# Berry’s Heraldry

## *Estoile*

The Baronage Press

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On the main street of a small Scottish village a couple of years ago I almost passed by a tiny shop before I realised what it was and retraced my steps to duck under its lintel and scan its dusty rows of second-hand books. As usual I looked for the local history and topography shelf, but there was nothing there of interest, and as I turned to leave I saw a group of Dornford Yates novels which I stooped to pull out to check their titles. At that moment an old lady appeared, eighty-something I thought, slim, erect, dressed much as her mother and grandmother would have been, sombrely and with good jewellery.

"Ah," she said, looking carefully at the books I held, "there aren't many of us left now, you know."

"No," I replied, "but we are loyal, aren't we, to Berry and to each other?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "so I suppose you have all those, don't you?" I nodded. "I still read them," she whispered, "over and over again, especially when things are quiet."

I looked out through the window. Nothing moved.

"I suppose it is usually quiet here," I said.

"Yes," she replied wistfully while gazing steadily into my eyes. "But I always have Berry and Boy." She put her left hand shyly on mine; its only ring was a well-worn signet whose tiny crest was now indecipherable.

The medical profession has called this the "Dornford Yates syndrome" — suffered by gentle ladies who once moved, or in other circumstances believe they might easily have moved, in the social circles described by Yates in his Berry books, and as the years have passed have moved progressively further away from the immaculate lawns and heavily scented gardens in what always seemed to have been a June afternoon in an England now obliterated by war and taxation. Of course, doctors utilise the term to describe a psychosomatic illness, and I do not believe the lady was a sufferer; she did however represent a class now fast disappearing from our lives.

I thought about her as I drove south, and of Major William Mercer, the widely disliked man who, as Dornford Yates, accumulated millions of adoring readers. He was a superb writer, equally at home in the classic style as in the archaicly formal mode I think, in the twentieth century, was uniquely his, the former used for light romantic comedies revolving around the immortal Berry Pleydell, the latter for adventure stories extolling the feats of Jonah Mansel (who had a lesser role also in the Berry books).

The perceptive, greatly talented commentator, Cyril Connolly, surprisingly in a left wing magazine, noted in the summer of 1935:

> “Sometimes, at great garden parties, literary luncheons or in the quiet of an exclusive gunroom, a laugh rings out. The sad, formal faces for a moment relax and a smaller group is formed within the larger. They are admirers of Dornford Yates who have found out each other. We are badly organised, we know little about ourselves and next to nothing about our hero, but we appreciate fine writing when we come across it, and a wit that is ageless united to a courtesy that is extinct.”

That was the group to which belonged the bookshop lady whose signet ring had emphasised to me the lack of a wedding ring, and I wondered who might have been the unfortunate hero who failed to make it back in 1945.

Yates usually included a three-generation family tree to help his readers understand the close relationship of his principal characters. It began with “Bertram Pleydell (of White Ladies in the County of Hampshire)”; the next line carried the names of his two sons “Bertram” and “Bois”, and of “Daphne” who married “Jonathan Mansel”; and the third line showed that Bertram’s son “Berry” had married Bois’s daughter “Daphne” (obviously named after his sister), that Bois had also a son “Boy”, and that Daphne and Jonathan Mansel had two children, “Jonah” and “Jill”. Only the five on the third line appear in the books, all lived at White Ladies when they were not at their house in Town (London, that is, in Mayfair), and Berry was the squire in the fairytale village of Bilberry they owned on the edge of the New Forest.

Of the family history little is revealed other than that Pleydells had lived at White Ladies “since before Shakespeare’s day”, and this lack of genealogical data accompanied by the almost total absence of heraldry in his books is surprising with a writer so famous for his idealistic portrayal of the best of England’s upper middle class. The names of Pleydell and Mansel must have been chosen carefully, for so are all Yates’s names, a fact consistently noted by commentators on his work, and undoubtedly they do carry nuances of the feudal countryside — but why did he not give them a history, why not arms? Was it because the names belonged to people he knew?

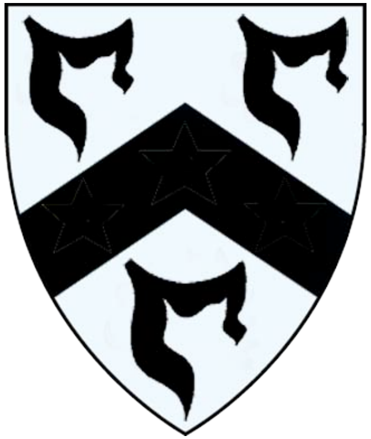
Richard Usborne, who discussed the books with their author (and received very little cooperation), did identify the original of Jonah, a man who had been at Oxford with Yates and, as did Jonah, had an extraordinary record as a boxer, but he remains the only inspiration so far positively identified. Interestingly, Usborne wrote of their surnames: “The Pleydells and the Mansels had no need of titles. Their names, as ordinary as yours or mine, make you feel that they themselves were enduring …” However, for the unknown and intriguing source of Pleydell and Mansel perhaps it is necessary only to look as far as Dorset, the adjacent county, for there, holding the manor of Whatcombe, was a contemporary Mansel-Pleydell family.

The first Pleydell on record is William who held Coleshill, Wiltshire, in the 15th century, and began a line of increasingly affluent descendants whose senior branch ended eleven generations later with a co-heiress, Louisa, who married Colonel John Mansel, the fourth son of Sir William Mansel, 9th Baronet of Muddlescombe, and left a son, John Clavell Mansel-Pleydell, High Sheriff of Dorset, who inherited Whatcombe and left a son, Colonel Edmund Morton Mansel-Pleydell, who was living at Whatcombe when the first Berry stories were written for publication in the Windsor Magazine.

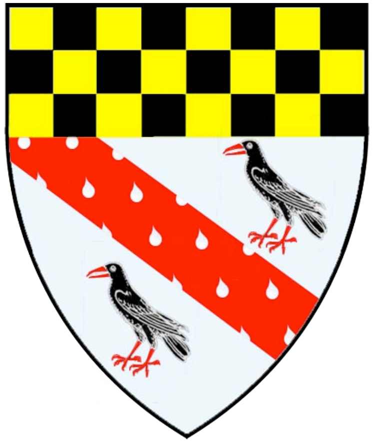
Colonel Edmund was a squire, a Justice of the Peace, an Old Etonian, all as Berry was, but unlike Berry he had children, one of whom was named Daphne and was seven years younger than Major Mercer *alias* Dornford Yates (those seven years being the gap also between Berry and his Daphne). She had two brothers, both killed in action, as were so many of Mercer's friends and contemporaries (read *For Better Or For Worse* to comprehend the impact of this on him), and the elder was Mercer's age. Authors use several inputs when they build their characters, but the coincidence here of the names of Pleydell and Mansel and Daphne helps persuade this writer, anyway, that Daphne Mansel-Pleydell, aged 21 in the year the Great War started, may have had glorious hair, eyes that danced, a perfect mouth, a slim figure, small hands and feet, beautiful ankles (was it Sapper or Yates who insisted one could "always tell a filly by her fetlocks"?) and a quick wit. (All Yates's early heroines have these attributes.) Was she Mercer's first love? Most assuredly, Berry's wife was Dornford Yates's lifelong passion.

Throughout the Berry books Daphne is a quiet saint adored by all. She does very little, but she is an important character because she is there as Berry's principal support. There is only one other woman in Yates's books who can be considered to equal her in importance, but she appeared in only one book and is much, much more fully developed as a character. Her name was Vivien — which was the name of Daphne Mansel-Pleydell's only sister.

Well, although the Dornford Yates Berry books do not reveal the Pleydell and the Mansel arms, these are what they would almost certainly have been in the mind of Berry Pleydell's creator if the Dorset family had inspired him —



**Mansel**



**Pleydell**

***Dedicated to the bookshop lady – one of us.***

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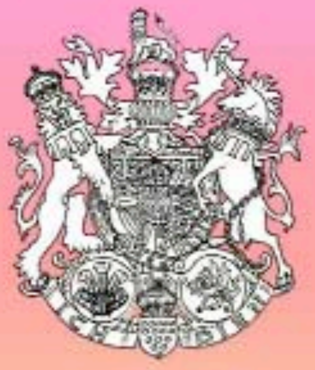
## Burke's Peerage



The change to modern printing technology made redundant the skilfully chiselled printing blocks Burke's had used for the Peerage and the Landed Gentry directories since the early 19th century. Some were sold to the heads of the families represented in those books, and the remainder are now available for any family members who wish to preserve this unique memento of their history. The blocks may be kept for their original purpose, which was to print the full armorial achievement by which the family is known, or the metal may be removed from the wooden block and then polished, mounted on black linen or velvet, and framed as a picture for display. **Click here for details.**

The block illustrated here (at greatly reduced size) is that of H.R.H. The Prince of Wales.

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