



The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

John Baxter Black diaries and family papers

1875-2014 [bulk 1914-2014]

MssCol 23785

Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2016.

Summary

Creator: Black, John Baxter

Title: John Baxter Black diaries and family papers

Date: 1875-2014 [bulk 1914-2014]

Size: 11.55 linear feet (28 boxes)

Source: Donated by the estate of John Baxter Black, 2016.

Abstract: John Baxter Black (1924-2014) was a writer and historian who wrote daily diary entries from 1936 to 2014. His diaries chronicle his life in Mansfield, Ohio; London; New York; at boarding school and university; and in the army. This collection contains Black's diaries, letters, and a two-volume family history he wrote, as well as diaries and letters of his uncles John Baxter Black (dating from 1914 to 1918) and Donald Black (dating from 1926 to 1927).

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: John Baxter Black diaries and family papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Processing note: Compiled by Kit Fluker, 2016.

Creator History

John Baxter Black was an American writer and historian who kept a diary from January 1, 1936 until the last month of his life, October 2014. Born in 1924 to Robert Blymyer Black and Esther McEwan Black, he was named after his paternal uncle, who died in 1923. He had one brother, Peter. He was the grandson of Frank Blymyer Black, who founded the Ohio Brass Company.

Black was raised in Mansfield, Ohio. In 1938, he began attending boarding school, first at the Adirondack-Florida School, and then, in 1939, at the Putney School in Vermont. After his graduation in 1942, Black spent a term at Brown University, where he joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps. In February 1943, he, along with many other Brown students, left school for active duty in the Army.

Black's army duties were chiefly clerical, and he never saw combat. He was posted in the United States (1943), England and Northern Ireland (1943-1944), and Compiègne and Le Havre, France (1944-1945), before his discharge in January 1946. For the next four years, Black studied at Harvard. After graduating in 1950, he moved to New York City to pursue a writing career.

In New York, Black's social circles overlapped with the poets and abstract-expressionist artists associated with the Tibor de Naga Gallery. Between 1950 and 1954, he led an active social life but had little success as a writer. During this period, he tried to overcome his homosexuality through psychoanalysis. In 1954, Black began to study English history at Columbia and, going forward, "accepted the homosexuality that was already in fact a part of his life."

While at Columbia, Black traveled to London to conduct research for his dissertation, and subsequently returned to London regularly, often spending a third or more of his year there. From the 1960s onward, Black primarily divided his time between London and Ohio. He also spent time in New York City each year and traveled around the United States and Europe with various companions.

Black's novel *The Night the Americans Came* was published in 1962. During the 1960s, he taught world history at Babson Institute in Massachusetts, and 19th century English history at a polytechnic institution in London, as well as teaching night courses.

Black had a falling out with his parents after they sold the family home in Mansfield in 1970. However, Black continued to spend large amounts of time every year in Ohio. His father died in 1973 and his mother in 1988, both after long illnesses.

In 1978, Black began working on a history of his family. The two-volume history was privately printed in 1995 with the title *A History of the Family of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Blymyer Black of Mansfield, Ohio*. He continued to make a study of his family's history and genealogy. He died on October 28, 2014; his last diary entry was made on October 24.

Scope and Content Note

John Baxter Black (1924-2014) kept a diary from 1936 until October 2014. This collection contains Black's diaries, letters, and a two-volume family history he wrote, as well as diaries and letters of his uncles John Baxter Black (died 1923) and Donald Black.

Black's diaries, dating from 1936 to 2014, contain inserted material such as letters (incoming and outgoing), clippings, and photographs. In addition to his 70 complete diaries, there are two small diaries from 1933 and 1934 that represent his early attempts at regular diary-keeping. Black wrote a 39-page "Autobiographical Sketch" to accompany this collection. The sketch offers an overview of the major phases of Black's life until the 1990s, and describes his childhood before he began keeping diaries. The collection also contains Black's appointment books (1964-2014), and letters Black wrote while in the army in World War II.

The consistent topics of the diaries are Black's active social life; his relationships and sex life; books, movies, theater, and music; and politics and current events. Black's social circles contained prominent scholars and academics, especially historians, and people working in literature and the arts. Friends whose names appear frequently in the diaries include Peter Barnes, Marion Coughlin, Frederick English, Bentley Gilbert, Jerome Kohn, Ivan Morris, John Sandoe, Werner Vortriede, William Weaver (Bill), Lulie Westfeldt, and Leslie Workman. Researchers can refer to Black's autobiographical sketch for further context for many of his relationships. Black traveled regularly, and each volume after 1957

contains a breakdown of how many days Black spent in each location that year.

Entries for the 1930s and early 1940s, set primarily in Mansfield, Ohio and at Putney School, contain factual accounts of Black's activities, and brief comments on books, film, American politics, and the oncoming war. Black's diaries of 1943 to January 1946 are a record of his feelings, anecdotes, and observations about day-to-day life in the army.

Entries for Black's first four years in New York, 1950 to 1954, record his efforts to write a novel and his struggle to become heterosexual, in part through regular sessions with the Jungian psychoanalyst Frances Wickes. Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Allen Ginsberg make appearances, along with other New York-based writers and artists of the period. Diaries of the late 1950s and the 1960s are of interest in part for accounts of the London social scene: the diaries include mentions of gay clubs in Chelsea and cocktail parties with London literati.

After 1970, one recurring theme in the diaries is the sale of the family home, Woodside, to Mickey Rupp, and the subsequent tension between Black and his parents. Black's interest in genealogy and family history is increasingly apparent in later entries. Diaries for the years leading up to Black's father's death in 1973 and his mother's death in 1988 give accounts of his parents' illnesses and the challenges and difficulties arising around caretaking. Diaries of the 2010s include many entries about his brother Peter, who suffered from Alzheimer's Disease.

Black created typed transcripts of many of the diary entries, some of which he lightly edited. Diaries from 1936 to 1948 have been fully transcribed, with the exception of a small notebook in which Black made occasional notes from 1943 to 1946. Later diaries are transcribed only in part, or not at all.

Black's uncle and namesake, John Baxter Black, attended Princeton and went to France in 1917 with the "Princeton Unit" to volunteer for the American Field Service, though he ultimately volunteered with the French Camion Service instead. The collection contains two of his diaries (1914-1917) and transcripts of his letters home (1917-1918). There are also transcripts of letters home from another uncle, Donald Black, written while Donald was on a trip around the world in 1926 and 1927.

Key Terms

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Diaries

Subjects

Gay men
Men -- Diaries
World War, 1914-1918 -- Personal narratives
World War, 1939-1945 -- Personal narratives

Geographic Names

London (England) -- Social life and customs -- 20th century
Mansfield (Ohio)
New York (N.Y.) -- Social life and customs -- 20th century

Names

Black family

Container List

John Baxter Black

- b. 1 f. 1 Autobiographical Sketch 2000s
- Appointment Books
- b. 2 v. 1-35 1964-1998
- b. 3 v. 1-15 1999-2012, 2014
- Diaries
- b. 1 f. 2 1933-1934
Two small volumes: the 1933 volume contains one page of notes; the 1934 volume contains many one-sentence entries.
- b. 1 f. 3-4 1936-1948 Diaries 1936-1978
Diary entries are from 1936 to 1948; material dating after 1948 was inserted by Black.
- b. 4 f. 1-4 1949-1952
- b. 5 f. 1-4 1953-1956
- b. 6 f. 1-4 1957-1960
- b. 7 f. 1-4 1961-1964
- b. 8 f. 1-4 1964-1968
- b. 9 f. 1-4 1969-1972
- b. 10 f. 1-4 1973-1976
- b. 11 f. 1-4 1977-1980
- b. 12 f. 1-4 1981-1984
- b. 13 f. 1-4 1985-1988
- b. 14 f. 1-4 1989-1992
- b. 15 f. 1-4 1993-1996
- b. 16 f. 1-4 1997-2000
- b. 17 f. 1-4 2001-2004
- b. 18 f. 1-4 2005-2007 Diaries 2003-2007
Diary entries are from 2005 to 2007; material dated before 2005 was inserted by Black.
- b. 19 f. 1-4 2008-2010
- b. 20 f. 1-4 2011-2013
- b. 21 f. 1 2014 Diary 1875, 2014
Diary contains an 1875 photograph of Black's maternal grandfather, William McEwan, as a child.
- Transcripts
- b. 21 f. 2-5 1936-1944 August
- b. 22 f. 1-4 1944 August-1948
- Excerpts
- b. 22 f. 5 1950
- b. 23 f. 1-13 1951-1953, 1955-1956, 1958-1960, 1962, 1964-1967
- b. 24 f. 1-11 1968-1972, 1974

John Baxter Black (cont.)

Diaries (cont.)

Transcripts (cont.)

Excerpts (cont.)

- b. 25 f. 1-7 1975, 1979, 1985-1988
- b. 25 f. 8 Atlantic Crossings 1948-1968, 1974
- b. 26 f. 1-6 Trips in Europe, Egypt, and North America 1954-2000
- b. 26 f. 7 Letters 1943-1944, 2002
Transcripts.

John Baxter Black (died 1923)

- b. 26 f. 8 Diary 1914-1917
- b. 27 f. 1 Diary 1917
- b. 27 f. 2 Letters 1917-1918
Transcripts. Includes a photograph of Black in uniform.

- b. 27 f. 3 Donald Black Letters 1926-1927, 2013
Transcripts.

- b. 28 v. 1-4 *A History of the Family of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Blymyer Black of Mansfield, Ohio*