

# Robert Blakey Part 1

by Roger Hawkins

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Dr. Robert Blakey, 1795-1878, historian of philosophy, radical politician, and writer on angling, was born in Manchester Street, Morpeth, May 1795, son of Robert and Elizabeth Blakey. His father, a mechanic in a cotton factory and staunch Presbyterian, died when Robert was nine months old. In his Memoirs he does not mention his mother at all, and we do not know who looked after him until, some time between 1799 and 1801, his grandmother, Mrs. Elizabeth Laws, took him in. Mrs. Laws was a remarkable woman, then in her seventies, who had had little education but was well known in the town for her theological knowledge. She used to make him read two chapters from the bible every night before he went to bed, and also got him to read aloud to her from her favourite religious works.

From the age of seven or eight Robert worked full time for his uncle, John Robertson, as a gardener's boy, except in winter when it was intended he should have a few months off to go to school. Soon after, however, his uncle found him occasional winter work, cutting corve-rods; these were mainly of hazel, and were for making the baskets (corves) used in coal mines. Not surprisingly, Robert got most of his education at evening classes. He and his grandma moved to Alnwick in 1809, where he learnt the trade of a furrier, learnt fishing and shooting, became a convinced Cobbettite Radical, and was befriended by the Rev. David Paterson, minister of the Scotch or Secession Presbyterian church, who acted as a kind of unpaid private tutor, and gave him an education up to university standard.

In 1815 Blakey returned to Morpeth, set up in business, and became known in the town as 'Robin Readypenny' from his habit of always paying in ready money and never being in debt. He travelled extensively, selling rabbit fur in bulk to hat manufacturers in the northern counties and Scotland, and probably in London and beyond as well. From 1820 or earlier he had a hat shop in Bridge Street, Morpeth, and, later, one in Bigg Market, Newcastle, and engaged in farming and property development. In 1822 he married Miss Mary Gibb of Alnwick. They had six children, of whom four, Mary, Isabella, George and Robert, grew up. Their house in Wansbeck Terrace, now Bennett's Walk, still stands.

In politics he was a Cobbettite Radical, and a personal friend of Cobbett, who visited him in Morpeth in 1832. In 1818-21 he joined in an agitation to reform the poor law in Morpeth, and the three pamphlets and many squibs that he wrote in connection with it can be identified with reasonable probability. In 1820 he drew up an address—now in Durham University Library—from the inhabitants of Morpeth to Earl Grey, in honour of his defence of Queen Caroline. In 1825, he helped to found the Morpeth Mechanical and Scientific Institution, the town's first public library. He himself bought the original stock of 549 books and a few scientific instruments for £208. 19s. 6d., being the greater part of the subscribed funds.

He was involved for many years in the agitation that led to the Reform Act of 1832, and in 1818 began to expose the electoral corruption of the freemen of Morpeth in a series of letters to the Tyne Mercury. He was a Council Member of the Northern Political Union, and, though he did not speak at the big show-piece meetings, was active in the background and was friendly with Charles Attwood, Thomas Doubleday, and Charles Larkin. From 1832 he was a parliamentary elector in both the borough of Morpeth and the northern division of the county, and was one of a deputation to C.W. Bigge of Linden, to ask him to stand as a second Liberal candidate for North Northumberland.

Blakey was essentially a practical reformer. His priority after the Reform Act was not for more democracy, but for lower taxes. From 1836 to 1840 he was one of the new, reformist Morpeth town council. One of his most important contributions was to stiffen the council's resolve in *Doe v. Brady*, the action to recover Morpeth Common from the freemen of Morpeth, which otherwise might have been lost by default, but his main interest was in the provision of good, cheap education in the town. He was a trustee of King Edward VI's grammar school, and, although neither the trustees nor the council had much money, they co-operated to provide the English school, a secondary school for

boys who did not want the classical curriculum. During his mayoral year, 1836-7, when it seemed certain that the council must drop a cherished project to provide two purpose-built schools (including, remarkably, a secondary school for girls) because the then rector of Morpeth refused to hand over a publicly subscribed school building fund of £500, which he had held unused for twenty years, Blakey urged the council from the mayoral chair to go ahead with the plan despite this. They did so, and the schools, with a trust deed guaranteeing all children a non-sectarian education at no more than 2d. a week, anticipated the 1870 Education Act, and particularly the Cowper-Temple clause, by over 30 years. The building still stands in Wellway, but is now known as Borough Hall and is the headquarters of the Housing Department of Castle Morpeth Borough Council.

Blakey soon became disenchanted with Whig rule after 1832, and particularly with the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. For 18 months from September 1836, he was a guardian of the Morpeth poor law union. It is impossible to say if he ever meant to take a constructive part in it. He mainly used his position to obtain information to attack the board for its alleged cruelty. This he did in 1837, in a series of letters to the press, which he republished, together with the replies, as *Cottage Politics*, or *Letters to the Mechanics and Labouring Men of the North of England on the new Poor Law*. He later exposed the inadequate medical treatment given to people in Morpeth workhouse—and the official humbug about it—but also admitted that he had been partly mistaken in 1837.

In 1838 he bought the *Northern Liberator*, a radical Newcastle paper. Blakey seems not to have exercised close editorial control, but it nevertheless set a high standard in popular journalism, mainly due to the effortlessly stylish contributions of his friend, Thomas Doubleday, and also because of the use of illustrations, in which Blakey was something of a pioneer. The *Liberator's* best year was 1839, but in August of that year a true bill was found against him at the Newcastle assizes for seditious libel in an article—written and inserted by his sub-editor, Thomas Ainge Devyr—called *An Address to the Middle Classes*. Devyr included it as part of a news item, not as a statement of editorial policy, but this did not prevent the prosecution. Blakey's foreman printer, John Bell, was charged with the same offence in respect of a handbill containing a similar article, and was sent to prison for six months at the spring assizes of 1840. Blakey was ill then. In May 1840, the family went to London. He was ill again for the summer assizes, and compromised the case soon after, changing his plea to guilty, and was bound over in £300 to keep the peace for 3 years. In December 1840, he closed the *Liberator* down. Contemporaries believed that he did it because of low circulation, but the circulation remained at the high levels of 1839 right through to August 1840—the date his trial was deferred for a second time—and was almost certainly showing a good profit then. Blakey's account in the *Memoirs* blames the prosecution for the closure of the paper and for his own heavy financial losses, and, while the detail is confused, this is undoubtedly what happened. Apart from the *Northern Star*, the *Liberator* was the only viable Chartist paper, and it is significant that Lord Normanby, the Whig home secretary, greeted its closure with private satisfaction. In June 1841, Blakey started the *Politician*, edited by 'The Writers of the former Northern Liberator'. Its average circulation was very low. It had no local base, and virtually no advertising. He closed it down in July, and this event marks the end of his early career. We do not know how much he lost on his two papers, but he had sunk a large sum of money in the *Liberator*, equivalent to perhaps £200,000 today, and it is most unlikely that he got that it all back when he closed the paper and sold the printing works.

Blakey's reason for going to London was almost certainly to give him more time for medieval philosophy. He closed the shops and kept only the wholesale fur business and the *Liberator*, which was then profitable. The interest in medieval philosophy was not a new development. His literary career had begun in a small way with writing letters to newspapers when he was sixteen, and in the 1820's he wrote several philosophical essays for the *Newcastle Magazine*. His first book, *On the Divine and Human Wills*, was published in 1831. His second, *The History of Moral Science*, 2 vols., 1833, was well reviewed in the *Athenæum* and the *Literary Gazette*, and established him as a scholar and writer. In 1834 he published *An Essay towards an Easy and Useful System of Logic*. He also, in 1836, published a sort of humorous novel, *The life of the Rev. Josiah Thompson*, by 'Nathan Oliver', one of several books he does not mention in the *Memoirs*—and very reasonably in this case, since the story, while it starts well enough, is a poor specimen of the genre. After 1836 he largely suspended scholarship and the writing of books, apart from a new edition of *Moral Science*, and concentrated on politics, business, and writing for his newspaper. By the middle of July 1841, however, only the fur business was left, and later that year he closed even that down and went to Boulogne with his family. 'Here,' he says, 'I resolved to devote all my time and energies to philosophical literature.'

Blakey had evidently intended to retire rich, but the prosecution, coupled with some serious reverses in business, ran away with most of his money. He spent the next seven years researching in France, Belgium, and Germany, writing his main work, *The History of the Philosophy of Mind*. He was extremely happy, money worries apart, but these became so severe that in October 1834 he had only one pound left. Even then, he says, 'We had one consolation, we owed no man anything.' Something turned up, and he ghost-wrote a 6-volume history of social and political philosophy by which he earned £300 in about six months; it enabled him both to live and to publish a book on the lives of the early Christian hermits. He also wrote *Hints on Angling*, by 'Palmer Hackle'. In 1847 the family returned to London, and *Philosophy of Mind* came out in November 1848. It was simultaneously published by one firm in New York, four in Europe, and five in the United Kingdom, was dedicated by permission to Prince Albert, and was reissued by Longmans in 1850. Leopold, King of the Belgians, Blakey's first subscriber, awarded him a gold medal in 1849.

Blakey's ambition up till then was purely to be a writer, but, at the suggestion of a friend, he applied in December 1848 for the post of professor of Logic and Metaphysics at Queen's College, Belfast. He was appointed. It was a job for life with a salary of £250 p.a., plus class fees and the earnings from his books. Logic and metaphysics were respectively second and third year subjects, so he began with teaching non-degree students (mostly candidates for the Presbyterian ministry) in January 1850. His *Memoirs* show that he taught according to the statutes, but always so as to be easily understood, but he was seriously ill in the autumn and missed a whole academic year. The authorities dismissed him for neglect of duty in September 1851—a technicality, and the only option open to them. Despite his illness he published *Historical Sketch of Logic* in 1851. The *Memoirs* do not refer directly to the end of his academic career—an omission which plainly arises from the fact that Blakey never finished them and did not publish them—and his editor, Henry Miller, unfortunately did not notice it. This lapse on Miller's part seriously misled both Welford and DNB, and in fact most of the accounts of Blakey's life are all more or less wrong.

In 1853 (the last year in the *Memoirs*) Blakey had fully recovered from his illness, was living in Scotland, and wrote two new books, *The Angler's Complete Guide to the Rivers and Lakes of England*, 1853, and *The History of Political Literature*, 2 vols., 1855. In 1856 the University of Jena conferred on him the degree of Ph.D., and in 1860 the government awarded him a pension of £100 p.a. from the civil list.

The Blakeys' younger daughter, Isabella Elizabeth, married George Adam Bell, merchant, in Glasgow in August 1850, and the young couple emigrated to New York soon after. The elder son, George, became a railway clerk, and the younger one, Robert, a commercial artist; he did not marry and died of TB at Moffat in 1855. Mrs. Blakey also died at Moffat in 1858. George married a Falkirk girl, Elizabeth King, in 1861 and they had two children, Robert and Charlotte. He left the railway and they were brought up on a small-holding called *The Eyrie*, near to Walford in Herefordshire. Mary married late in life. Her husband, the Rev. Edward Mathews, a Presbyterian minister, died of cholera less than a year later. In 1859 Dr. Blakey himself remarried in London. His second wife, Charlotte Esther Blakey, evidently took her adopted family to her heart, leaving bequests to her step-son and daughter, George and Mary, and to her step-grandchildren, Robert and Charlotte.

Throughout the 1850's Blakey put out new titles, including *Angler's Guide to the Rivers and Lochs of Scotland*, 1854; two cheap and very popular works, *Angling and Shooting*, published by Routledge; and further editions of previous books. *Angling* must have been in print almost continuously for over fifty years. It went into a new edition in 1898, twenty years after the author's death, and it was as an angling writer that the late Victorians knew Robert Blakey best. Dr. Blakey's *History of Political Literature* was also reissued many years after his death. I do not know if he took any part in politics after 1841, but in 1873 he mentions his satisfaction at the introduction of the secret ballot. He died at 20, Blomfield Road, Paddington, in October 1878, and is buried with his second wife, Charlotte, at Kensal Green. The grave is unmarked.

## References

No satisfactory biography of Dr. Blakey exists; the *Memoirs*, ed. the Rev. Henry Miller (Trübner, 1879) while excellent in many ways, is both incomplete and in places seriously misleading. Despite that it makes a good read, and the first chapter—the only one that Blakey finished—is a marvellous evocation of a long-lost childhood. Boase's *Modern Biography* (1892, reissued by Frank Cass & Co.

Ltd., London, 1965) is the only account which is in every important respect correct, but it is also very brief. T.W. Moody and J.C. Beckett, *Queen's, Belfast, 1845-1949* (Faber, 1959) give the facts of his career at QCB, but spoilt by a quite unjustified hostility, due no doubt to their failure to realise the implications of Blakey having neither finished the *Memoirs* nor published it, and to their ignorance of the admittedly obscure fact that, as the President of the college demanded, Blakey returned to Belfast in January 1851. Richard Welford's *Men of Mark twixt Tyne and Tweed* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1895) gives a balanced view of Blakey's career, but one that is full of mistakes, most of them negligible, some ludicrous, and at least one quite appalling in an author with respectable claims to be a historian. The obituary in *Athenæum*, 2 November 1878, is excellent, but, like many notices of Blakey, remembers him only as a literary figure, and completely ignores his political career. This was probably as he wished it, for although he makes a brief mention of his political life in the *Memoirs*, it is, along with his family life, clearly a subordinate matter. Details not in these references have come from my own as-yet unpublished study, which I hope to bring out in 2000 or 2001.

### **Request for information**

As far as anyone knows, none of Dr. Blakey's papers have survived, nor is there a portrait of him. However, he may have descendants through Isabella Bell or Charlotte Sinclair. If you know any descendants of these people, or of the whereabouts of either the papers or a portrait of Dr. Blakey, I should be very pleased to hear from you. Thankyou.

Meanwhile, the following is as far as I have got:

Dr. and Mrs. Blakey's daughter, Isabella Elizabeth Blakey, married George Adam Bell in 1850. They had four sons, all born in Brooklyn, New York, USA, in the 1850's. George Adam Bell died at Brooklyn in 1897, and Isabella in 1901. All four sons had children, and Lucy Candace Bell, the widow of their son Elmer Bell, died as recently as 1955. In 1900 Isabella's eldest son, George Alfred Bell, was living in Troy, NY, with his wife, two sons and a daughter. In 1920, another descendant, Madeline Bell Gilbert, was living in Brooklyn with her husband, Frank Cameron Gilbert, and their four children, Christine B. Gilbert, aged 10, Frank C. Gilbert, aged 43/4, Margaret Gilbert, aged nearly three, and Robert W. Gilbert, aged nearly two.

Dr. and Mrs. Blakey's son George—the railway clerk—had a daughter, Charlotte Elizabeth Mary Blakey. She married Robert Sinclair, chemist, in 1896, and they lived at Falkirk for many years. Charlotte died at Hove as recently as 1951. She had a daughter, Elizabeth Sinclair, who married Arthur Reginald Lewis, music hall artiste. The Lewises had a son, Arthur Reginald Sinclair Lewis, born in London in 1918. Elizabeth Lewis was still alive in 1942, at Speen, Bucks., but I do not know if her son or any other children survived.