

## FRANCES POWER COBBE: THE BIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF A VICTORIAN CHILDHOOD

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In popular imagination the phrase “Victorian childhood” evokes contrasting images: a sentimental scene with sunshine, fluffy dogs, lace and ribbons, or a gloomy illustration of pitiful half-naked infants labouring underground in mines. The outpouring of careful historical work on childhood during the last decade has provided specific details about the many additional differences that depend on class, region, empire, age and generation, as well as informed critiques of image, ideology and culture. Yet the new historical and theoretical insights may well complicate a biographer’s task. Hard facts about anyone’s early years are notoriously difficult to find. But even when it is possible to locate a surprising amount of information—although much of it is contextual rather than direct—for a biographer the questions remain: what do I do with these “facts”? What do they explain? Why does a biographer want to know about childhood anyway?

My subject is Frances Power Cobbe. She was a journalist, suffragist, antivivisectionist, theologian, essayist, activist, and in a phrase that appears in *Review of Reviews* in 1894, “the oldest New Woman now living on the planet” (“New Books” 563). She was at the time seventy-two years old and for more than thirty years had been an independent professional woman who staked out her own moral and intellectual positions, earned an adequate income, travelled alone both at home and abroad, and lived with another independent woman who was her beloved friend. She lived from 1822 to 1904, although like many similar women her professional life did not begin until she was thirty-five and her father had died. She was from a family of Anglo-Irish gentry with a substantial estate not far from Dublin. Her formal education ended with two years at a fashionable Brighton boarding school which she left in December 1838 when she had just turned sixteen.

During her own lifetime Cobbe was presented to girls in younger generations as an example of an alternative pattern of ideal womanhood. As a result of her impact on animal rights, women’s education, poor people’s medical treatment, and protection for abused wives, abbreviated (and often inaccurate) versions of her history appeared in several of the “girlhood of great women” books that were used as school prizes and Christmas presents. Her name is also found in Louisa May Alcott’s *Jo’s Boys* (1886) in which she represents a model for the happy and honoured life “old maids” can lead.

In everything so far published on Cobbe, including the fine brief study by Barbara Caine in *Victorian Feminists*, the only information about her childhood comes from the autobiography published when she was seventy-one. Thanks to the generous cooperation of Cobbe’s great-great-great nephews, however, I have been able to use family material which remains in private hands. Most of the papers are presently stored at Newbridge House which now belongs to the Fingal county park system. Roughly sorted and catalogued, there are estate records, farm accounts, leases, even pay books that show what each labourer was doing day by day back to the middle 1700s. Other papers

document the landowners' work as churchwarden, magistrate and so forth. Finally there are marriage settlements, family letters, school reports—sixty-five boxes in all, of which eighteen or twenty are personal papers, perhaps half of those from the generations that interest me.

Almost none of this copious information has direct reference to Frances Power Cobbe. (The reasons for that absence will be considered in due course.) But the papers do solve one other problem: what to call her. Of course she's "Cobbe" from the moment her public life begins, but in childhood there were dozens of Cobbes, several of them also named Frances and one—a cousin only eight months younger—was "boy-Francis" not "girl-Frances." Close friends in adulthood called her "Fanny" but she never signed letters that way. I now know that her mother was also called "Fanny," and she was usually "Fan." In this essay I will refer to her father as "Mr Cobbe," her mother as "Mrs Cobbe," and Frances Power Cobbe as "Fan."

There are only three letters from Fan at Newbridge and a dozen or so in the hands of another relative. I was disappointed to find nothing about her school. Though the estate records are wonderfully detailed, the private accounts do not survive. I suspect Fan's clothing and the salary of her governess might have come from Mrs Cobbe's separate income; this was the situation in the family of Fan's beloved friend Mary Lloyd, whose estate papers I have also seen. Sometimes what is missing may be more interesting than what is there. Her father kept a diary, in nine soft-covered notebooks, beginning soon after she was born and continuing up to his death in 1857. And in the thirty-four years of that diary there are exactly twenty-five mentions of Fan, most of them along the lines of "My mother returned to Bath taking my daughter . . . with her" (22 August 1825).

In my attempt to reconstruct an informative narrative about Fan's childhood I have gleaned collateral information from other people's diaries and memoirs and sometimes—carefully—from fiction. I've looked at wills, marriage certificates, and other public records. For example the census of 1821, the year before Fan was born, indicates that the following people were at Newbridge: Mr and Mrs Cobbe, three of their sons—the oldest must have been away at school—a niece, Anne Conway, age five, plus three male servants and eight female servants. I've picked up clues from college and army records, maps, railway timetables, pamphlets by local historians, the *Annual Register's* report of events and weather. I've looked at newspapers and tried to keep reminding myself about dates and I've used common sense. I know what periodicals were taken at Newbridge. The books she owned as an adult include many published around 1800 which probably belonged to her mother. I also learned a lot from visiting the terrain and looking at objects. In addition there are three volumes of notebooks at the National Library of Wales; the first is inscribed "My Pocket-books. 1846. 1847. 1848. 1849"—the years when Fan was aged between twenty-three and twenty-six. As an example of the kind of facts one can learn from these sources, here is what I now know about Fan at age eight (since she was born in December, that means the last month of 1830 and most of 1831). Her governess was Miss Kinnear; she's called a "nursery governess" and was probably young, since she left Newbridge soon after to get married. Lessons were finished at noon, and Fan was more or less free during the afternoon to

play outdoors or read whatever was in the house. For her, as for the Brontë children, that included *Blackwood's Magazine*.

Newbridge is a substantial Georgian country house, originally built in 1737 and extended in the 1760s with a wing containing a very large drawing room. Most of the furniture currently displayed in the rooms open to the public was acquired before Fan was born. The house was surrounded then by 360 acres of lawn, garden, pasture, woodland, and home-farm. From the house to the gate closest to the village of Donabate is a brisk fifteen-minute walk. Also on the grounds not far from the house are the ruins of a Norman peel tower once known as Lanistown Castle. Fan's autobiography describes her nursery at one end of the north corridor, "so distant from the regions inhabited by my parents that I was at full liberty to make any amount of noise" and with a "commanding view of the stable yard, wherein there was always visible an enchanting spectacle of dogs, cats, horses, grooms, gardeners, and milkmaids. A grand old courtyard . . . surrounded by stables, coach-houses, kennels, a laundry, a beautiful dairy, a labourers' room, a paint shop, a carpenter's shop, a range of granaries and fruit-lofts . . . and a well in the midst of all" (1: 32). The room where the family papers are stored is also at the north end overlooking the stable yard; it must be right underneath Fan's nursery. The house is open for guided tours, and it is indeed so soundproof that the length of the drawing room plus a single closed door kept me from knowing when a group passed through.

By the time Fan was eight her mother was an invalid and spent much of her time in a darkened room. Her father's diary for the year shows constant activity: seeing to tenants (he held land in Louth and Wicklow as well as county Dublin), doing church business, attending quarter sessions, serving as governor of Kilmainham Prison (where he was trying to institute the new solitary system), taking guests on shooting parties, engaging in local politics. At end of 1831 he was named a deputy lieutenant of the county, an honorary post that recognised his importance. Whether Mr Cobbe was at home or away he insisted on a rigid schedule: bells for prayers and meals, and dinner served promptly at six. In theory Fan ate with the adults by the time she was eight but it is not clear how often either parent was actually present for meals. She went to parish church every Sunday at St Patrick's which is directly outside one entrance to the grounds; since most of the villagers were Roman Catholic the Cobbe family must have provided much of the congregation. The gallery served as their family pew; it has a fireplace, a window with ventilating fan, and seats with comfortable cushions.

In early December 1830, when she turned eight, Fan was the only child at home. At mid-month boys started arriving for the holidays. On 15 December her brothers Charles, Henry and Tom came from Charterhouse. Charles was nineteen and had already matriculated at Oxford but no rooms were yet available in college. Tom and Henry were seventeen and thirteen. Four days later three more boys came: brother William, who was fourteen and prepping for Sandhurst at a school near Cheltenham, and two cousins. The cousins were another Henry and another Charles. They had been sent home from India many years earlier. The eldest—"Henry Clermont" in the family—turned nineteen the day after he arrived at Newbridge; he had done well enough on his Sandhurst exams to be commissioned without purchase. Charles Augustus (generally known as "C.A.") was thirteen and went to the same school as William. After a month

of holidays Tom and Henry went back to Charterhouse. Charles stayed home; Mr Cobbe was looking for someone to tutor him but the first person he interviewed "was too young & too fond of billiards" (27 January 1831). Cousin Henry Clermont and the two younger boys were also still there. On 24 January there was a large crowd for dinner; the next morning the hounds assembled at Newbridge to hunt. The older boys rode to the hounds; William and C.A. may have followed. Mr Cobbe was grumpy about both hunt and hounds: "I wish they were in the bottom of the sea," he wrote (24 January 1831). How exciting was this for a girl of eight? Did the younger boys share their fun with her? They were supposed to leave for school on 1 February but overnight there was the biggest snowfall anyone could remember, said to be seven or eight feet deep in some places.

In mid-February cousin Henry Clermont was commissioned as ensign in the 86th Foot and left for Bath to visit his grandmother before joining his regiment. Brother Charles went up to Oxford in April. Some other cousins were also just leaving childhood behind. Mrs Cobbe, like Mr Cobbe, had a brother in the Indian army. His son Tom Conway had spent two years at Haileybury where boys prepared for the East India Company civil service. He sailed for Madras on 9 August; his sister Isabella, who had been at a London finishing school, also went out to India. Tom Conway was at Newbridge for much of the summer; so was another sister, Anne. The house was crowded for two months: all four of Fan's brothers, two Conway teenagers, and one more family of cousins—the five children of Fan's Uncle William Power Cobbe. A half-pay naval officer, Uncle William died suddenly of "brain disease" on 8 April. His oldest son—yet another Charles Cobbe, usually called "little Charlie"—was less than a year younger than Fan. Her autobiography calls him her favorite cousin; the two of them together evidently struck sparks that usually led to mischief.

The Dublin zoo opened during 1831. Did anyone take Fan and some cousins to see the animals? She seems to have been a tomboy: "The Joy of Youth," a poem written when she was twenty-two, includes the line "my limbs are clad with strength which few may know." Anne Conway wrote a nice duty letter to her aunt after going back to school: "Pray thank Fanny for her letter which I shall answer soon. I am sorry she has not had much good luck at fishing. . . . I am glad my sampler has proved to be of use to her it was quite an agreeable surprise to hear she had at last taken to work" (26 November 1831). "Work" of course means "needlework"—and the emphasis on "at last" is clearly deliberate. Brother William went to Sandhurst the following September and wrote to Fan: "I hope you feed the Shelldrakes sometimes. I suppose you can ride a little by this time though not quite able to leap a ditch or paling" (30 September 1832). A few months later he hopes she will "ride out with me when I come home" (10 March 1833). She took possession of a garret over the lobbies, where she had a rack of carpenter's tools and an "armoury" of old court swords (*Life* 1: 48).

As has become evident, putting together this kind of information raises bigger questions: what do we know when we know facts? And why do we want to discover the real child? Two groups of things so far seem especially interesting. First the multitude of cousins, the issues of empire, and the meaning of "family" for Victorian gentry. Second the major questions about psychology which arise both from my new realisations about Cobbe's family and from the disparities between her autobiography and some of the



information I have discovered. Why is it so hard to find an individual child? The very nature of fact, memory, and narrative make some of the problems universal; others are specific to the nineteenth century: conventions about what is saved, what is said, what can be named, what is of interest. And for me there are as yet unanswered questions about emotions and their meanings.

Cobbe's autobiographical account of her childhood—written when she was seventy—is largely without what I would call personal content. Unlike Charlotte Tonna, Elizabeth Barrett, Fanny Kemble or Elizabeth Sewell, she tells us almost nothing about her mental or emotional life which the others reveal at least by describing what they read, or their fantasies, or their imaginary fears and terrors. Of course part of this is the difference between what we want to know at the end of the twentieth century and what was important even to those Victorian women who thought seriously about self-creation. I might hope to learn about feelings, traumas, encounters with other people, and about moral education, inner life, worries, self-confidence. But though I can discover much about what Fan read, what she saw, and who she knew, I acknowledge the real limitations in applying twentieth-century psychological methods of thinking to the understanding of nineteenth-century childhoods. Yet it seems to me that the only reason a biographer has a legitimate interest in childhood is to understand how early experiences may shape the adult's character, ambition, knowledge, and public accomplishments.

Like many female autobiographers Cobbe pictures herself as a solitary child: "My childhood, though . . . singularly happy, was . . . unusually lonely" (*Life* 1: 33). As Valerie Sanders points out, "there seems to be a direct link between the independence she acquired as a girl and the sense of self that enabled her to lead bold campaigns, and subsequently to write a two-volume autobiography" (69). From the viewpoint of a successful woman in her seventies that may well be true, but neither the loneliness of her childhood nor the remoteness of Newbridge is really borne out by surviving records. The village of Donabate is near the east coast of Ireland and lies between two estuaries. In the 1830s it was necessary to go several miles west to Swords in order to reach a good road. Yet the distances are not great; Mr Cobbe often rode into Dublin and back for a day's business. The round trip journey by carriage would have been more time-consuming, but for much of Fan's childhood Uncle George commanded the artillery that defended Dublin harbour and lived in the "Pigeon House," a fort built midway along the massive sea wall which then extended more than three miles out into the bay. Uncle William's widow and children were also in Dublin. There were two good places to stay; visits were definitely made. And Dublin itself was hardly even "provincial"—it was still described as "the second city of the British empire" (Hardy 84). It is true that the village of Donabate had only 221 inhabitants in 1831, and the clergyman was not well educated; there were few social contacts between his family and the Cobbes. The parish had four principal landowners, but two of them were absentees. The only people of substance living nearby were the Evanses of Portrane. Because George Evans was a liberal member of Parliament, political differences kept the two families apart until he died in 1842. After Evans died, his widow Sophia—an aunt of Charles Parnell and a woman active in many charitable projects—became a friend and mentor to Fan.

Although research has shown that many nineteenth-century children didn't see much of their parents, our understanding of "family life" may shift when we realise that Fan's brothers were schooled in England from the age of six or eight, and that England was still quite distant in those years. When Fan began school in Brighton in 1836 she went by packet from Dublin to Bristol—twenty-four hours at best—and then spent another three days crossing England by coach. She was away for nine months—she didn't even get home at Christmas—and when brother Will took her back for her second year he reported that "she kept up her spirits very well untill she saw Miss Roberts when as you may suppose she burst out crying" (26 August 1837). Reviewers of Cobbe's autobiography often quoted her description of the solitary childhood that shaped an independent woman, but rereading it after looking at the family papers, I see that she does also describe the full house at "holidays"—which add up to about one-fourth of the year: "Often a party of twenty or more sat down every day . . . in the dining-room" (1: 46). The children played Blindman's Buff, Prisoner's Base, Hunt the Hare; as they grew older, there were charades and dancing and pranks and comic verses and forged love letters (1: 173). "Little Charlie," writing from India many years later, nostalgically remembered when they acted plays "in the dining room at Newbridge" (Charles Power Cobbe to Charles Cobbe, 10 March [1851]). For much of Fan's "isolated" childhood there were twenty cousins of her own generation for whom her father was responsible.

The story of Uncle Thomas Cobbe and his ten children is especially interesting. A few days before his sixteenth birthday in 1804 he became a Bengal Cadet, arrived in India the next year, and in about 1810 was married—legally, in a Muslim ceremony—to the Begum Nuzzeer, daughter of Azeze Khan. The children, some of them as young as age three, were sent back in small groups. In 1836 Uncle Thomas retired, sailed for home, and died at sea just days before reaching Southampton, where Mr Cobbe and eight of the children had gone to meet the ship. The composition, dynamics and role of such a family highlights my puzzlement about psychology, although it does partly explain what is recorded in Mr Cobbe's diary and retained in the papers. His sense of obligation to the extended family was enormous. Finding an occupation for the boys—not only getting them educated but arranging a "place" using networks, calling in favours—is seen as a duty of the father or guardian. The boys are not given much choice. On 30 August 1829, when his son Tom was fifteen, Mr Cobbe told him "of my having designed him for the church, wherein I had the best prospects of providing for him." When Tom resisted—after changing his mind several times and earning his degree at Oxford—there was a flurry of other efforts. Uncle George helped look for a commercial post. Mr Cobbe called on a distant relative about getting Tom a cavalry commission. When that failed he wrote with great reluctance to the Duke of Wellington whom he'd known in India thirty-five years before.

The boxes at Newbridge are crammed with the responses to similar letters. Would the family solicitor give a job to George's son if Mr Cobbe sent him more business from the estate? Who could secure cadetships for Uncle Thomas's younger boys? Or take William Henry to Australia? Would engineering do for C.A.? Could he be apprenticed to the father of George's daughter-in-law? The files are also full of money matters. I don't think this is because people wrote to Mr Cobbe only when they needed cash (though it's possible); I believe it's a function of what has been kept. Mr Cobbe was

conscientious, obligated and burdened: “Am I doing my duty?” is a constant theme in his diary. Perhaps, unlike merely personal letters, letters about money were saved because they were a record of the advances he made against the inheritance that he would turn over to various wards as they reach twenty-one.

What about the middle stage of Fan’s girlhood: was there a comparable effort to “settle” her in the traditional female role? And is it possible to discover anything about her feelings on the subject? In the last year before Fan left school—1838, when she was fifteen—a string of family marriages began. Cousin Florence Cobbe (a daughter of Uncle Thomas and the Begum) was married early in the year to John Ensor of Rollesby Hall in England. She was twenty-two, he was sixty-four and had six grown children by his first wife. “There are objections enough that I can see” wrote Mr Cobbe when the match was proposed but they arose from “years rather than any thing else, and it is not for me to throw . . . difficulties in the way of one who so much stands in need of a protector” (20 September 1837). The summer of 1838 may have been the last time there was a big happy crowd of young people at Newbridge. On 23 August word reached them that Fan’s brother Tom and his first cousin Azelie had been married at Rollesby—the clergyman was one of Florence’s stepsons who had been up at Oxford with Tom. Mr Cobbe had forbidden this marriage; he was deeply troubled when it took place; and as time proved, he was right. What did Fan think? Was a runaway marriage romantic and thrilling? Did it make her look differently at the lively boy cousins who were her pals?

Fan left school at Christmas 1838. The following spring, when she was sixteen, the family spent three months in Dublin where they had a house at 29 Rutland Square. Fan was not officially “out,” although brother William, writing to her from Bristol in March 1839, clearly had suspicions: “You seem to be going to flare up to no small account giving parties once a week, there must be something in the Wind or it would not pay at no price ‘Trot her out’ How nimbly she picks her steps How well she bends her knee (I forget the rest of the Quotation) ask Chas.” But it was brother Charles who was courting; he and Louisa Brooke were married on 21 May 1839. In June the family were back at Newbridge and Mr Cobbe was helping negotiate two more marriage settlements for children of Uncle George.

Fan had an official “season” in 1842 when she was nineteen. On 26 January her father noted: “Levee at the Castle, the first I have been at this ten years,” and on the next day, “drawing Room at the Castle with my daughter Fanny; for her sake I have again gone out at night to an heated atmosphere, & to me ungenial society; but her poor mothers health renders it imperative on me to take her out, and I fear will more than once do so again.” The amusing thing is that Fan didn’t enjoy it much more than he did, or at least that is what she said fifty years later. Her recollection (some details are wrong) was that Uncle George, who commanded a brigade of horse artillery, produced a series of young officers “whose really marvellous silliness and dullness made conversation wearisome in the extreme” (*Life* 1: 166). (Judging by the young Irish officers found in the novels of Charles Lever that sounds about right.) One other small clue about Fan’s social life: one of her notebooks (mostly filled with quotations from books she’s reading) has a page upside down with a half-legible pencil note in a different handwriting: “I have often noticed that clever women are the dullest & most

disagreeable companions” (Note-Books 2). Was this a cousin’s prank? A confirmation of young officers’ empty heads? Or was it something real and deeply painful?

The final stage of Fan’s introduction to society took place in autumn 1845 when she was twenty-two. Her father took her on a trip around Ireland to meet relatives. He had made similar visits with her brothers; looking after their future meant introducing them to the peers and churchmen and generals and judges who had some family connection. For Fan it might have been part of “trotting her out” (to use Will’s phrase)—though in the long run she made better political use of these contacts than her brothers did. She tapped them to sign petitions and put them on the executive committee of her antivivisection society. Some names from that trip show up forty years later in the list of titled women she sent when Millicent Garrett Fawcett was looking for people to contact if a suffrage bill reached the House of Lords. That trip probably marks the end of Frances Power Cobbe’s childhood in the strictest sense, but a number of experiences in the next decade, during the nameless period as a daughter at home before she began life as an independent adult, are significant in forming the person she would become. Much of this material is explicitly suppressed in her autobiography.

After the Dublin and Drogheda Railway opened for passenger service in 1844 when Fan was twenty-one, both social contacts and an independent mental life grew much easier. The Donabate station is a twenty-minute walk from the house at Newbridge, the line ran across the estuary reaching Malahide in only five minutes. There Fan could visit the Talbots. Her father did not much like them: he wrote in his diary on 27 January 1835 that he had dined at Lord Talbot’s and found “the company stupid, without having any redeeming qualities that I can perceive being both Vulgar and Radical.” There were, however, a number of young people close to Fan’s age, and by 1872 the fourth Baron Talbot (nephew of the man Mr Cobbe dined with) was taking the chair at meetings of the Irish Society for Women’s Suffrage. In the other direction the train would stop, by arrangement, close to the house at Ardgillan where Harriet St Leger then lived. Although she was thirty years older than Fan, St Leger was a noted bluestocking, a handsome woman who dressed—like the Ladies of Llangollen—in a masculine style and shared her life with an intimate friend, Dorothy Wilson. As her father grew increasingly silent and remote Fan invented various occupations for herself: producing an elaborate genealogy taught her how to do research; she read manuscripts in the British Library, wrote to archivists at various cathedrals, and even had the sacristan at Dublin’s Christ Church take her into the crypt so she could read the brass plates on piled-up coffins (“State Vault”). Perhaps knowing of the Saxon chiefs and the archbishops and the elaborate quarterings helped give the adult Frances Power Cobbe confidence to seek private meetings with eminent men—and then to attack their policies in her unsigned newspaper columns.

Fan’s mid-twenties were also occupied by serious theological study: “I could go when I pleased,” she wrote in her autobiography, “and read in Archbishop Marsh’s old library in Dublin” (1: 70). Narcissus Marsh’s library on the precincts of St Patrick’s cathedral contained 25,000 volumes and was, according to *The New Picture of Dublin*, “generally open . . . from eleven till three, but its remoteness from the respectable part of the city, causes it to be little frequented” (Hardy 224). Still, once the railway had opened, central Dublin was only twenty minutes from the Donabate station and Fan

could have afforded a cab to travel across the river. Although guidebooks say that only “gentlemen and graduates” were permitted to use the library some arrangement was clearly made for the great-granddaughter of the archbishop who was next but one in succession to Narcissus Marsh. Fan’s notebooks for 1846 and 1847 are filled with quoted passages, biblical verses, readings in history and linguistics and theology, many of them followed by logical queries (for example, “Joshua 11/21 . . . Incredible that the leader of a nomad tribe should have made law on the sale of houses”). Later the notes become organised with an alphabetical index: “Aesthetics of Bible . . . Apocalypse . . . Aristotle . . . Asses.” Ultimately she wrote a manuscript whose title-page reads “An Essay on **TRUE RELIGION**, Being a reply to the question **WHY ARE YOU A DEIST?**” Although it is clearly the product of a self-taught beginner with great blocks of quotation and plodding transitions, the research embodied in this document remains impressive. She had put herself through the equivalent of PhD comprehensive exams with a major in comparative religion and a minor in philosophy.

We now come to the question of big disparities between Fan’s autobiography and other evidence that has been uncovered. One major problem is the relations with her father caused by her loss of faith. In addition there were several significant family crises of the 1840s that are not reported in her writings. None of Fan’s letters home from school survive, nor (for that matter) do those from three of her brothers. There is, however, a fat box from brother William. William is never named in her autobiography; he joined a millenarian religious cult—known as the Agapemone or Abode of Love—that lived communally at a compound in Somerset. In 1843 Henry James Prince the leader of the cult declared that he was the Holy Ghost. That is the year Fan was twenty and ceased to believe in Christianity. It is also the year her brother Henry was ordained as an Anglican clergyman and assigned to a parish in Kilmore. Across the channel in England the *Somerset County Gazette* soon reported that a “fanatical Irishman, named Cob [sic] . . . has been haranguing audiences in the streets of this town, on the coming of Christ to judge the world, and declaring the end of all sublunary things is shortly to take place” (qtd Schwieso 116). Letters, brothers, cousins, and legal opinions flew back and forth; they asked a commissioner in lunacy about getting him declared insane and may have considered arranging to have him kidnapped. By the time Mrs Cobbe died in October 1847 all communication with William was cut off. Presumably their mother had saved letters from all of her children and following the usual custom Fan and Henry and Tom and Charles took theirs back after the funeral. William’s letters survive because he was no longer “in” the family to get them back.

In 1847 there was a second significant family crisis: on 13 March Azelie Cobbe—the cousin that brother Tom married despite his father’s objections—eloped to France with William Talmadge who had been a student with her husband at Oxford and the Inner Temple. Again various cousins came into action: Tom Conway (on home leave after fifteen years in India) spoke to the police about tracing her. By June 1850 a bill of divorce had passed through the House of Lords. Full details were published in the *Times* on 24 April 1850, and the costs consumed all the money Mr Cobbe had intended for Tom’s inheritance. With that context in mind I return to Fan’s loss of faith and her father’s response. According to her autobiography:

When my poor father learned the full extent of my "infidelity" . . . he could not trust himself to speak to me, but though I was in his house he wrote to tell me I had better go away. My second brother, a barrister, had . . . given up his house in Queen Anne Street under a terrible affliction, and had gone, broken-hearted, to live on a farm which he hired in the wilds of Donegal. There I went as my father desired and remained for nearly a year. (1: 100-01)

This account of her father's silence and her own banishment has been quoted in almost every account of Frances Power Cobbe's emotional and intellectual development—yet Mr Cobbe's diary does not contain a single word about any religious questions involving Fan. There are vast agonies over William; soul-searching when Tom decided not to enter the church; and concern about Henry (who flirted with Puseyism and perhaps something more while he was at Oriel [Newman's College]). I also can't make her exile in Donegal come to anything like a year, or at least not a continuous year. She was there at various times over a period of eighteen months or more, but so were many other members of the family. And Fan's stay was interrupted by several other visits, including a trip to London with her father and her cousin Sophy in May 1848. If I had to guess from the evidence in family sources, I would think she was sent to keep Tom from falling into despair; his "nervous difficulties" and "mental distress" had been mentioned repeatedly since his mid-teens, and a letter he wrote to his father in an earlier crisis sounds to me like a suicide gesture.

So what is the solution? Are we to believe that Mr Cobbe never really heard whatever his daughter said about her religion? Or that he thought men's doubts were important and women's were not? Or is it that her own fear and guilt led her to project onto an unspeaking father those opinions she believes he must have held? Is it a measure of her own stricken conscience at the enormity of disbelief, with her defiance of "father-man" standing in for the vast risk of defying "father-god"? These are the kinds of difficulties which arise in trying to deconstruct the silences and suppressions of the autobiography. One part of my critical sensibility believes these things must be terribly important. Another, however, questions my whole understanding of family dynamics, of distances, of privacy, and of Victorian conventions about personal reticence. Much of Cobbe's writing is frustrating because it tends to conceal people's identity: at one point she says (not quite accurately) that she will not mention living people by name and some of the letters she quotes have been edited to accomplish that goal. Even among those no longer alive she is apt to use "a relative" or "one of my acquaintances." The unstated rule seems to be that names appear only when the person has some public reputation.

Several unnamed cousins, however, did have public lives. Henry Clermont died heroically in the Crimea as reported by the war correspondent William Howard Russell (397). Aleck and C.A. both achieved positions that let them supply information she used for newspaper columns during the 1870s. Of course the autobiography is her story, thus writing about the boys might have made them too central; women's autobiographies often do become portraits of men. Yet because so many people are missing it is hard to sense the personality we might grasp through private relationships. A biographer wants

to see connections between the girl “Fan” and the woman “Frances Power Cobbe.” It is easy to draw a line from her self-education in the 1840s to her appeal, at the 1862 Social Science Congress, that women be admitted to university examinations. Knowing also of her lifelong independence from men and the consistently anti-patriarchal themes of her essays, what am I to guess she learned from her experiences with all these brothers and cousins? For instance considering the rarity of divorce it’s astonishing to find there were two in her family. Cousin Thomas Monck Cobbe’s marriage was one of that first string of marriages when Fan was sixteen, hardly more than a year later his wife was with another man and he had secured an ecclesiastical separation. In this and her brother’s cases the public evidence shows the woman at fault—thus making divorce possible. What more was there to these stories?

Another thread involves brother William and his wife’s money. Not long after joining the cult, Will and another member married two sisters who had inherited moderate fortunes. Brother Tom offered to help Will arrange a marriage settlement to protect his wife’s money. The answer, dated 4 October 1845, was perhaps predictable: “I have made no settlement & as Christ is coming so soon there will be no need whatever of my making one” (Frances Power Cobbe in the early 1870s was on the Married Women’s Property Committee). And then there is the intellectual issue. Although no university was open to Fan, three of her brothers received degrees from Oxford—eventually. All of them failed their exams at least once. Will’s final report from Sandhurst says his conduct was “always exemplary,” but of the six required subjects he had passed only one. Yet he was quite willing to write to their mother, when Fan was sixteen and he was twenty-two, that his sister’s biggest fault was “Pride, with a very high opinion of her own talents & a very low opinion of every one’s else” (11 January 1839).

The most crucial missing piece of the puzzle that was Fan’s inner life involves her father. The *Life of Frances Power Cobbe* praises his probity as employer and landlord, his conscience and fair dealing, and his care of his tenants—and as far as I can tell everything in the estate records bears out this judgment. Yet she also mentions more than once his “immense force of will”: “fathers believed themselves to possess almost boundless rights over their children . . . and the children usually felt that if they resisted any parental command it was on their peril” (1: 170). “His mistakes and errors,” she wrote in a paragraph of finely crafted ambivalence, “arose solely from a fiery temper and a despotic will, nourished rather than checked by his ideas concerning the rights of parents, and husbands, masters and employers; and from his narrow religious creed. Such as he was, every one honoured, some feared, and many loved him” (1: 206-07). So where did Fan’s opinion of her father lie—with the “some [who] feared” or the “many [who] loved”? She and her brothers always spoke of him as “The Master.”

Fan published two books—anonously—before she left home; her father did not read either of them, nor did she ask him to. “Perhaps the most fortunate daughters,” she wrote, “are those whose fathers die while they are themselves in full vigour and able to begin a new existence with spirit and make new friends; as was my case” (1: 204). These words reflect that mixture of control and distance in family relationships which, together with the unstated assumptions lying beneath seemingly ordinary statements and the combination of intellectual and moral acuity with emotional reserve, make the

reconstruction of nineteenth-century childhood so problematic for twentieth-century scholars.

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