

A Journey into the Past with Barbara Erskine

Notes from my Research Diaries

The two main characters



Two miniatures: of Thomas and of Frances Moore, the treasured possessions of their eldest daughter Frances. They look so young! I don't know who painted them, although they look as though they might have been by the same person; they are fairly crudely executed, but very sweet. I had always suspected that Thomas and Fanny might have given the little paintings to one another when they were courting. No photos to tuck into a wallet in those days so what better way of keeping one's true love close? As with so much of this novel, the moment the idea occurred to me it seemed so obvious that it had to be true, and so they went into the story.

The Sussex connection

Strangely the part of the story my great aunt never mentioned as far as I remember was the fact that Thomas bought a huge estate in Sussex. She must have known. It was just up the road from where she lived and, after all, I have inherited from her the address book of Thomas's grandson which shows how many of the family gravitated towards the Brighton area.

Why, I asked myself, did this outwardly most English of families, seemingly rooted for the last two hundred years or so in the very south, insist so passionately, generation after generation, that they were Scots? And was this the reason she ignored this last part of the story? She preferred to concentrate on the more ancient lineage, the Earls and Kings of Scotland – and even the two Saints (one of whom was French, but we will ignore that in the name of the Auld Alliance) in the family tree...

When I looked at a map I was astonished at the sheer acreage of the land in Sussex that Thomas acquired. His trustees were not impressed; commercially the land was apparently worthless and there wasn't even a huge house to go with it. He had to build Buchan Hill (the present house of that name, a boy's prep school, is a later building on the site) but something attracted him to the area. Of course it must have been largely because it was relatively close to Frances and Sam, but I couldn't help thinking the fact that this was a place where dragons used to roam was a strong attraction. The man was a romantic.

In following the origins of that dragon story I looked up St Leonard, after whom the forest was named, to find that he probably lived in the time of King Canute. When he killed 'the last dragon in England' lilies of the valley sprang up wherever the dragon's blood was spilt. It was with a real shock

of recognition that I discovered that the church dedicated to St Leonard was part of the land of the de Braose family of Bramber. And so my own story as a novelist came full circle. This land had once, long before Thomas's time, belonged to the family of my Lady of Hay. The fact that my eldest son who had been to prep school at Sompting – where there was another church held by the de Braoses, near Bramber where my Matilda came from, and near Poynings where Sam had his first living – was perhaps not after all, entirely by chance. Why my son went there is part of another story, but then, as we all know, there is no such thing as coincidence...

I went to Edinburgh University. Of course I did: that Scottish tug at the heart strings. And while there I explored much of the heritage I had heard about. I went to Dryburgh on the bus one weekend, alone with my trusty notebook, and I was captivated. I was eighteen; it had the magical atmosphere of all ruined abbeys, but this was special. My ancestors were there. I went to Holyrood Abbey to find the grave of Thomas's father and mother (and his eldest brother) but could find no trace of them. How sad that their memory had gone. I went to St Andrews, but could find no cave. It had long ago been lost to the waves. And I went to Cramond, often. Always with my trusty notebook. (How astonishingly neat was my writing then!)



Notes on family snippets

- *The three boys had their lessons in a room above the stables at Uphall. Once a violent quarrel broke out between David and his two younger brothers and David said, 'When I am Earl I will turn you both out of this house,' to which Thomas replied, 'That you shall not for I will kill you first!' and he threw a slate at his brother's head which luckily missed...*
- *Lady Buchan (Tom's mother), when Tom was six, 'took a post to Manningtree, where she drank cider' which was 'the best she ever tasted' and as 'good as she made at Goodtrees (her old family home)'. 'It tasted of apple.'*
- *Lady B's cave was near the ruins of St Andrews Castle. It was the cave where St Rule prayed ... 'more or less inaccessible at high tide ... it was where she drank tea and where she made her toilet when she bathed' ... [formidable woman – I had visions of the North Sea crashing in on the rocks when I read this.]*
- *Harry reluctant to pursue the law and succeeded without seeming to try. Handsome, fair-haired, taller than either brother. Slender, elegant, musical (he played the fiddle). Good-natured; popular; a poet. Like his younger brother a brilliant orator...*
- *Tom, when a young subaltern, had such good looks and delicate features a relative dressed him up in lady's attire while on a visit to Harrogate for a joke and he carried it off for the entire day...*
- *Daniel Moore (Frances's father) was the son of John Moore, Attorney General of Pennsylvania. Daniel was sent to England to be educated, graduated from Oxford and became a distinguished advocate and later MP...*

- *Sir Walter Scott thought Tom's story of meeting the ghost of his father's servant, John Barnett, a 'cock and bull story'...*

- *In 1762 Tom wrote a letter to his brother David from St Andrews. Says 'he is in his second month at dancing school and has learned "shantrews", [a highland dance], a single hornpipe and is learning a double hornpipe'. His school was on vacation so 'most of the other boys have gone home. A large Norway ship is in the harbour'. The captain invited him and Harry on board and gave them French claret and Danish 'bisket' with smoked salmon. There wasn't enough water to sail so the captain was waiting for the 'stream to be greater'...*

- *Dion Fortune and her Inner Plane contacts were intermediaries in the Western Esoteric tradition: She first made contact with Lord E on 15th November 1922... After 1940 he called himself Magus Innominatus (the master with no name). Later identified by some as a reincarnation of Sir Thomas More....*

And so on; pages and pages of notes from which a picture of the historical characters emerge so strongly, I felt I knew them personally.