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Biography: Le Blanc, Sir Simon (1748/9–1816)

C. Douglas Hay

Osgoode Hall Law School of York University, dhay@osgoode.yorku.ca

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Le Blanc, Sir Simon (1748/9–1816), judge, was the second son of Thomas Le Blanc (1704–1765), of Charterhouse Square, London, and Ann Tully. Thomas Le Blanc, a wealthy merchant and a director of the South Sea Company, was descended from a Huguenot family of Rouen; his wife had a fortune of £20,000 at their marriage in 1739. Simon, who received £14,000 under his father’s will in 1765, followed his brother Thomas (b. 1743) to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he was admitted pensioner on 1 January 1766; he was named scholar in that year and matriculated in Michaelmas term 1766. He was admitted to the Inner Temple in 1771 and called to the bar in February 1773. He graduated LLB from Cambridge in 1773 and was a fellow of Trinity Hall from 1779 to 1799.

Le Blanc joined the Norfolk circuit and by February 1787 was sufficiently eminent in the profession to be created serjeant-at-law; he was made king’s serjeant on 4 March 1795 and was treasurer of Serjeants’ Inn from 1798 to 1799. One of the most successful advocates of his generation, in the year 1790 he made 271 appearances in the court of common pleas; only one other barrister made more. His advice on cases was called upon by clients on many different issues; they included the inhabitants of Hinxton, Cambridgeshire, in 1792, whom he advised on right of common at enclosure; George Nugent-Temple-Grenville, first marquess of Buckingham, who retained him on the prosecution of deer-stealers in 1786; and many others, in Cambridgeshire and throughout the country. He was counsel for the University of Cambridge from 1791 to 1799. On 5 June 1799 he was made a justice of the court of king’s bench, and knighted, taking his seat on the following day. Lord Campbell, who first saw him on the bench in June 1800, later described him as ‘prim and precise’ (Campbell, 4.108) in appearance and one of the best lawyers of his generation. In contrast Isaac Espinasse was less complimentary: In speaking, he was tame and unimpressive; his delivery was feeble, and totally destitute of that earnestness and seeming self-conviction of the truth of what he wished to impress upon the minds of others. No varied cadence ever relieved the ear—no quotation ever embellished his address to a jury. He was tamely correct, tedious, and unconvincing. (Espinasse, 319)

Espinasse added that Le Blanc was not popular with the bar and too full of his own importance to allow himself any familiarity.

Le Blanc’s contributions to judgments were many, only some of which have been noted by historians, such as Glazebrook v. Woodrow (1799), on executory contracts; Haycraft v. Creasy (1801), on false representation of another’s credit, in which he and the other puisnes overruled the lord chief justice, Lloyd Kenyon, first Baron Kenyon; and R. v. Creevey (1813), on libel by a member of parliament, in which his own direction at trial was overruled by Edward Law, first Baron Ellenborough. He sat with other judges on a number of state trials, including that of James Hadfield, who fired on George III in 1800, but came to widest public notice in his conduct of other criminal cases. In June 1808 John Harriott Hart and Henry White, of the Independent Whig, were successfully prosecuted for libelling Le Blanc for his directions to the jury in the trials of captains Chapman (which he did conduct) and Bennett (which he did not) for murdering a young man and a boy through savage punishment. Chapman and Bennett had been acquitted; Hart and White were convicted, fined, and imprisoned for the libel on Le Blanc and another on the lord chief justice, Ellenborough.
Four years later Le Blanc was selected as one of the judges charged particularly with the suppression of Luddism. During the initial phase of machine-breaking in the midlands and the north some of the justices on assize circuit had directed or encouraged acquittals in spite of the scale of disturbances. John Bayley, a puisne justice of king's bench, did so at Nottingham in March 1812, at York in August 1812, and again, at Nottingham, in March 1815. George Wood, a baron of the exchequer, sat on a trial at Lancaster in August 1812 where thirty-eight were acquitted. The government was convinced that exemplary executions were necessary, and when special commissions were issued for assizes at Chester and Lancaster in May 1812, and at York in January 1813, care was taken to select judges of a different temper. Le Blanc sat with Sir Alexander Thomson at both Lancaster and York, at which twenty-five prisoners were executed in all. At York he tried the murderers of the woollen manufacturer William Horsfall, whose conviction was critical. The judges advised prosecuting counsel, James Alan Park, and Henry Hobhouse, the Treasury solicitor, that moving the executions of the three condemned men to Huddersfield would be unwise, as it would entail a respite, raising hopes of mercy. They were hanged at York two days after trial. Before the next convictions took place Le Blanc conferred with Park on the advantages of early hangings, as had been adopted at the Lancaster special commission. The judges also agreed to accept no applications for mercy but to leave the entire discretion with the secretary of state. Le Blanc and Thomson recommended mercy for only one of the seventeen sentenced to death.

In the 1780s, while a barrister, Le Blanc had chambers in Lincoln's Inn; on appointment to the bench he moved to Serjeants' Inn. His town house, where he died on 15 April 1816 in his sixty-eighth year, was in Bedford Square. He also had a country seat, Northaw House, near Barnet, Hertfordshire. He was buried under the altar of Northaw church. He made extensive bequests to nephews, his widowed sister, his sister-in-law, and their children. He had no children himself and never married.

DOUGLAS HAY

Sources


Archives

TNA: PRO, corresp., HO 42/132
Likenesses

J. Opie, oils, Trinity Hall, Cambridge · F. Wheatley, portrait; Sotheby’s, 26 Nov 1975 [see illus.]

Wealth at death

bequests of £30,000 in the funds, as well as real and other personal estate: will, TNA: PRO, PROB 11/1579, sig. 208

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