

COMMENTARY

A Peacock in the attic

Insights and secrets from newly discovered letters by George Meredith

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Late in 2009, the novelist Jim Powell found a cache of letters written by George Meredith to his great-great-grandmother Susan Mary Neill, which suggested that Susan was an illegitimate daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. He contacted Professor Nicholas Joukovsky to discuss the discovery. This article is the product of their joint research since then.

An old envelope, found among some family papers in December 2009, bore the written instruction “Destroy or burn I at my death, I S M Neill”. Inside it were letters from George Meredith to “Susie Pye”. One of the letters, which had only a postscript by the novelist, was written by his wife Mary Ellen, the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. Mary signs her letter, which was written for Susan’s birthday, “Your affectionate sister”, and says, “Baby sends aunt Susan ‘me love & a kiss for her nice day’”. In two other letters, George refers to himself as Susan’s “sincere brother-in-law” and “your affectionate brother”. It seems that Mary and Susan were sisters, or at least half-sisters. In which case, did they share a mother, or a father?

Susan Mary Abbott, afterwards Neill, was born in London on October 12, 1830, and baptized on November 1 at St Pancras Old Church, where her parents were given in the register as John Abbott, an attorney residing in Ernest Street, and his wife Emmeline Spencer. Mary was baptized as the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock and his wife Jane. Because Peacock destroyed almost all his private papers, not much is known about his marriage and family. In November 1819, he proposed by letter to Jane Gryffydh, a Welsh parson’s daughter he had neither seen nor written to since April 1811. At first their marriage appears to have been happy, and there is no reason to question the paternity of the four children born to the couple over the next eight years: Mary Ellen (1821–61), Margaret Love (1823–6), Edward Gryffydh (1825–67), and Rosa Jane (1827–57). But after the death of their second daughter in January 1826, Jane is said to have been “inconsolable” and to have gradually become, in the words of her granddaughter Edith Nicolls, “a complete invalid”. (Mary Shelley and George Meredith both described her as “mad”.) It seems unlikely that Jane Gryffydh would have had an extramarital affair, whereas Peacock might well have sought sex and companionship elsewhere as his wife’s condition deteriorated.

If Peacock was Susan’s father, who was her mother? The most obvious answer at first seems to be John Abbott’s “wife”, Emmeline Spencer, but there is no evidence of her existence, other than her name as Susan’s mother in the register of baptisms at St Pancras Old Church. The absence of any record of Emmeline’s own baptism, marriage, or death is suspicious, as is the absence of any record of John Abbott’s marriage. Suspicion that the baptismal record might have been falsified to

cover up an illegitimate birth leads to the search for an unmarried woman in John Abbott’s family who might have been Susan’s mother, and the only likely candidate is John’s older sister, Alice Bunce Abbott, who was born in 1793 and was thus eight years younger than Peacock. In a large urban parish, she might have successfully pretended to be John’s wife.

For some fifteen years from 1833 to 1848, John Abbott’s law offices were located at 10 Charlotte Street, Bedford Square (the old name for the portion of Bloomsbury Street between Bedford Square and Great Russell Street). This was also the residence of Alice Abbott, and Alice’s will, dated March 10, 1841, reveals that it was she, rather than her brother, who held a long-term lease on the house, which she left in trust for her “niece”, Susan, despite the fact that she had other nieces and nephews. Around 1848, John and Alice took a house together on Ditton Com-

mon at Thames Ditton, and the 1851 census shows them both living there, with Susan, just five miles from Peacock’s house at Lower Halliford. (It is also worth noting that in 1850/51 Peacock took a house at 1 Torrington Street, a few hundred yards from Bedford Square.) If Peacock helped Alice Abbott to obtain the lease of the house in Charlotte Street, Bedford Square, to provide a home for her and Susan as well as a reliable source of income for Susan in the event of her mother’s death, this heavy expense would help to explain the financial problems we know he had in his later years, in spite of his East India Company salary of £2,000 a year.

John Abbott brought Susan up as his own daughter and left his entire estate to her in his will, dated July 23, 1846. A charming letter – written on July 11, 1842, while Susan was at school in Ipswich – contains parental advice from “Your affectionate Father”: “I shall hope to see my Dear Child again at Felixstowe, before she resumes those Studies, which are so essential to her future happiness and comfort, store your mind my dearly beloved, with all useful knowledge, at the same time do not neglect to cultivate that branch of your Education, which comes under the denomination of Ornamental, for Accomplishments are also necessary”. Susan did indeed become accomplished. George Meredith discusses literature with her and comments on her fine ear for music and her skill as a pianist. Her album of Old Master and other drawings remains in her family, while her notebook on needlework is preserved in the Bodleian Library among Henry Wallis’s papers.

ber 1852. In a letter to her husband of November 18, 1852, Mrs Horne gives a partisan account of the Merediths’ quarrels in which she portrays Miss Abbott as a bad influence on Mary: “She is more amiable but as practical as Mrs M. and always sides with her against ‘George’”. The newly discovered Meredith letters reveal that Susan’s relationship to Mary was much closer than Kate Horne was led to believe. They also reveal that George got on well with Susan and could trust her to take a more impartial view of their marital difficulties. He evidently liked and admired her.

In his first letter, George is writing from Lower Halliford on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day 1854. Addressing her as “Dearest Susie Pye: I (née Abbott)”, he explains that he is “too busy to scrawl much, being now in the very heat of composing and concluding one of my ‘Arabian Nights’: not of those that you have heard, but original altogether, and which I have every reason to think will be accepted by Chapman & Hall & published with Illustrations”. He is nevertheless taking a break to send Christmas greetings, “Mary having said in her usual solemn uncompromising manner I — ‘George! you have asked me to tell you when I write to Susan, thereby you may send an accompanying Autograph: George! — I write to day!’”

George’s holiday greetings are overshadowed by the Crimean War: “And yet, O my Susie! Where is Merry Christmas this year in England? What Compliments of the Season can one of English blood speak to another, while Britons sink in the ghastly trench, British mothers, wives, brides, sob for the beloved ones fallen to rise no more: while the whole heart of our England is beating with throbs of doubt . . . Not that your George desponds! O my Susie, no! He is of them that believe if England be true to herself she must triumph. He rejoices in the French Alliance: detests the Foreign Mercenary Bill [the Enlistment of Foreigners Bill, passed on December 22]; and even has some idea that if nothing else offers, he, too, may possibly don red and put left leg forward”. He again alludes to the possibility of military service later in the letter, when looking forward to their meeting at some future date: “When? ah! what may hap ’twixt now & then? Your George and your Black Sea Sidebottom;—of whom dear Mary is talking to everyone here as ‘Susan’s Sidebottom’ who was stunned by the cannonade: She calling him, in consequence ‘Susan’s Stunner’, irreverently as I think—These two may be Russian earth!” (It would appear that Susan was romantically involved at this time with a soldier named Sidebottom – possibly a Lieutenant Leonard Sidebottom who was Adjutant of the Buffs during the siege of Sebastopol.) George also reports that he has read Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* with Mary: “A most charming work! I like Lucy Snowe, moreover, who hath some points wherein to be compared to my Susie. But above all, and beyond all special characters in fiction that I



George Meredith by George Frederic Watts, 1893

John Abbott brought Susan up as his own

On March 27, 1852, John Abbott died suddenly at his law chambers in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. On April 16, Alice Bunce Abbott died of “chronic bronchitis” at Thames Ditton. Their deaths left Susan, at the age of twenty-one, financially independent but apparently an orphan. While it is not clear how she learned that Peacock was her father, we know that by October that year she was living under his roof, his wife having died on December 23, 1851. Susan was the Miss Abbott who was residing with the Merediths at Peacock’s house on the Thames at Lower Halliford when Kate Horne, the young wife of the writer Richard Henry Horne, paid the couple a three-week visit in October–Novem-

wot of, there is no one to me so life-like and delightful in simplicity, uniqueness, and distinct drawing, as Paul Emmanuel". After describing a recent visit from Kate Horne and enthusing about his son Arthur ("He is my star—my spring of life—my pride"), George concludes: "Alack! Alack! I have no gossip for my Susie, to cheer her droned-out life: but God bless her! says her sincere brother-in-law I George Meredith". Below and to the left of his signature, he adds, superfluously: "To Mlle I Susie Pye I née Abbott".

Meredith's playful insistence that Susan's name was formerly Abbott but is now Pye may allude to the discovery that she was Peacock's daughter. The original Susie Pye was the intrepid heroine of the popular ballad of "Young Beichan and Susie Pye", but the name may also be a play on the Greek letter pi, hence the initial P for Peacock, whose friends called him Greeky-Peaky, and who occasionally used Greek initials to sign his letters.

George's second letter, an extremely long one, is dated "Thursday: somewhere in 1 March 1855", probably the 15th or 22nd. Because "Dearest Susie" is "dull where she is in the wilds bordering on Manchester", George is writing sooner than he might have otherwise, "being for a while both physically & mentally prostrated". He is alone in lodgings at 25 Lower Belgrave Street, Eaton Square, where he expects to remain "a week or fortnight longer — perhaps longer still". The cause of his prostration is the death of his friend the distinguished chemist and social reformer Charles Blachford Mansfield on February 26, from burns sustained in a laboratory fire nine days earlier. "You have heard of our dear Charles Mansfield's death. That has given us a great shock. I say, you have heard, for I doubt not one of your correspondents has stated to you the sad accident which befel that noble fellow, one of the noblest & best of the men of this earth: . . . I am inscribing from a heart-ache." George's reticence here is significant, for Mary appears to have had an affair with Mansfield in 1853–4 and to have been overwhelmed with grief at his death (see "Mary Ellen's First Affair", *TLS*, June 15, 2007).

George answers Susan's questions about her friends Robert and Elizabeth Bell and about contemporary poets and poetry, concluding with a sympathetic assessment of the radical working-class poet Gerald Massey, whom he considers "Worth reading". Feigning reluctance to speak of himself, he continues: "'The Shaving of Shagpat' an Arabian Entertainment, by George Meredith—is in the hands of Chapman & Hall, and they are this week to make me an offer for the first Edition of a thousand Copies. I don't sell the Copyright—being so advised. Doyle has not time to illustrate it: but Chapman insanely insists on illustrations, which will delay the bringing out of the book. Indeed Chapman wants to make it a Christmas book—provoking, but such is the race of publishers . . . I will not omit to say, that Chapman has had from his 'Reader', (a species of literary Invisible in the pay of publishers), a very favourable opinion of my MSS, which is so far satisfactory". (Meredith succeeded John Forster as Reader for Chapman & Hall in 1860.)

Then follows a broader assessment of his financial needs and family situation: "I am sorry to say my prospects of an Appointment in the E. I. H. [East India House] look bad. I

fear I shall have to look to Literature altogether. Bell said he would try and get me an engagement on a weekly publication of some sort—which I hope he'll not forget . . . Employment of that specific & regular order is what I want—myself will do the rest. That is to say, I have faith in the ultimate product of my own powers, but they're of slow growth & present a distant harvest. Mary frets, and will never get thoroughly well while our prospects are so uncertain. For her sake & and my darling boy's—for their sakes alone—I suffer anxiety. Edith is provided for, and I think I can see success for me in the main—meantime, however, the main may engulf me". The letter is signed, "Still ever your affectionate brother, I George Meredith".

George's next letter is dated from 25 Lower Belgrave Street on a Saturday, evidently April 21, 1855. Mary is still at Halliford, but George is trying to arrange for her to come to London to see Susan on the following Wednesday, and then go to the seaside: "I do not want her to remain long in Town as a fortnight's sea air will do her more good than London. Nor can I write while I know her to be fretting & ill. It is a constant fever to me. Chapman has accepted my terms & is going to pay in advance next week. In two months more, if Mary gets better and all's smooth, I shall have finished something else—not 'fairy' which you sneer at, my Susie!" It appears that Susan is now staying with Mary's sister Rosa Collinson, who has also been ill, and to whom George sends his "warm love" as well as thanks for "her kindness" — possibly in helping the Merediths with their financial difficulties. The letter begins "Dear Susie Pye" and ends "I am your affectionate I GM——".

In the fourth letter — dated "Seaford: Sussex. October 12" — Mary and George both write to congratulate Susan on her twenty-fifth birthday. "My dearest Susan", Mary begins, "I cannot let your birthday pass without a word of congratulation: yes *congratulation* dear Susan, not for its lonely anniversary but because it renews the term of a good true life that is worth living, that is *wealth* to you & to your friends. I hope this may be its last lonely year . . .". The children, Arthur and Edith, also send birthday greetings to their "aunt Susan".

The Merediths' plans have changed again, and they will be returning to Halliford in

December. Meanwhile their anxiety over money continues, as Mary notes in closing: "I hope your discomforts are lessened by this time, tell me dear & write soon. George is in daily expectation of the Ordonance Money, if it comes soon we shall be all right, if not I shall perhaps be glad to be able to borrow again of you—but I hope not to need it. I Ever dearest Susan I Your affectionate sister I Mary Meredith". Mary's confidence that she will be able to borrow money from Susan certainly serves to confirm their family relationship.

George's brief note follows on the last page: "My dear Pye I Mary leaves me a little space for a few words . . . So I wish you all happiness, my dear girl! Life is an odd riddle, which you seem to be quietly solving for yourself in a manner to shame noisier ones. We wish you were with us. Of myself I have nothing new, or I would tell you a tale, knowing you care to listen. Mary is really & thoroughly better, her voice clear, appetite constantly good; in a fair way; but her body is the slave of her mind, and when the latter goes a moment wrong, the other unhappy machine requires terrible amount of mending. Arthur is advancing as my best prayers would have him. Edith also . . . My book should be out the first week in Novr. I have re-written much of it". *The Shaving of Shagpat* would eventually be published, without illustrations, on December 19, 1855, with a title page dated 1856. George concludes, "God bless you, dearest Susie, this day and the others of your life! Now & always know me I Your constantly affectionate I George Meredith". In the lower left corner of the page, he adds: "To, I Miss S. Pye, on her birthday".

Following this joint birthday letter there is a gap of more than five years, probably due in part to the breakdown of the Merediths' troubled marriage. During this time Susan made an impulsive marriage to William Mayne Neill, who was born in March 1824 in Holywood, near Belfast, a cotton merchant then resident in New York and back in Europe on a short business trip. Susan and William met, probably in London, on September 30, 1858. That very evening he wrote her a proposal of marriage which, on second thoughts, he did not send. On October 8 (by which time he had packed in a business trip to France), he did send a different version of it. The next day they were engaged. By October 12, Susan was in Ireland, presumably to

be introduced to some of William's family. On November 22, they were married at All Souls, St Marylebone. By the end of the year, Susan was living in New York. Despite religious differences — William was Unitarian while Susan was Anglican — the couple shared wide cultural interests and a taste for radical politics. William had previously cultivated the friendship of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving and Nathaniel Parker Willis in America. He was politically involved as a radical and was in close touch with leading members of the anti-slavery campaign, as was Susan during their life together in New York. In the autumn of 1859 Susan returned to Belfast, presumably to give birth to their son Harold, who was born there on November 4. William followed her in February 1860, by which time (and possibly in response to the imminent Civil War and its impact on the cotton trade) they had decided to relocate from New York to Liverpool. Later they moved to London.

George Meredith's last three letters to Susan come from this period and contain his earliest recorded comments on the failure of his first marriage. They are all written on the same paper, evidently in May–June 1861, some three years after the birth of Mary Ellen's son by Henry Wallis. Susan is visiting London, and she wants to see George, who appears to have mixed feelings about a meeting. The earliest is dated from Copsham Cottage, Esher, on a Tuesday, probably May 21, after his return from a three-day ramble with Frederick Maxse. "My dear Susie Pye!" he writes, "I have been running away from your letter (knapsack on back) over the Surrey hills, & now find it here to astonish me. You know Esher, I think? I am beyond Claremont, on a wild common, with my son. That sweet man you are most welcome to come & see if you like. It's better to presume (& quite safe) that all the world knows of one's domestic miseries. He & I are alone, & very happy. I needn't add more." He tells her that he is in town on Thursdays but so engaged all day that it will be difficult to arrange a meeting there. As an alternative, he invites her to come and introduce her husband to him at Esher, where they can dine, walk and talk, and spend the night if they wish. After asking her to "write what hours you are at home, how long you will be in town &c", he closes, "—bright in the roll of days, you may believe I Your ever faithful I George Meredith".

In his next letter — again dated from Esher on a Tuesday, probably June 4 or 11, since he refers to doctor's orders that we know he received on May 30 — George explains why he must decline Susan's invitation to some sort of gathering in London, despite the fact that it will be his last chance to see her before her departure. "My dear S. Pye!" he begins, "I would if I could, but I think I can't. It's too true. But you can write to me, & I dare say I shall see you when you next come. I must tell you plainly that it is impossible for me to see anyone who is in the habit of seeing, or is on familiar terms with, the 'opposite party':—simply because it is not right. You understand that I don't prescribe conditions." Since he makes it clear in his previous letter that he is quite willing to see Susan, the person he is refusing to see must be someone whom he cannot forgive for siding with Mary Ellen in the aftermath of the separation.

"And O, my dear!" he continues, "how disappointed you'd be with me. For I don't gossip a bit, & I hate old times and drop a veil between them & me, and never talk of them, & am as one just wise enough to see what a fool he has been. Peace will come some forty years hence, & then we'll talk & laugh over it. I should have been glad to shake your hand. Tell me how many children you have, & draw me a portrait of your husband. Three lines of description quite suffice to show how my lady feels towards him."

Next year, he tells her, he is thinking of taking Arthur to start school in Germany, but now he is preparing to go off to the Continent for a few weeks, because he has worked for the past three years without a break, and his doctor "interdicts work for a quarter of a year".

The last of George's letters is dated from Copsham Cottage on "Tuesday [June] 25th". He addresses her more formally as "My dear Susan" and attempts to explain himself: "Pray don't suppose me so lofty. For, my dear, was I not an ass? And by all my hopes (deep, fervent, unalterable) that I am one no more, but have grown to be something very very different, I am bound to presume that Time has had, will have, must have, an equally beneficent influence on others. I did not think my dear Susan wished to 'set in' for a gossip. I simply wished to say that I never touched that subject". Although we may never know exactly what George was admitting to, it is surely significant that, in writing

to a sister-in-law who probably knew as much as anyone about the breakdown of his marriage to Mary Ellen, he was willing to accept his share of the blame for their "domestic miseries".

Susan has written in praise of her husband, and George is pleased to hear her do so. "As to me," he adds, "I agree with you that the main thing for me is health. Composition causes a nervous excitement that, when long continued, quite prostrates the stomach. Feeling ill, I work harder, thinking my hours numbered, & then I may as well provide as well as I can for Boy. I am now resting after a fashion:—preparing a volume of Songs Ballads & Poems which will absolutely be bought and paid for, Susan! I have two novels in hand, & an Autobiography in head. The latter will probably appear as a serial in 'Once a Week'. I hate serials, but they pay." The volume of poems would appear almost a year later, with substantial additions, as *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads*. The intended "Autobiography" was the germ for *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, eventually serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1870–71.

When he wrote this last letter, George was still planning to leave Arthur with an unidentified friend — "a lady who will look after him like a mother" — but in the end he decided to take his son with him. By the time they returned at the end of August, Mary Ellen was on her deathbed in Otlands Park, Wey-

bridge, where she died from "renal dropsy" on October 22.

Although there is no record of any subsequent meeting between George and Susan, he seems to have remembered her kindly in his old age. Preserved with his letters to Susan is a rare autograph that he provided for Susan's thirteen-year-old granddaughter Eileen Neill. It is written in a shaky hand on his Box Hill stationery and dated January 6, 1906: "To the Grand-daughter of the Venerable Dame Susie Pye, this autograph, refused to all other applicants. I George Meredith".

Susan lived a long and productive life. In 1870, she was active in the campaign that saw Elizabeth Garrett Anderson elected to the first London School Board. Her son Harold became a distinguished journalist. Susan and William also "adopted" Charlotte Augusta Edings, who was born in South Carolina in 1860, the daughter of plantation owners. Charlotte came to live with the Neills in London in 1866 and took their name. She studied at the Slade School in 1879–80 and married Lewis Beard, the scion of a distinguished Lancashire family who was knighted for his services to local government in Blackburn. She died in 1962, at the age of 102. Susan died in London on March 4, 1921, aged ninety. William predeceased her by eight years.

William's numerous surviving letters to Susan offer no indication that she ever told him the secret of her illegitimate birth. The unravelling of her childhood assumptions about her identity probably left her feeling

ambivalent about her relationship to Peacock, and the scandal surrounding Mary Ellen's affair with Henry Wallis may have prompted her to distance herself from the Peacocks and the Merediths after her marriage. Yet somehow she must have wanted the truth to be known. A rational person does not leave letters in an envelope inscribed "Destroy or burn at my death" unless she expects someone to read them — that someone presumably being her son Harold (who, curiously enough, was given the same name as Mary Ellen's love child, born some eighteen months earlier).

The chance survival of George Meredith's letters to Susan Abbott provides new insight into his marriage and family circumstances at the time he was writing *The Shaving of Shagpat* as well as into his reflections on his "domestic miseries" shortly before Mary Ellen's death. But the most intriguing aspect of these new letters is surely the revelation that Susan was Peacock's daughter. Peacock's involvement with Alice Abbott, and Susan's birth around the time he was completing *Crotchet Castle* — his last novel for almost thirty years — must have complicated an already difficult family situation and may have proved a significant factor in limiting his literary output, which declined to a trickle in the 1830s and ceased altogether in the 1840s before recommencing in the 1850s. The discovery of his second family forces us to reassess many of our assumptions about his life and character.