

# THE MILLER ARCHIVE: AN INTRODUCTION

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*Resumen:* La familia Miller tuvo una importancia especial en el desarrollo comercial de las islas Canarias desde la llegada fortuita de James Swanston Miller en 1812. Su archivo familiar incluye una colección de documentos fotográficos tanto de la saga familiar como de la vida cotidiana en Gran Canaria a finales del siglo XIX. *Palabras claves:* Familia Miller; Archivos familiares; Fotografía histórica; Gran Canaria.

*Abstract:* The Miller family was particularly important in the Canary Islands commercial development since the chance arrival of James Swanston Miller in 1812. Their family archive includes a collection of photographic documents about the familiar saga itself and about the daily life in Gran Canaria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Key words:* Miller family; Family archives; Historic photography; Gran Canaria.

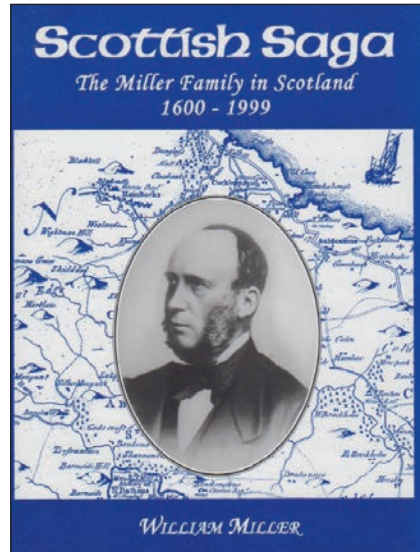
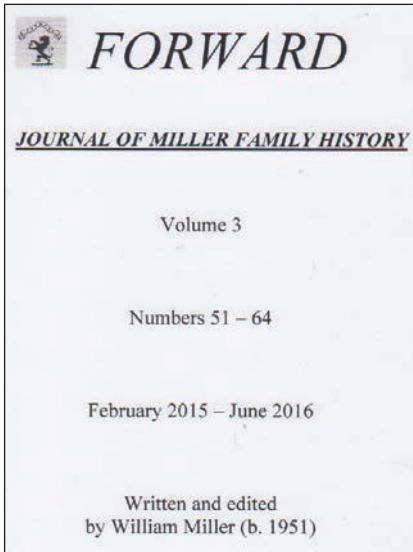
The author's interest in researching and documenting the history of the Millers was stimulated by two books which were written about his family nearly thirty years ago<sup>1</sup>. The first, by Miguel Rodríguez Díaz de Quintana<sup>2</sup>, was published in 1989 and was called *Miller y Compañía: cien años de historia*. The second was publis-

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\* Miller Archive. Northamptonshire County Record Office, Wootton Hall Park, Northampton, NN4 8BQ, Reino Unido

1. The originals of all the photographs in this paper are held in the Miller Archive, in Northampton, United Kingdom, in Box WFN 10. Copies of *Forward: the Journal of Miller history*, Issues 1-70 (July 2005-January 2018) are kept at the Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Palmas and the Northamptonshire Record Office.

2. RODRIGUEZ DIAZ DE QUINTANA, Miguel. *Miller y Compañía: cien años de historia*. [Las Palmas de Gran Canaria]: Miller y Cía., 1989.



hed in 1990 by the author's father, Basil Miller<sup>3</sup>, and was called *Canary saga: the Miller family in Las Palmas (1824-1990)*.

Rodriguez' well researched book is particularly important as it quotes archival sources some of which have now been lost. It is quite shocking that the extensive Miller y Cía. company archives did not survive the sale of the company by the British Condor group to the Spanish Boluda Group.

The author's response to learning about the lost company archives was to set out to attempt to recreate a family archive by contacting every branch of the family, and from as many surviving sources as possible. Gradually over the last twenty five years a substantial archive of manuscript, printed and photographic material has been accumulated successfully and deposited, currently, in the Northamptonshire County Record Office, and catalogued.

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3. MILLER, Basil. *Canary saga: the Miller family in Las Palmas (1824-1990)*. [S.l.]: Haggerston Press. Published by the Miller family, 1990; MILLER, Basil. *Saga canaria: la familia Miller en Las Palmas (1824-1990)*. Traducción: María Dolores de la Fe. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Cabildo Insular de Gran Canaria, 1994.



*Thomas Miller Swanston  
(1805-1885).*



*George Swanston Miller (1807-1875).*



*Album of Thomas Miller & his second wife  
Margaret Wilson.*



*Alice Miller de Parry.*



*James (standing), Joseph (left), Thomas Wilson Miller. Thomas Hamilton-Miller with his sons Dudley (left) an Cecil.*

The second book, by the author's father, raised a huge number of questions, in particular, what exactly had the Millers done in Scotland before they came to the Canary Islands, and indeed why they came. More intriguing was the question of whether the family did indeed arrive as a result of the intervention of a privateer, as is recorded anecdotally.

After many years of research, including months spent in the National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh, the author published his book *Scottish Saga: the Miller family in Scotland (1600-1999)*<sup>4</sup>. Published in 2007, this answered many of the outstanding questions, but that is another story.

Since 2007 the author has continued his research into all the branches of the family, which comprises about 200 living members in England, Scotland, the USA, New Zealand, Australia, Portugal and the Canary Islands. The results have been published in a journal of Miller history founded, and edited, by the author

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4. MILLER, William. *Scottish saga: the Miller family in Scotland (1600-1999)*. Published by the Miller Family, 2007.



*Harry Miller and his family.*



*Gerald Miller (right), with Harol Mac-Millan and Ken Park, when he was British Consul.*

entitled *Forward*. The 70th issue was published in January 2018. Not only does this serve to disseminate research, but it has also served as a means of communicating with family members and institutions in attracting further additions, both written and photographic, into the family archive.

Unfortunately an image of James Swanston Miller (1798-1855) has not yet been discovered. He was the first member of the family to arrive in the Canaries on 26 August 1812, after being captured by the French privateer John Ordronaux<sup>5</sup> and landed, penniless, in the island aged only 14. However, I have recently found a photograph of his brother George Swanston Miller (1807-1875) who joined him in business in Las Palmas in 1822 aged only 15.

Another wonderful recent find for the archive is a painted portrait in miniature of Thomas Miller Swanston (1805-1885) as a young man. It is fascinating to see that he had red hair. He joined his cousin James Swanston Miller in business in Las Palmas in 1824 at the age of 19, and eventually went on to found his own business in 1854.

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5. *Forward*, 28 (January 2009).





*Lieutenant (Sp.) T.B.C. Miller RNVR, DSC (from row, second from right) in the Azores with Portuguese officers.*

The archive is fortunate in possessing the personal photograph album of Thomas Miller Swanston<sup>6</sup> which probably contains relatives of James Swanson Miller as, sadly, there are several unidentified images.

Also in the archive are all the originals of the photographs which are reproduced in Basil Miller's book *Canary saga*. For example, the well-known photograph of three of the four surviving sons of Thomas Miller Swanston, namely James and Joseph Miller Vasconcellos, and Thomas Miller Wilson. James Miller (1839-1915) built the shipping company Miller y Cia. on the Santa Catalina mole. Joseph Miller (1840-1920) was a partner in the Swanston company which built the Puerto de La Luz<sup>7</sup>. He was also a partner in the company which built the Santa Catalina hotel. Thomas Miller Wilson (1857-1930) continued the business of his father in 46 Triana, and developed into motorcar sales and fire and marine insurance<sup>8</sup>.

6. Album owned by the author, William Miller. Original photographs in Miller Archive WFM Box 10.

7. *Forward*, 62 (April 2016).

8. *Forward*, 64 (June 2016).



*Ship's bell of the Alexander (1867).*



*James Miller Vasconcellos' desk  
(ca. 1880).*



*Crested silver tray (ca. 1880).*

There is a very nice, full-colour, painted portrait in the archive of James Miller's wife Alice Parry (1851-1931) who was born in Agra, India, had 10 children with James, and is well known for having operated a soup kitchen to feed the poor of the town. She also played the organ in the British Church.



*New mole built by the Swanstons & Millers  
(1903).*



*Tugboat Gran Canaria  
(1904).*



*Miller's electric coal conveyer.*



*Laden coal barges at anchor.*



ADVERTISEMENTS.

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Bank Notes, Bills, and Cheques Cashed.  
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NATIONAL BANK OF SCOTLAND, Limited.  
UNION BANK OF SPAIN AND ENGLAND, Limited.  
LONDON AND RIVER PLATE BANK, Limited.  
AMERICAN EXCHANGE IN EUROPE.

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LARGE ASSORTMENT & EXTENSIVE STOCK AT MODERATE PRICES.  
These CIGARS can be delivered, Duty Paid, in  
any part of the United Kingdom.

**MANAGERS OF THE LAS PALMAS COALING CO.**  
(The oldest established Coaling Depot in Grand Canary.)  
Agents in London: SWANSTON & CO., 1, Laurence Poultry Hill, E.C.  
Coaling Agents: HULL, BLYTH & CO., 4, Fenchurch Avenue, E.C.  
Miller's advertisement before the shipping days

James Miller was in his 60s when the Miller building was constructed on the Santa Catalina mole, so the burden of the operation of the business soon began to fall on the shoulders of three of his sons, Thomas Hamilton-Miller (1872-1952)<sup>9</sup>, Harry Miller (1879-1959)<sup>10</sup> and Gerald Miller (1889-1982)<sup>11</sup>.

The eldest son, Thomas Hamilton-Miller was a senior partner, but less known in Las Palmas because he was based mainly in the London office. Harry Miller divided his time between London and the Canaries in order to support his youngest brother Gerald in the early years. As is well known, Gerald was, for many years, British consul in Gran Canaria<sup>12</sup>.

The author's father<sup>13</sup>, Basil Miller (1920-2002), the second of three sons of Gerald, should be mentioned at this point because

9. *Forward* Issue 11, August 2006.

10. *Forward* Issue 49, August 2014.

11. *Forward* Issue 42, January 2014.

12. *Forward* Issue 22, December 2007; *Forward*, Issue 39, June 2012; *Forward*, Issue 41, October 2012.

13. *Forward*, Issue 1, July 2005; *Forward*, Issue 32, March 2010; *Forward*, Issue 33, April 2010; *Forward*, Issue 38, May 2011; *Forward*, Issue 39, June 2012; *Forward*, Issue 41, October 2012; *Forward D*, Issue 43, February 2014; *Forward*, Issue 63, May 2016.



*Clothes washing in an irrigation channel.*



*Collecting water from the fountain in Plaza Santo Domingo.*

he was recruited into British naval intelligence to help with the planning for Operation Pilgrim, and in the last two years of the war was an intelligence officer attached to the British and American navies occupying the Azores. After the war he became a director of the London based shipping company, Lambert Brothers Ltd., who by that time were shareholders in Miller y Cia., S.A. in Las Palmas. After the Second World War, Gerald's youngest son Jim Miller<sup>14</sup> (1926-1995), was Lloyds Agent employed by Miller y Cia., Las Palmas.

The archive is trying to collect photographs of significant artefacts which depict the history of the Millers, for example, the ship's bell of the sailing ship Alexander which was used by Thomas Miller Swanston to store coal, anchored by the old mole at San Telmo. A photograph of a large silver tray carrying the family crest, illustrates the wealth that the family had acquired at the end of the 19th century. However, because the family is now very large, the wealth has been disbursed, and no one is rich now. The author is fortunate to have inherited the office desk belonging to James Miller Vasconcellos.

The archive has some wonderful photographs of the port and the commercial activities of the Millers, for example, one showing

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14. *Forward D*, Issue 23, February 2008.



*A cave-dwelling family.*



*Cave village of Atalaya.*

the new mole built by the Swanstons and Millers in the 1880s. One showing a social celebration on board the new tugboat the *Gran Canaria* in 1904. Another showing the electric overhead coal conveyor that the Millers built behind their warehouse, on the Santa Catalina mole, to automate the handling of coal in large quantities. And one showing rows of coal barges, piled high with bags of coal, at anchor awaiting orders from ships.

Another section of the archive contains a collection of advertisements placed by the various Miller companies, and depicted here is the one which is perhaps the best known.

The Miller family were well aware of the contrast between their own personal wealth and the poverty of the general population of the Canary Islands. Not only did they document it with photographs and take a huge interest in the local culture and traditions, but they tried to alleviate the condition of the people in various ways not least by providing a great deal of employment.

The historian Miguel Rodríguez Díaz de Quintana has estimated that at one time no less than three quarters of the working population of Gran Canary was employed by one or other of the Miller companies.

The archive contains many photographs showing the condition of the local people deprived as they were, for example, of piped water into their homes, and having to put up with unacceptable living conditions.

The Miller family were very aware that some local islanders were so impoverished in the 19th century that they lived in cave



*Weaving.*



*Ploughing.*

villages. Photographs of these living conditions in the family albums may in fact be commercial photographs, rather than taken by family members, but they are included here because they are so important to the story of the Canary Islanders. The Millers clearly cared because, in addition to the soup kitchen operated by James and Alice Miller, Joseph Miller made regular monthly cash payments to three hospitals in the island, and Thomas Miller Wilson allegedly paid for water rights to be given to a poor part of the town. He also appears to have given money to anyone who approached him.

The Millers were also fascinated to record some of the crafts which they observed being carried out inside these primitive homes, including spinning and weaving, and essential life giving activities such as agriculture, the latter utilizing very primitive equipment which inevitably involved very hard work in view of the hard, sun dried soil and the lack of rain.

The family also recorded urban scenes, and it is fascinating to see a quiet street scene in Teror with its cobbled road and young children playing in the road.

Not surprisingly there are several photographs of street scenes in the capital Las Palmas, particularly of the street called Triana, where many British merchants had their houses including the Millers at number 46.

Also not surprising was the fact that the family made several photographs of their new offices at the foot of the Santa Catalina





*Spinning and water carrying.*



*Street scene in Teror.*



*Offices of Miller y Cia on the Santa Catalina mole.*



*Tennis - Gerald Miller (right)  
Ernest Wootton (centre).*



*Swimming led to tourism.*

mole which proved so important to the family's life from 1883 onwards, as well as its importance to the economy of the island, the arrival of passenger ships and the beginnings of tourism.

The British introduced many new sports to the island, cricket, golf, tennis and football, and these activities they documented extensively, obviously mainly because they enjoyed the sports themselves. But perhaps the most important sport they introduced was swimming which has become so popular because of the wonderful climate of the Canaries and led to the huge boom in tourism which is now so beneficial to the island's economy.

Finally a note as to why it is important to conserve our historic photographs. Shown below are two photographs of a famous Miller gravestone in Cockburnspath, Scotland, the first taken in about 1970 when the text was still legible, and the second taken in 2006 by which time the stone had weathered so badly that it was no longer legible.



*Grave of Thomas Miller (1729-1795) & Alison Sinclair (1730-1797)  
showing erosion and loss of text.*

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