in after-dinner oratory–he thought proper to insult me so grossly that it was impossible for me to let pass what was said in the face of the assembled college. In what he said he had laid himself so open to retort that a dexterous nimble-witted man would have laid him on his back with ease, and carried the company with him. I was not such a man; and being naturally in a state of boiling indignation, I went at the enemy in a blind fury, hardly knowing what I was saying, and of course placed all the company on the side of the assailant. Five minutes afterwards I was bitterly repenting the folly of my tongue; but I little thought at the time what use was to be afterwards made of it against me. There were other minor slips of conduct, all of which were carefully hoarded by Michell against the time that he might want them.[11].

Pattison outlined how Richard (to whom he referred as "Satan") prevented him becoming Principal of Lincoln College. On the eve of the election, Richard boasted at a party that "by three words" he could

[8] Bruno Bubna-Kasteliz, personal communication, 2016.
[9] Pattison, 1885, pp. 264-65.
[10] *E3*, 4 Jul.1874, pp. 10-11.
[11] Pattison, 1885, pp. 266-67.

determine its outcome. Pattison and his supporters made a tactical retreat and nominated a "ruffian" who won. As to the validity of the criticisms, several contemporary commentators described Pattison as being profoundly weak of will and character, a man who succumbed to deep and anti-social depression and who performed poorly as Principal once he won the position.

Richard had the light touch of an accomplished after-dinner speaker in other struggles. When a slightly hostile question was raised as to a Professor Westwood's religious opinions (he was a zoologist, and Oxford was only just beginning to recognise that science might be an important area of study), he quipped that the worthy professor was not a "sectarian", but an "insectarian". Some serious debates, even political ones, could be tackled humourously. Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) published a mock-heroic poem, "The Elections to the Hebdomadal Council", subtitled, "Now is the winter of our discontent", a reference to the President of St. John's, Dr. Wynter. Carroll was apparently railing against pestilential Conservatism. He wrote:

> Disenfranchise each Conservative, and cancel
> The votes of Michell, Liddon, Wall and Mansel!
> Then, then shall Oxford be herself again,
> Neglect the heart and cultivate the brain […].[12]

No doubt Conservatives laughed heartily as the lines about the Liberal Fellows who could then be appointed followed:

> "Avaunt, dull Virtue!" is Oxonia's cry:
> "Come to my arms, ingenious Villainy!"
> For Classic Fellowships, an honour high,
> Simonides and Co. will then apply–
> Our Mathematics will to Oxford bring
> The 'cutest members of the betting-ring–
> Law Fellowships will start upon their journeys
> A myriad of unscrupulous attorneys–
> While poisoners, doomed till now to toil unknown,
> Shall mount the Physical Professor's throne!

Richard's lack of progress was probably related to the wider battles about religion and the nature of university education to which Patterson and Dodgson were alluding (German was replacing Latin as the language

[12] Pycroft, 1896, p. 19.

of scholarship following Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert), combined with the longevity of the Principal of Magdalen Hall.

It appears Richard met his wife Emily[13] through a friend[14]. Whereas his origins lay amongst the lesser gentry in Devon, Emily's were, most immediately, amongst those who had profited from Britain's ventures in the East and West Indies and who, back in England, hovered at the edges of the upper echelons of society, buying up land, building mansions, and making good marriages. Further back, the grand connections were more solid. Emily was descended from lairds, the Blairs of Balgillo, who had lost everything in an ill-advised wager about temperance. A further loss was incurred on another branch of Emily's paternal tree when her great great grandfather, Peter Blair, lost all in the cause of James II[15]. Emily was related to Anne Hay-Mackenzie, who, in 1849, married the Marquis of Stafford (later the 3rd Duke of Sutherland, May's second husband), through John Mackenzie, 2nd Earl of Cromartie. The Duchess was descended from the eldest son, George, who lost his all, but not his life, as a result of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion. George's younger brother, Captain the Hon. Roderick Mackenzie, from whom Emily was descended, disputed the inheritance going to his niece, but, because he was fighting in Flanders at the time, failed to meet the required deadlines. Roderick's daughter, Jane, married William Blair, whilst Isabella, the inheriting niece, married George, the fourth Lord Elibank. Emily and the Duchess were thus fourth cousins, and both sides of Emily's family had suffered for their support of the Catholic Stuarts.

More immediately, Emily was the sixth daughter and tenth child of Thomas Blair Esq. (1751–1828) of the Honourable East India Company (i.e., a type of civil servant with opportunities to amass wealth in often dubious dealings with the nabobs) and Jane Frances Blair (1765–1841). Emily was born at her father's estate in Walton-on-Thames, although most of her siblings were born in India. Judging by the only remaining photograph and recollections from her descendants, she had a tiny frame that belied her strength (Fig. 1-2). As her grandson François Michell described her,

[13] Amelia "Emily" Blair (1811–96). She retained the Latin form of her name in formal documents.

[14] Through Emily's brother-in-law, James Stilwell. James's cousin was an Oxford man, John Browne Paige-Browne (1817–93), M.A. (Exeter), an executor of Richard's will.

[15] Family lore.

> Emily Blair was a sort of Wesleyan of the Scottish sort (her brother, Henry Blair–owner of Farleigh Castle in Somerset–wrote very low church religious tracts). Emily hand copied entire sermons by various clerics!

Typically for women, there is little information on her life, but some on her father and siblings. This provides some sense of her upbringing and the sorts of influences there may have been on her children[16].

Thomas Blair, her father, owned not only his Walton Grove estate but also a town house, 39/39a Welbeck Street in Marylebone. This was the area dubbed Little Bengal–the streets north of Cavendish and Portman Squares. Typically, H.E.I.C. retirees, having spent all their working lives drawing a British salary in outposts of the Empire, no longer felt they belonged anywhere, so clustered together here. Their identities as people of significance were thus confirmed. Thomas traded with the East Indies and retained a prominent role in the Bengal Military Orphans Society as their stationary agent. This was an H.E.I.C. charity, educating legitimate and illegitimate children of senior British staff in the Bengal Army (Mason & Owen, 1819; Smith, 1827).

Emily's eldest brother, William Thomas (1793–1881) took on the role of pater familias when their father died in 1828. In 1836, the supporter of William's nomination as Mayor of Bath following electoral reforms described him as:

> "a gentleman, in every sense of the word–in talents, acquirements, and habits"; "preeminently a Christian"; exemplary in "private life", and not less estimable in his "public character". "He filled," continued the speaker, an important office in India–that of High Sheriff for the Presidency of Madras; the duties of which he discharged with so much ability and zeal, and consequently with so much credit to himself and service to the Government, that he was, for the first time on record, nominated to the same situation a second year […]." […] It were easy to extend this notice, by expiating on the generous and unremitting labours of Mr. Blair to procure the abolition of Slavery wherever it is found to exist[17].

---

[16] See Appendix 1. Whilst being reluctant to footnote Emily's sisters, only two figure in her story. Eliza Maria "Lizzie" (1814–39) died just before Emily married. Frances Charlotte's (1795–1871) son or grandson, James Stilwell (1832–1908 or 1862-1912), is mentioned in May's diary.

[17] Stock, 1840, pp. 145-146. A William Blair Esq. published *An Inquiry into the State of Slavery Amongst the Romans* in 1833 (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, & London: Treutel, Wurtz & Richter). In the Preface, he mentions having served in two colonies, but not discussing contemporary slavery issues because of the political connotations. [Archive.org.]

Later in life, William established himself with his two then unmarried daughters, Harriet and Charlotte, at 1 Arlington Road, Twickenham Park. The area had been promoted in 1873 as one of leasehold residences for "families of the highest respectability" selling at about 30% below market value[18]. William's purchase, and the lack of any manservants, could mean he was happy to pick up bargains or that his fortunes were waning[19].

Another of Emily's brothers, Henry Martin (1799–1880), figures more significantly in May's life because he was the father of her first husband, Arthur Kindersley Blair (1834–83)[20]. The next boy, George Mackenzie (1800–30), graduated from Haileybury (the East India Company College) with third Class Honours. He redeemed himself with a well-regarded report on taxation in Poona. Suffering from a rheumatic condition, he took and promoted Indian medicated vapour baths in Brighton, which Sake Dene Mahomed, the "shampooing surgeon" [21] to George IV, had introduced. George married in Bombay in 1829, but died the next year in London.

Emily's next brother, Colonel Sir Charles Devaynes Blake (1804–60) served in the 10th Bengal Light Cavalry. Over his long career, he was knighted for bravery and awarded a star. As to his family, two of his children by his first wife had mental illnesses. One son from the second marriage became a gentleman companion in a Lunacy Asylum in Sussex, possibly caring for his siblings.

The Blair girls' lives were not as colourful. Perhaps Emily imagined her future as one of companionate spinsterhood with her younger sister, Eliza ("Lizzie") (Emily was born in 1811 and Lizzie in 1814). Lizzie had some artistic talent. In 1826–27, Miss E. Blair[22] of 39 Welbeck Street, received the Silver Palette for a drawing in chalk of a head in the Royal Society of the Arts division of "Polite Arts" (Honorary Class): Copies. In 1828, she received the same award for a chalk drawing, this time of an historical subject, obtaining the large Silver Medal.

---

[18] *MP*, 14 Feb. 1873.

[19] He left £4,053 14s 6d. Today, in terms of the historic standard of living, this is £368,200; economic status (prestige value), £3,198,000; and economic power (relative to other incomes or wealth) £5,914,000. In other words, compared to other people, it was a lot, but in terms of what it could actually purchase, not much.

[20] More details are provided about Henry in Chapter 5.

[21] Nowadays, a "massage therapist"; the word comes from the imperative form of a Hindustani verb, *chāmpō*.

[22] Given the conventions of the time, in which the eldest daughter did not have her initial mentioned, this must be Lizzie.

Lizzie died in April 1839. By this time, Emily was nearly thirty years old, all but permanently on the shelf in the eyes of society. Whether her late marriage to Richard was the outcome of a long engagement (having cared for her dying sister) or a late proposal of marriage is unknown. The couple wed at the neo-classical St. Marylebone Parish Church on Bastille Day 1841[23]. It would have been unlike a contemporary ceremony, in that only the witnesses were likely to be present, and Emily, judging from surviving examples in the V. & A., would have worn something like a peach-bronze silk dress with a matching bonnet and engageantes.

Their married life began at 36 St Giles. This was and is one of Oxford's main thoroughfares. It is wide enough for King Charles's troops to have drilled there, and still hosts (as it did in May's time) the many stalls and the crowds of the annual fair. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, elegant terraced houses were built behind the fringe of trees; the family stayed in one of these for five years. Edward Blair Michell was born there on 6 December 1842, as were Eliza Maria "Lizzie" (January 1844) and Richard "Brooke" (1 October 1845). In 1846, the family moved two doors away, to number 38. One year later, Rowland "Rollo" Lyons Nosworthy was born on 14 February 1847[24], then came Mary Caroline "May" on 21 June 1848. There was a three-year gap before Herbert William Cresswell (12 February 1851). With Arthur Tompson (16 September 1852) and Walter Gordon (28 April 1854), the brood was complete (Fig. 1-3).

The year May was born (1848) her father was appointed Vice-Principal of Magdalen Hall. The Principal, Dr. John McBride (the incumbent since 1813), was not a scholar, but a profoundly religious layman of the "old" evangelical school and a moderate Conservative. The appointment was simultaneously success and failure. The Hall did not have the autonomous status of, and was far poorer than, an incorporated Oxford College. Richard's progress to Principal depended upon Dr. McBride's lifespan, and he lived for twenty more years.

The year after this appointment, Richard was selected to present the Bampton lectures. The resulting volume, *The Nature and Comparative Value of Christian Evidences Considered Generally, in Eight Sermons*, comes to 377 pages. To the modern eye, this is heavy reading. He was described as treating the subjects "with good sense and felicitous diction". In 1849, he was appointed as the university's public orator, and he retained that office till his death. In 1856, he became Rector of South Moreton.

---

[23] *S4*, 17 May 1841, p. 21.

[24] Richard later mentioned Rollo as a child about whose health he was worried, and he did not press him hard to achieve academically as a consequence (letter to Lord Lyons, 26 January 1870).

In 1854, on the formation of the new Hebdomadal Council[25] under the act for reforming the university, Richard was elected to a seat he retained until 1872. The then Dean of Christ Church, Henry Liddell (1811–98)[26], from 1870 to 1874 the Vice-Chancellor and President of the Hebdomadal Council, had been an influential figure in these reforms, having long been convinced that the university's constitution required remodeling, to give real power to those engaged in education.

Richard was awarded his Doctor of Divinity in 1868, the year he became Principal. By then, university reforms had eroded Magdalen Hall's market and incorporation was necessary for its survival. Richard wanted to refurbish the buildings, offer fellowships and scholarships, extend the curriculum and develop a genuinely educational tutorial system. He set in train the conversion of the Hall into a College, despite the fact there was no substantial endowment. Convocation approved the design of a new college in 1873, and the expenses required for passing the necessary bill through Parliament were paid by subscription among the members of the Hall. It was just as well Richard had influential contacts (Dean Liddell, Dr. Jeune, and fellow Conservatives, to name a few). A benefactor fortuitously emerged.

Before the Act was passed, Thomas "T. C." or " "Charlie" Baring, Conservative M.P. and partner in Barings Bank, had offered his alma mater, Brasenose College, an endowment of £230,000, on condition that Fellows subscribe to the Church of England. As the Universities Test Act (1871) specified that no religious tests were to be applied, Brasenose turned it down. Baring[27] offered the endowment to Magdalen Hall and Richard seized the opportunity. His colleague's son, Francis Henry Jeune (1843–1905), a skillful young barrister who at this stage of his career specialised in ecclesiastical law, finessed the details[28], and the necessary Act passed through Parliament. Baring's name was hidden in an anonymous trust.

Richard became the first Principal of the new Hertford College in 1874, which had a constitution more like that of Magdalen Hall than other Colleges[29]. He could immediately embark upon a building program, with the support of three honorary Fellows who included young Francis Jeune and Baring's own son. Richard did not bask long in this glory; not only

[25] The body responsible for academic legislation.
[26] The father of Alice of *Alice in Wonderland*.
[27] Baring shared Grillion Club membership with Disraeli and Gladstone. [Grillion Club.]
[28] Information drawn from Jeune's letters in Hertford College Archives.
[29] *OJ2*, 9 May 1874, p. 5.

was there a battle over the religious requirements for Fellows, he died before they were resolved, in March 1877. Emily outlived him, staying first with son Arthur and his family in Burghclere (adjacent to Highclere Castle) and Marsham in Norfolk, and ultimately at Rugby with her unmarried son Walter. She died in Rugby in 1896, and was buried next to Richard in Holywell Cemetery.

In sum, May grew up in a politically aware environment where the good connections, education, intellect, and styles of speech that promoted social mobility abounded. However, as in the rest of England, there was rising conflict between Conservatives and those who desired social change. As for her hopeless looks and the extent to which she rubbed shoulders with the aristocracy, the next chapter extends the emerging picture.

Sources

Anderson, M. (1829). *The Scottish Jurist: Containing Reports of Cases Decided in the House of Lords, Courts of Session, Teinds, and Exchequer, and the Jury and Justiciary Courts*. [Google books version].

Bell, G. T. (1995). *A Prospect of Sutherland: The Building of a Castle and the Making of a Duchess*. Edinburgh: Birlinn.

Bellon, R. (2014). *A Sincere and Teachable Heart: Self-Denying Virtue in British Intellectual Life, 1736–1859*. Leiden, Boston & Tokyo: Brill.

Burrows, M. (1894). Michell, Richard. *Dictionary of National Biography, 1885–1900*, Volume 37. New York: Macmillan & Co., and London: Smith, Elder & Co.

Cambridge Quarterly Review and Academical Register, *The*. (1824). London: John Letts Jun. [Google books version].

Carroll, L. (1874). The Elections to the Hebdomadal Council.

Charles. (4 September 2012). The Jailbird Duchess. [History at Random.]

Davidson, R. T., & Benham, W. (1891). *Life of Archibald Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury*. London: Macmillan & Co.

Hamilton, S. G. (1903, April 25). Hertford College Oxford. *The Spectator*, p. 8.

Harrison, J., & Newland, J. (2010 [1807]). *The Practice of the Court of Chancery* (Vol. 1). London: William P. Farrand.

Hickey, M. (n.d.). Social Change & Politics in the Early 1800s.

Hughes, T. (1888). *Life of Bishop Fraser (1818-1885), Second Bishop of Manchester*. London: Macmillan & Co.

Jeune, F. H. Letters. Ref. Nos. HC 3/1/1/25; HC 3/1/1/27; HC 3/1/1/28; HC 3/1/1/29; HC 3/1/1/119; HC 3/1/1/125; HC 3/1/1/133. Hertford College Archives.

Mahomed, S. D. (1826). *Shampooing or Benefits Resulting from the Use of the Indian Medicated Vapour Bath*. Brighton: printed by Creasey and Baker.

Mandler, P. (n.d.). Review of the books English Landownership 1850–1950, by J. Habakkuk & Landowners, Capitalists and Entrepreneurs: Essays for John Habakkuk, edited by F. M. L. Thompson. [History Today.]

Mason, A. W., & Owen, G. (1819). *East-India Register and Directory, 1819* (2nd ed.). London: East India House.

Michell, E. (1792). *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Governors of the Grammar School in Bruton, from the Death of Lord Berkeley to the Present Time*. Bruton: self-published.

Michell, R. (9 February 1859). Letter to Richard Bickerton Lyons. Arundel Castle Archives.

Michell, R., (1849). *The Nature and Comparative Value of Christian Evidences Considered Generally, in Eight Sermons.* Oxford: University of Oxford.

Mitchell, I. (n.d.). Devon Mitchells and some Cornish too. [Devon.mitchells.]

Newton, W., & Partington, C. F. (1828). *Newton's London Journal of Arts and Sciences, 14.* [Forgotten Books.]

Orthodox Churchman's Magazine; or, A Treasury of Divine and Useful Knowledge, The. (1803). [Google books version].

Pattison, M. (1885). *Memoirs.* London: Macmillan & Co.

Pycroft, J. (1886). *Oxford Memories: A Retrospect After Fifty Years.* London: Richard Bentley & Son.

Rothblatt, S. (1997). An Oxonian "Idea" of a University: J. H. Newman and "Well-Being". In M. G. Brook & M. C. Curthoys. *Nineteenth Century Oxford*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Royal Society of Arts. (1827). *Transactions of the Society Instituted at London for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (Vols. 45–46). London: Royal Society of Arts, Great Britain. [Google books version.].

Simpson, R. S. (2004). McBride, J. S. [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.]

Smith, S. & Co. (Comp.). (1827). *The Bengal Almanac for 1827*. Calcutta: Samuel Smith and Co. [Google books version.]

Stephen, H. (1912). Jeune, Francis Henry. [Dictionary of National Biography, 1912 Supplement.]

Stock, J. E. (1840). Mr. Blair's Letter, etc. *Unitarianism tried by Scripture and Experience: A Compilation of Treatises and Testimonies in Support of Trinitarian Doctrine, with a General Introduction, by a Layman*. London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co. [Google books version.]

Thompson, H. L. (1899). *Henry George Liddell, D.D., Dean of Christ Church Oxford: A Memoir.* London: John Murray.

Tyerman, C. (2 October 2013). Sermons in Stone. [Oxford Today.]

Valentine, D. R. (2014). *The Origins and History of Hertford College: The Conversion of Magdalen Hall into Hertford College, 1800–1880*. Oxford: Oxford University, Hertford College.

Wells, J. (1921). *The Charm of Oxford* (2nd ed.). London: Simkin, Marshal, Hamilton Kent & Co.

Wordsworth, J. (1894). *The Episcopate of Charles Wordsworth Bishop of St. Andrews, Dunkeld, and Dunblane (1853–1892): A Memoir together with some Materials for forming a Judgment on the Great Questions in the Discussion of which he was Concerned.*