

# ACTRESS VIVIEN LEIGH'S REMARKABLE COUSINS

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✘ **Liz Chater**, London UK, 28 September 2015

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### **Percival M.J. Fielding aka Michael Fielding**

He was Vivien's oldest cousin. Born in Darjeeling in 1896, he joined the Indian Army and rose quickly

through the ranks from second lieutenant to captain. He retired after the First World War and immigrated to California to eventually become a celebrated public speaker.

Shortly after moving to California, Michael could be found in the society pages as a popular dancing partner to many a young lady in Oakland. Having become an American citizen, he promptly changed his name dropping Percival and Julius and using Michael as his first name. His dashing looks and charm helped launch a Hollywood career. He appeared in numerous silent movies and eventually found a comfortable niche in the after-dinner speaking circuit specialising in political and military analysis.

On occasion, he also didn't hesitate to mix truth with a smattering of the wilder side of his imagination. Very few, if any, could or would question his subject matter because he talked with such confidence, flair and knowledge. A classic example is his apparent derring-do during the Second World War, behind Japanese lines with the Karen guerrillas in Myanmar (Burma). His exciting and self-serving account of how he fled the war zone is a far cry from the way it was remembered by those who were there.

Nevertheless, Fielding was a respected and a sought-after figure in the '40s and the '50s. Among the topics he lectured about was the Arab/Israeli conflict (Israel had just been born). It was ironic that he held anti-Israeli views considering that his grandfather was a German Jew from Hamburg.

Despite his long-ago "retirement" from the army, an American college newspaper reported (1949) during his speaking stop at the college, that Captain Fielding had penetrated the Iron Curtain (Yugoslavia) as a German-speaking Slovenian peasant.

To take advantage of his growing popularity, Fielding wrote a summary of his life story and sold it at his speaking engagements. The book never mentioned his German-Jewish-Armenian heritage.

Here are several paragraphs from the books summarizing his military exploits. Note that Capt. Fielding was in Baku during the turbulent years following the war and when the fate of Armenia was much in doubt: *"For four years he served in Iraq, followed by three post-war campaigns in the Khyber Pass region of India's blood-drenched Northwest frontier – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Afghan War (3 May 1919 - 8 August 1919), the Waziristan campaign (November 1919 – December 1920), and the Mahsud campaign. It was during his Iraqi service that Captain Fielding was associated with the highly secret Sunstar force which marched across Persia on foot to capture Russia's famous oil centre of Baku after the Russian revolution.*

*In 1920 Captain Fielding came to the United States and subsequently became a citizen. After trying his hand at cattle ranching and movie making in Hollywood, he returned to France in 1921 as Homme de Confiance to a famous Russian architect. Back in the United States a couple of years later he entered the newspaper field and worked for a number of years on the Chicago Daily Journal and the Chicago Tribune as reporter, re-writer, feature writer and undercover crime investigator during the infamous*

*gang days in the Midwest metropolis. He was also a public relations adviser to Arab-Riff chieftain, Sheriff Mulay Mohammed Tedjani. During this summer Captain Fielding has been in Europe, investigating at first hand the effect of our Marshall Plan aid to western Europe.....*



**Michael Fielding a journalist with the Army posing with the Karen Levies and the Lysander.**

**This photo was taken in 1945 at Lipeykhi airstrip. Photo credit: [Koi-Hai](#)**

American newspapers, time and again dedicated many columns of print to his uncanny ability to "predict" the future and what was going to happen in the war. This coupled with his extensive travelling to perilous places that would today put a chill down the spine of ordinary folk.

In the late '50s he wrote "A Pocket Guide to Europe" which was declared 'must read' for the European traveller. He continued his speaking tours into the early '60s and died in Los Angeles in 1966.

## Gerald Fielding

Also born in Darjeeling (1902), he too served in the Indian Army. After the family moved to Nice in the '20s, he dabbled in acting. Soon after he moved to the U.S. and became a Hollywood actor. He and his brother Claude appeared in the 1926 silent film 'Magician' directed by Rex Ingram, and again in A *Desert Romance* 'The Garden of Allah' which was filmed in North Africa.



An impressed 'The Charleston Daily' reviewer wrote: *Opinions of picture-goers from all over the United States are being awaited here by Rex Ingram, motion picture director, as a means of determining whether or not he has discovered another Ramon Novarro or screen idol.*

Gerald's acting career took off and he appeared in at least 17 films. He also became the lover of Ingram's wife, Alice Terry. In 1931 he starred in "Just a Gigolo" and a year later signed with Columbia Pictures for "Murder of the Night Club Lady".

In 1931 Gerald married actress and Pasadena socialite Barbara MacLeod. They had a tempestuous and brief marriage. One evening, after an argument, she shot and killed herself in Van Nuys. She was 32-years-old. Gerald was an actor and radio executive at the time. His wife's suicide had no impact on his career. He became a naturalized American in 1940 and died in Los Angeles in 1956 at the age of 54.

## Claude Anthony Karl Fielding aka Paul C. Fielding

Also born in Darjeeling (1904). Paul C. Fielding was another aspiring actor. He performed alongside his brother Gerald on a couple of occasions, but was the less successful of the two.



They appeared together in the 1926 film *'Magician'*, and again in *A Desert Romance 'The Garden of Allah'*. Claude went on to write screen plays hoping to find more success with his pen than in front of the camera. However, in 1940 Vivien Leigh, while staying at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel, gave him \$500 "because he was enduring an awful time." The 1940 census reported that he was a writer-actor living in West Hollywood.

He enrolled in the U.S. army in October 1942 and became a sergeant. He died in Los Angeles in 1973.

### **Alexander Fielding-Wallace aka 'Xan' Fielding**

While several Leigh's cousins made their mark, Alexander 'Xan' Fielding (nephew of Michael, Gerald and Paul Fielding), born in Darjeeling (1918) was the most celebrated of the four. His father, Major Alexander Wallace, served in the Indian Army. His mother (Armenian Mary Gertrude nee Yackjee) died soon after Alexander was born.

'Xan', baptized Alexander Percival Feilman Wallace in Ootacamund, was re-baptized a few months later as Fielding-Wallace at a Catholic church in Calcutta to erase the German-Jewish Feilman connection. The Feilman was originally Feilmann. To be accepted in colonial India and in wartime England, being a German-Jew was a serious handicap.

Alexander Senior, for whatever reason, be it grief or the realization that as a young widower and an army captain he was not in a position to bring up baby 'Xan', relinquished all parental responsibility for his son. Thus 'Xan' was effectively scooped up by his mother's Feilman/Fielding family. Suddenly the little boy's uncles and aunts (brothers and sisters of his mother) became his brothers and sisters. He grew up thinking his cousins were his brothers. Whereas Vivien had loving and devoted parents, her cousin 'Xan' never knew his parents and his start in life was beset with tragedy. According to Hugo Vickers in his biography of Vivien Leigh "*...Xan was raised for eight years in the belief that he was the son of his grandparents...*"

Growing up in France he became fluent in French. He was educated in England where he became a classicist and attended several German universities.

Despite his youth, he was hired, at the end of the '30s, as sub-editor of "The Cyprus Times". When he  was fired he unsuccessfully ran a bar. When war was declared, he left for Greece because he didn't want to be cooped up on the small island during the war. But when France fell, he joined the British Army as second lieutenant. In Egypt the Special Operations Executive (SOE) interviewed him for secret operations. During the interview he was asked: "Have you any personal objections to committing murder?" His reply was deemed acceptable and he was shipped, by submarine, to Crete. He landed with explosives and weapons. His job was to organize an espionage network to spy on German military activities in the area. Disguised as a peasant, he attended parties given for the Germans by Cretans who pretended to be collaborators. Along with guerrilla fighter and later famed travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, he provided valuable information to the RAF about Axis troop movements. In addition, he arranged transport to Egypt of hundreds of Allied soldiers left behind

after the German occupation of the island.

After six months he returned to Egypt by submarine and was parachuted by the SOE to southern France in the summer of '44. He was arrested by the Germans and faced certain death but was rescued at the last moment by the Resistance.

'Xan' was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* that year. Before the end of the war, the SOE sent him to Cambodia and Tibet. He later joined the Special Intelligence Services in Germany for six months and was appointed UN observer in the Balkans. At the end of the '40s he wrote "Hide & Seek" about his double-agent activities.

In 1954 he married a marchioness, wrote a book ("The Stronghold") about Crete and in 1956 was technical adviser for a Dirk Bogarde war movie ("Ill Met by Moonlight") about Fermor. The couple then moved to southern Spain before returning to southern France.

In the '50s 'Xan' became a much-sought after translator. He translated some 30 books from French and German, including "The Bridge on the River Kwai" and "Planet of the Apes". He also wrote books (about the Monaco casino) and "One Man and His Time".

In 1978 he split up with his wife and married the American widow of the Armenian painter Arshille Gorky. He died in Paris in 1991.

Like his cousins—Vivien Leigh, Michael, Gerald, Claude—'Xan' led a remarkable life. They were also the fruits of transplants. One side of the family was Armenian from Iran. They were also of German-Jewish extraction. Finally, they were off-shoots of the British...a people who roamed the globe and ruled a quarter of the globe when Leigh and her cousins were born in hill resorts of India.

Gone with the wind, indeed.

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La Mars Semi Weekly Sentinel, Iowa 30<sup>th</sup> November 1948

