

THE NEW BURKE'S PEERAGE

The 107th Edition

This review was written in March 2004, but its publication was delayed by the long period of the Baronage website's dormancy. However, despite their late appearance here, the recommendations made to our readers lose none of their value. Moreover, we urge all our readers to consider subscription to the online services the publishers provide, for the continued availability online of this unique store of ancestral data may be guaranteed only by the financial confirmation that the public needs it and appreciates it.



The Baronage Press

Burke's Peerage ~ the Latest (and Last?) Edition.

Publication of the 107th edition of Burke's Peerage, Baronetage & Knightage so soon after the 106th in 1999 is undoubtedly an impressive achievement, but the joy we could justifiably expect genealogists to display will be limited by the sad news that this is probably the last edition in its traditional form as a hardcover book. All the data published by Burke's has become available on the Internet, where, of course, it can be manipulated onscreen in ways impossible with conventional books, and the bonus of this valuable flexibility has been won at comparatively low cost. Accordingly, the case for the printed data, it is claimed, has been lost.

This new edition is published by Burke's Peerage & Gentry, a company which should not be confused with the Burke's Peerage Ltd, founded in 1826 and liquidated many years ago, whose assets, for the greater part, were bought by a partnership that has confused the public with the licensing of its name to other companies that exploited it by selling bogus genealogy, ugly heraldry and questionable "noble titles". The new company, Burke's Peerage & Gentry, has now acquired the publishing rights once owned by the original Burke's Peerage and is amalgamating in one database the updated contents of the earlier books.

The first of the Burke's peerage directories appeared under the editorship of John Burke, and the series was later continued by his much more famous son, Sir Bernard Burke, whose reputation among the general readership was far higher than among those scholarly historians who deplored his eagerness to perpetuate baseless family myths with the "Burke's" imprimatur. The learned editors appointed in the twentieth century worked hard to eliminate the more egregious legends bequeathed from the nineteenth, and the present editor, by pruning the origins of most of the more famous peerage families, appears to have expunged any fiction seeking to survive into the twenty-first.

The new edition has reverted to an earlier practice of including with the peers and baronets a listing of knights and dames. Ill-researched news items in various journals unjustifiably criticised this "innovation", but what is in fact new about this change is the appearance of knights and dames alphabetically among the peers and baronets rather than on separate pages at the end of the book as was the practice in earlier editions. There is, however, one genuine innovation: this is the inclusion among the peers and baronets of Scottish and Irish chiefs, and of Scottish feudal barons.

In his introduction, the editor, Charles Mosley, notes that a new title of BURKE'S PEERAGE, BARONETAGE, KNIGHTAGE, DAMEAGE, CHIEFAGE & FEUDAL BARONAGE would be too cumbersome, and offers a prize for an elegant but descriptive alternative. In view of the very obvious classlessness of his alphabetical arrangement, in which impoverished knights rub shoulders with landed dukes, and recognising that while some who have titles have a nationality other than British, their titles remain British, we suggest some consideration be given to BURKE'S BRITISH TITLED FAMILIES (or perhaps BURKE'S TITLED FAMILIES).

The inclusion of Scotland's feudal barons is, of course, the most spectacular of the changes. (Chiefs of clans, the other innovation, is less so, for they have been included in Debrett's Peerage for many years.) It coincides with a time when the future of the Scottish Baronage is threatened by the effects of the recent Abolition of Feudal Tenures (Scotland) Act, and by the Lord Lyon's uncertain intentions in respect of the future armorial recognition of baronies. Although the publisher, Dr Gordon Prestoungrange, himself a baron, must have decided on the book's inclusion of feudal barons long before the Lord Lyon allowed his uncertainty to become known, there is a suggestion of a flung gauntlet here. Moreover, in a few paragraphs apparently added just before the book went to press, the Baron of Prestoungrange pledges that all feudal barons extant in November 2004, plus all who subsequently possess the dignity of a feudal baron, will be included in future editions of Burke's publications and, by implication, on the website pages.

It may be argued that the present rulers of the United Kingdom, having evicted most of the hereditary peers from Parliament, and planning to evict the remainder soon, by removing the privileges of peerage have placed all with titles on an equal footing. A glance through the pages of this new edition tends to reinforce that impression, but the meagre or indeed non-existent lineages of most knights and politically-appointed life peers soon emphasises what a genealogical directory ought to demonstrate — that it is family history and ancient ancestry that distinguishes the entries, and will be of abiding interest, not styles and titles. From that perspective the lineages of many Scottish chiefs promote them far above new peers whose origins are of no help to genealogists, and they are often, especially when they are to be found elsewhere only very rarely and then with difficulty, of immense genealogical value.

For some readers the book's principal use may be its provision of personal details, such as preferred styles of address and postal addresses, but it should be noted that the editorial staff, who have a very different and strongly disciplined

approach to genealogical detail, have relied for the accuracy of personal details on those who have supplied them. Thus for the Chief of Clan MacTavish the address given is Druimnagaoithe, Achnabreac, Lochgilphead, Argyll (which is also the address he gave to the Lord Lyon for his 1997 matriculation), but when a Court attempted to serve proceedings on MacTavish at that place the Post Office reported that the address was unknown, that it did not exist. In contrast, in that same entry, the MacTavish motto *Non oblitus* is translated accurately as “Not forgetful” — and not, as the Chief of Clan MacTavish has insisted for so long on his website, the absurd “Do not forget me after death”! (Followers of the MacTavish claims will smile at the sight of the MacThomas lineage on the same page [those of the Thomson/MacThomas name having been claimed by MacTavish as his own clansmen, despite official recognition of MacThomas of Finegand as Chief of MacThomas – *Ed*]).

One of the features introduced by the present editor in the previous edition and expanded in this, one of huge value to the amateur family historian because such material is not available anywhere else in a single source, is the provision of short histories of the origins of genealogically important families together with brief notes on earlier families that had held titles of the same name. A splendid example can be found at the beginning of the article on Abergavenny. This covers not only the early holders of the title, but provides also a clear and concise explanation of the complex issues affecting Bergavenny’s contentious status as a feudal barony in the mediaeval period and today. (Incidentally, in an introductory article on feudal baronies Hugh Peskett states unambiguously what the pages of this website have constantly insisted, that no English feudal baronies have existed since 1660 — despite the claims of various well-known “titles” dealers — and that the situation has probably been the same in Ireland since around the same time.)

Doubtless owing to the high cost of good heraldic art, as was noted in our review of the previous edition, the book’s heraldry is disappointing. Ideally, the Representers of every family, if armigerous, should have a drawing of his or her arms included, and probably that objective will be achieved in the book’s online version at some time in the future, and perhaps in colour too. Currently the arms in the book and on the website are copied from the printer’s blocks used in earlier editions, and the quality of many of these is incompatible with the generally very high quality of the genealogies.

The book’s heraldic glossary also needs some improvement. A basilisk, it explains, is “like a wyvern or cockatrice”. This could be a little more helpful. The wyvern and cockatrice, although unpleasant, are harmless pets compared to the

basilisk. That scholars frequently describe it as an Amphisian cockatrice is misleading, as has been explained in these pages before. The definition of a bend as “a division of a shield formed by two diagonal lines

” is curious to say the least, and a fraise, the Frasers’ term for a cinquefoil, is claimed to be “a strawberry leaf”, whereas it is of course the strawberry flower.

But these are minor points that can be corrected online, and they cannot diminish the unique value of this book. Of course, some will question why, if all its data is available online, the printed book is necessary at all. This overlooks the critical differences between the two methods of use. When working with a family’s data on a screen the use of colour permits easy tracking down the generations. Additionally, electronic searches for specific names are fast and easy, a facility a book does not share. But the traditional usage of this book, while sitting with a drink in a comfortable chair and flicking the pages from family to family while the hours drift by, cannot easily be emulated with a computer. There is a need for both the printed book and the online data, and it will be sad if, as rumours suggest, this printed edition will be the last.

In a perfect world every family historian would have this book, but at the price only a comparative few will consider it affordable. However, even in this imperfect world every public library, recognising the recent huge growth in the public’s interest in genealogy, should have a copy. It contains not just the history of the governing classes, as so often suspected by those who have not used it — its nearly five thousand pages include an index of 120,000 living people and record the details of nearly a million capable of being linked into the ancestries of the public libraries’ ordinary readers.

Baronage readers who cannot afford the price and want access to this book as well as the online data should urge their local librarian to buy it, if necessary by printing out this review and including it with their letters. It will represent the best value the library will buy this year.