

George Meredith, Governesses, Neckties, and Friends: New Meredith Letters¹

Margaret Harris and Wes Rogers

George Meredith (1828-1909), novelist and poet, held firm opinions on many matters and did not hold back from expressing them. From his home on the slopes of Box Hill in the Surrey countryside he wrote on the healing power of the natural world and what he called the philosophy of earth, mainly in his poetry. His views on the entitlement of women to equality with men pervade his fiction, perhaps most famously in *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). Education was another topic frequently taken up in his novels, from Sir Austin Feverel's misguided attempt to educate his son Richard according to a System in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), to the school in Switzerland set up by Matey and Aminta in *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1894). Particularly in his later years, Meredith was liable to hold forth to his circle of friends and admirers, many of them resident in his neighbourhood, on allied subjects, notably the suffrage and the preparedness of England for war. He did not always practise what he preached, however, certainly in relation to his own daughter's education. The three previously unpublished letters brought to light here reflect well on his paternal concern while illuminating also his inconsistencies and eccentricities, down to his preference for red neckties.

The first substantial collection of Meredith's letters was assembled by his son William Maxse Meredith (1865-1937). Two volumes of *Letters of George Meredith* uniform with Constable's Memorial edition were published in 1912, Will Meredith having been on the staff of that publisher since 1895 and vigilant about his father's interests. His prompt appeal to holders of his father's letters has proved invaluable, with these volumes serving as the foundation for subsequent collections, notably C. L. Cline's three volume edition in 1970, in turn complemented by Mohammad Shaheen's 1997 *Selected Letters*. Since then, the main discoveries of relevant manuscript material have been made by Nicholas Joukovsky in the course of his work on Thomas Love Peacock. In particular, he has published seven important letters of 1854-5 and 1861 from Meredith to the half-sister of his first wife, Mary Ellen (née Peacock, later Nicolls, 1821-61).²

Coincidentally, the letters published here are to sisters, one of whom, Madame Ponsard (née Susan Fetherstonhaugh, 1834-1917) was governess to Meredith's daughter Marie Eveleen

¹ Thanks are due to Mr. J. P. Macpherson, a descendant of Louisa Elizabeth MacPherson (née Fetherstonhaugh, 1833-1924), for his permission to publish the three letters in his possession. Friends and colleagues, notably Professors Geraldine Barnes and Penny Gay, provided valuable assistance in shaping the discussion.

² Nicholas A. Joukovsky, "Dearest Susie Pye": New Meredith Letters to Peacock's Natural Daughter', *Studies in Philology* 111 (2014): 591-629. Joukovsky edited *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P. 2001, and has several publications of material relating to Mary Ellen which amplify the pioneering work of Diane Johnson in *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives*. New York: Knopf, 1972, reprinted in 2020 as a New York Review Books Classic – testimony to its formal innovation and pioneering feminist orientation (Hermione Lee's review in the *New York Review of Books*, 4 Dec. 2020, amplifies this comment).

(Mariette or Riette, 1871-1933) from late 1886 to the summer of 1887. She was the third daughter of a family of five sisters and three brothers. The other recipient, Mrs MacPherson (née Louisa Elizabeth Fetherstonhaugh, 1833-1924), was the second daughter.

The fortunes of the family intertwined with Meredith's in different ways. The Fetherstonhaughs migrated to Australia in the 1850s: initially Cuthbert Fetherstonhaugh, accompanied by two sons, Theobald and Alfred, and a cousin, went to the goldfields in 1852. Cuthbert became a Goldfields Commissioner on the Buckland River in 1853, and in mid-1854 became Police Magistrate and Crown Lands Commissioner at Hamilton.³ The youngest son, also Cuthbert, travelled with other cousins in 1853. The mother (née Susan Curtis), her personal maid, Mary Brennan, with the five sisters and Theobald, who had returned to Ireland ill and disenchanted, followed in 1856. They lived at Portland on the Victorian coast until "Correagh", the home Cuthbert was building for them at Hamilton, was finished.

On the lengthy sea journey to Australia, Susan met Eugene Marius Ponsard, a French civil engineer making his second visit to the colony in pursuit of business interests in machinery for gold mining (ultimately unsuccessful). They married on 4 April 1857 in Portland, returning to Europe soon after. Little is known of their life together, beyond their living through the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. They experienced privation, and "had to live on dogs, cats, rats, etc., before the siege was over", communicating with family in Australia by letters sent by balloon post ("the envelopes were marked '*par ballon monté*'" – *Hamilton Spectator*). Ponsard died from yellow fever in 1881 while working on the Panama Canal, and presumably Madame took up governessing to support herself thereafter. In her later years she lived in Surrey or London with one or other of her sisters, and died on 8 May 1917.

Louisa Fetherstonhaugh married in 1858 John Alexander MacPherson (1833-94). Trained as a lawyer, he was a pastoralist who went into politics in 1864, serving as Premier of the State of Victoria in 1869-70, and holding ministries in later governments before he retired in 1875. After travels in Europe, in 1878 the MacPhersons settled at Thorpe, Chertsey, Surrey (on the proceeds of a legacy from his father) (Cline 2:898n.). They had a son and seven daughters of whom Louisa Elizabeth (Louison, 1866-1940), the fourth, was a friend of Meredith's daughter Mariette.

Already the ways various Fetherstonhaughs figure in Meredith's circle of friends are apparent, though in certain respects it was Frances, younger sister of Louisa and Susan, who had most to do with Meredith. More of that relationship presently. First, the letters, now in the keeping of a descendant of Louisa and John MacPherson. They are exemplary of Meredith's prose style, whether in his letters or his fiction, replete with the obscurities so often remarked – memorably by Oscar Wilde among others: "His style is chaos illuminated by flashes of lightning." (Wilde 315) The style is a moderate version of the exaggerated courtly mode Meredith adopted especially as a widower in his sixties writing to young women, whether they were single or married, after the death of his wife Marie (née Vulliamy, 1840-85). His letters to Mlle Hilda de Longueil in 1886-87, and to Lady Ulrica Duncombe

³ For reasons of economy the Irish family had lived in Germany for some years in the 1840s: see Fetherstonhaugh which draws for family history on a memorandum in the hand of the fourth daughter Frances (1839-1924, Lady Colvin, formerly Sitwell). This Cuthbert was a son of the Cuthbert who migrated to Australia in 1852: repetition of names through the generations was common in the Fetherstonhaugh family.

from the late 1890s to his death, are conspicuous examples. Cline sees a romantic attachment to Mlle de Longueuil in 1886-87, on paper at least, that was sufficiently intense to lead her to break off the correspondence (Cline 2:840n for de Longueuil, and 3:1729 for Duncombe). The jocularity of the letters published here, to two sisters, carries an erotic metaphorical undercurrent, treating with the traditional association of love and death. We present the letters according to recognised scholarly conventions, at the cost of some repetition of information.

The Letters

Letter 1, to Madame Ponsard

Box Hill

Decr 22nd 1887.

My dear Madame

I shall wear the neckties & lay them in their silken bed at night, thinking always of the good warm heart from which they & a multitude of blessings come as from a springing fountain upon all who have the honour & happiness of your esteem.

Ever de coeur

Your devoted

George Meredith

NOTE:

The gallantry of Letter 1 is suggestive: Madame Ponsard's gift is fruitful, yielding blessings that flow as if from "a springing fountain" when the neckties are laid "in their silken bed at night".

Madame Ponsard (née Susan Fetherstonhaugh, 1834-1917) was governess to Meredith's daughter Marie Eveleen (Mariette or Riette, 1871-1933) from late 1886 to the summer of 1887 (her successor was in post by the end of September). Meredith's relations with Madame appear to have remained cordial after she left his employ, with neckties becoming an ongoing concern, as subsequent letters, including the following one, confirm. See e.g. Cline 2: 926: to Louison, 10 Jul. 1888 (Louison MacPherson, 1866-1940, was a niece of Madame Ponsard, and a friend of Riette).

Letter 2, to Madame Ponsard

Box Hill

February 13th 1889

My dear Madame

You have been good indeed – even unto the practice of patience. The ties exactly hit the colour & texture, giving the throat just that look of l’homme guillotiné which must be my secret desire in the choice I make of them. MacMillan forwarded the notice of Poems, & why the ineptitude was written would be hard to say, if one did not know what an itch has imbecility to force the expression of itself. I sent out no copies to Reviewers. By the way, I have a clipping from some paper to-day, stating that Prince Rudolf of Austria was a great reader of my books. It gave me a momentary sense of contact with him & mountain Austria – which was queer. – The true story (as I am told by Maxse, from Paris) is that a damsel was with him, that he shot her in the morning, showed her to his valet for her beauty, then sent the bullet into his own distraught Bavarian brain. The flowers gave great pleasure.

Ever warmly yours George Meredith.

NOTES

Letter 2 was written over a year later than Letter 1 – a period during which it is unlikely that the correspondents met. This time the neckties are a gift for Meredith’s 61st birthday on 12 February 1889, seemingly accompanied by flowers. Madame Ponsard is congratulated for her “exact hit” of colour and texture: given Meredith’s epithet for himself as *l’homme guillotiné* he subliminally makes her his executioner. His closing reference to the Mayerling scandal further reinforces the association of love and death.

l’homme guillotiné: in describing himself as “the guillotined man”, Meredith is referring to his frequent choice of a red tie or neck cloth giving the appearance of blood to the fanciful observer. This preference is referred to by his friend Sidney Colvin, among others. Colvin writes of “his habitual, unvarying suit of warm light-grey set off by a bright scarlet tie”, in *Memories and Notes of Persons and Places 1852-1912* (173). A more extended description is provided by Francis Burnand (quoted in Stevenson 70).

MacMillan ... Poems: Meredith’s volume *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life* was published by Macmillan in 1887. On 5 May 1887 he wrote to the publisher requesting that complimentary copies be sent to seven people, of whom Louison MacPherson was one (Cline 2:863).

Prince Rudolf of Austria (1858-89) died together with Baroness Marie Vetsera (1871-89) at his hunting lodge Mayerling on 30 January 1889: possibly a case of murder and suicide, or a

double suicide. Meredith refers to the Baroness in a letter to Frederick Maxse on 1 March 1889 (Cline 2:949 and n.).

mountain Austria: Meredith's passion for the Alps is demonstrated for example in *The Egoist* (1878). A letter to Maxse written from the Tyrol during Meredith's tour via Germany, Switzerland and Austria to Italy in the summer of 1861 with his son Arthur (1853-90) and his friend W. C. Bonaparte Wyse (1826-92), spells out his reactions to the Alps (Cline 1:93). This reference to the horrific episode at Mayerling brings out the melodramatic associations rather than the purifying power of the alpine regions Meredith elsewhere extolled.

Frederick Augustus Maxse (1833-1900) was a close friend of Meredith whose naval career and subsequent attempts to be elected to parliament provided Meredith with the prototype of the Radical Nevil Beauchamp in *Beauchamp's Career* (1876). Maxse took an apartment in Paris at this time to enable his daughter Olive Hermione (1867-1955) to study music there.

Letter 3, to Mrs Louisa MacPherson

Box Hill,

December 24th 1889

My dear Mrs Macpherson [sic]

You have sent us a thing of beauty, that will exercise a monition upon us, as to the need for matching it: which is likely to cause an entire reconstruction of our bit of household & ourselves therewith. By such an alcove-curtain sat Yseult when Tristram knelt [sic] But it is all too good for the dusty chalet & its anchorite. It must help to decorate the bower of Riette. – The girl is grateful. Her father has pulled his curmudgeon's cap from the peg, and mused ruefully over an amount of labour this rival of Arachne has bestowed on him. Why did she? There is no answer except that it is done, & that he both inwardly & outwardly must come into harmony with this lovely gift.

Your most faithful

George Meredith.

NOTES

In Letter 3, another "thank you" letter, this time for an alcove-curtain. In practice the curtain is presumably to protect against drafts, but Meredith's formulation carries also a connotation of concealment, slyly associated with the Tristan legend.

Meredith spells the name of the addressee with a lower case "p", though at the time the family used upper case. According to family tradition, at some point the women of the family decided in favour of lower case: conceivably it was the recipient of this letter, Mrs

MacPherson (née Louisa Fetherstonhaugh, 1833-1924), a sister of Madame Ponsard, who was responsible. The London *Times* obituary of her declared that she was “an artist to her finger-tips, and for years produced magnificent large-scale embroideries in silks, largely to her own designs” (21 Aug. 1924). The alcove-curtain is evidently a Christmas present: Meredith’s reaction to the gift of a cushion at Christmas from Mrs MacPherson’s fourth daughter Louison at Christmas 1893 is similar: the item is too good for the chalet (Cline 2:1150).

Yseult and Tristram: there are many variants of the story about the adulterous love between the Cornish knight Tristan and the Irish princess Iseult, dating back to the twelfth century. A number of nineteenth-century English poets drew on the Tristan legends (for example Tennyson in *The Last Tournament* (1871), one of the *Idylls of the King* (1859-85); and Arnold in *Tristram and Iseult* (1852)). Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde* (composed 1859) was an influential version.

Arachne: a mortal who was transformed into a spider after challenging Athena, goddess of wisdom and crafts, to a weaving contest.

Contexts of the letters

What more do these brief texts yield, in particular relating to Meredith’s connection with the Fetherstonhaugh family? I start with the address from which he wrote these letters.

Place

By the late 1880s, when the letters to Madame Ponsard and Mrs MacPherson were written, Meredith was well ensconced in Flint Cottage, Box Hill, Surrey. His home increasingly became a centre that attracted a circle of friends, many of them writers and journalists, among them Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94). His literary eminence and status as “the Sage of Box Hill” was intimately associated with his residence there. In *Literary Geography* (1904), his friend and admirer William Sharp, declared “Mr. Meredith ... is English of the English: there is none living who more swiftly and poignantly conveys the very breath and bloom of nature as we know it in England – above all in Surrey and the long continuous vale of the Thames.” (4-5). In his writings Meredith celebrated the beauty of the natural world and human affinity with it, not only in Surrey but beyond.

For Meredith is conspicuous among English authors of the second half of the nineteenth century for his familiarity with Europe: educated partly in Germany, he was fluent in German and in French (his French reinforced by his second marriage to Marie Vulliamy, whose family had strong links with France, where she was born and lived until she was seventeen). Moreover, he travelled a great deal in Europe (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Italy, France) until failing strength in the mid-1880s limited him to holidays in England, Wales and Scotland. The settings of his novels continued to range widely through Europe, drawing both

literally and figuratively on different regions, especially the Alps, from *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* through to *The Amazing Marriage* (1895). Thus Richard's epiphany in Germany towards the end of the novel contrasts with the idyllic English surroundings of his boyhood at Raynham Abbey; the two "Vittoria" novels deal with the struggle for Italian unity; *The Tragic Comedians* (1880) is set in Prussia; while *The Amazing Marriage* works a complicated set of analogies around the Alpine areas of southern Austria and Switzerland in contrast to the British Isles, with invocation of the mercurial Celt in contrast to the stolid Anglo-Saxon, a motif that recurs often through his work.

This paradox, of Meredith's continuing though diminishing engagement both with the physical terrain and the culture of the Continent, combined with his acknowledged affinity with Box Hill and status as "English of the English" is only one of the tensions in his life and work that can be teased out from these courteous notes to women friends where the range of reference, from classical allusions to the melodrama of Mayerling, goes far beyond the customary language of "thank you" letters. There is an underlying hint too of the Fetherstonhaugh's Australian connection, though the education of his children, especially his daughter Mariette, is the connecting thread.

Meredith's family

The marriage of Meredith and Marie Vulliamy took place in 1864, and with their son William Maxse (1865-1937) they moved to Flint Cottage in January 1868. The birth in 1871 of their second child, Marie Eveleen (1871-1933), put increasing pressure on space, leading to the construction in 1877 of a chalet on the slope behind the cottage, as a workroom for the author where he sometimes slept. Later in 1868, Meredith transferred Arthur Gryffyd (1853-90), the only child of his first marriage, previously at school in Norfolk, to school at Hofwyl, near Bern in Switzerland. Arthur had been in his father's sole care from 1858 when his mother Mary Ellen left Meredith for the painter Henry Wallis (she died in October 1861). Meredith didn't encourage Arthur to return home for holidays, nor did he pay frequent visits to his son.⁴ While the change of school was at least partly for reasons of economy, it is hard not to see Meredith's paternal attentions to Arthur being displaced by his new family.

Enter Governesses

Will Meredith, unlike his half-brother, had the education of an English gentleman. He was sent to board at Westminster School, while his sister Mariette was educated at home. She had a governess at least from 1880. Miss J. M. Hooke held the post for a number of years, and Meredith recommended her warmly when she left his employ during 1885, declaring that "you possess the three qualities sure to command esteem — competency, the sense of duty,

⁴ David Williams (esp. 48-63) is harsh on Meredith's treatment of Arthur, discussed more neutrally by Lionel Stevenson in his still standard biography. For Mary Ellen, see Diane Johnson, *The True History of the First Mrs. Meredith and Other Lesser Lives* (n. 2 above). Richard Cronin's recent *George Meredith: The life and writing of an alteregoist*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, provides a stimulating account of Meredith's relationships including those with his children, that revises earlier studies.

and sweetness of temper.” (To Miss J. M. Hooke, 29 May 1886, Cline 2:814) When Marie Meredith died on 17 September 1885, the fourteen year old Mariette was staying with close friends: Alice Brandreth and her cousin Jim Gordon had made Meredith’s acquaintance when they were very young (Jim a boy at Eton), and were now married and living at Pixholme, close to Box Hill. Subsequently Mariette was sent to other friends for stays of weeks at a time, with Meredith enlisting the help of many of them in the quest for a new governess. He considered sending Mariette to boarding school, in part – as a letter to Mrs Gordon suggests – because of his consciousness of the possibility of gossip about an unmarried governess living in a household with a single albeit widowed man. The letter concludes with his revealing expression of concern “that Mariette wants a special and a very patient hand to help her mind to study.” (12 Oct. 1885, Cline 2:794).

By November, a suitable candidate had been found. Meredith expressed to Henry James his satisfaction at the appointment of Miss Lowe: “My girl now has a resident Governess, who seems to be managing her well, and is a disciplined and pleasant person—a Gentlewoman of the provincial English, coming of parsons, but inclined to think. So far I am at peace.” (30 Nov. 1885, Cline 2:800). But within the year Miss Lowe had given notice of her intention to leave at Christmas 1886. According to Meredith, she had declined “to assist in the management” (it’s unclear of what: perhaps of the household?) “whereupon she humped in the air at once all back and bristles.” (To Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson, 15 Oct. 1886, Cline 2:832).

Meredith’s desire for particular qualities in the governess became more explicit as the search for Miss Lowe’s replacement got under way. Again he appealed to various of his acquaintance for assistance, giving Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson his requirements in terms which bear out the earlier expression of need for “a special and a very patient hand”: “good sense, music, French, good sense, a little German, much good sense.” (Cline 2:831) Mrs Stevenson was asked to vet a prospect prior to Meredith’s interviewing her, but for whatever reason that candidate was not proceeded with (possibly because she was unable to provide instruction in music, and Meredith would not budge on his proposed salary of £70 per annum in the event that Mariette had to continue to go in to London from Dorking weekly for that instruction: 15 Oct. 1886, Cline 2:832). Meredith and R. L. Stevenson had become acquainted in 1878, the year of publication of the younger author’s first book, *An Inland Voyage*. At this time, Meredith was already working on his last novel, *The Amazing Marriage*, in which the character of Gower Woodseer is based on Stevenson as prototype. The acquaintance developed from 1882. At the time of this consultation about governesses, the Stevensons were living in Bournemouth (the young author took up with the widowed Fanny Osbourne in late 1876, and they married in May 1880).

The first reference to the eventual appointee comes in correspondence of 26 October 1886, when Meredith wrote to his friend Frederick Maxse: “She is in certain essential respects a jewel. Irish, widow of a Frenchman, recommended by friends of mine and hers, well born, well bred, brisk, intelligent, rational.” (Cline 2:835). This paragon, a Celt to boot, is Madame Ponsard (mentioned by name in Meredith’s letter of 27 October 1886, to Mrs Robert Louis Stevenson, Cline 2:836). Among the “friends of mine and hers”, Madame’s sister Frances Jane (then Mrs Sitwell, later Lady Colvin) was certainly central; perhaps Louisa Elizabeth

(Mrs MacPherson), the recipient of Meredith's letter of 24 December 1889 (Letter 3 above), was also involved.

In post late in 1886, Madame Ponsard was ill by July 1887 and did not resume her responsibilities. Late in July Meredith and Mariette went to Cornwall on holiday with his long-time friend Leslie Stephen (1832-1904, Vernon Whitford of *The Egoist* (1879)) and his family. Louison MacPherson (named for her mother) was also of the party. On 3 September 1887, Meredith wrote to Madame's sister, Frances Sitwell, lamenting the loss of Madame Ponsard, while justifying his decision to terminate her employment: "my duty to the girl commands me; she is at the critical time for teaching, when prolonged holidays, or a want of vigour in the tuition, must cause a stiffening of her natural indisposition for work" and hence "I must look elsewhere for her preceptress". (Cline 2:883. Cline seems not to realise the relationship of Madame and Mrs Sitwell.)

It appears that Meredith's favourable impression of Madame Ponsard quickly modified. His concerns emerged as the search for her successor proceeded. At first he was guarded: "we are bothered by the illness of Madame Ponsard, Riette's governess, as to whom I have painfully decided that the girl cannot wait for her recovery, and a new one has to be found." (To George Stevenson, 12 Sep. 1887, Cline 2:886). Within days, he was more forthcoming in a letter to his younger friend Mlle Hilda de Longueuil, in which he refers to Madame's volatility as compromising her authority with Mariette:

Now I am bothered and occupied to find a new governess—poor Madame Ponsard being still unwell. She wants to return; I have to be firm. Next week a lady comes, unlikely to be so agreeable to me, but according to the chances a better preceptress. Madame was perpetually for high-jumps and her cap in air unless I sobered her, when at once she subsided; her nature pathetically throwing up a bubble or two; but I wanted a less infantile lady in Riette's close guide; so with something to regret, I am not sorry. (15 Sep. 1887, Cline 2:888-89)

Into the bargain, he lamented that Madame had taken on an incompetent cook, and saddled him with much correspondence. The force of his calculated admission of regret (but not sorrow) is apparent in the amicable relationship with Madame evident in the new letters printed here. Further, writing to Louison in 1889, almost as an aside he writes "No one gives me news of Madame. I hope it is not gloomy—?" (Cline 2:978). Though Meredith's direct contact with Madame may have dwindled, his friendships with her sisters Frances and Louisa continued to his death.

Mariette

The desire to settle Mariette was strong: the day before the new governess was to arrive, Meredith wrote: "I am very anxious for my girl to take up her lessons without delay: for now, what with the holidays and poor [M]adame Ponsard's illness, she has been idle three months." (Shaheen 87). His anxiety was shortlived. In the new year, he wrote that Mariette "has now a Governess, named Beatrice Simpson, boasting pure descent from the head of the MacGregors, a nice person into the bargain. We get on well." (To George Stevenson, 15 Jan. 1888, Cline 2:902). Further, "The Miss Simpson attending her is very good and

companionable” (To Mrs Gordon, 16 May 1888, Cline 2:916). Beatrice Simpson retired in 1889, and was succeeded by Miss Butler, who took up post on 1 September (6 May 1889, Cline 2:957, and 30 Jul. 1889, 2:975). By this time, Mariette was eighteen, increasingly taking on household responsibilities and acting as her father’s hostess until her marriage to Henry Sturgis (1847-1929) in 1894. The Sturgises, and their daughters Joan and Dorothy, lived at Leatherhead, in walking distance of Box Hill, and continued to keep an eye on Meredith.

That Mariette was a spirited young woman is clear. Some of Meredith’s friends took against her, an extreme instance being Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece and ward Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who wrote together as the poet and dramatist ‘Michael Field’. Following a meeting with Mariette at a picture gallery, they described her as “frank, cold, spoiled, shallow”, though they somewhat softened their judgment on further acquaintance (David Williams 186, and see 183-91 for detail). The insights of Meredith’s long-time friend, née Alice Brandreth, were more sympathetic and better founded. In her memoir she explains that after Marie’s death:

... the education of his daughter Mariette was Mr. Meredith’s deepest interest and care.

In my endeavours to help him, I interviewed governesses, dentists, dressmakers, and music teachers, and did all I could to aid him in his difficult and lonely task; but the best was barely good enough for his ‘dearie girl.’ ...

I think the various ladies that he saw must have been bewildered by the many drastic admonitions they received.⁵

Her observations on Meredith’s regulation of Mariette are revealing. She describes the bafflement of “one perplexed English lady”, subsequently appointed as Mariette’s governess, after her interview with Meredith in which he “skipped across the centuries for examples of female education”, leaving her “rather frightened at the many things he will not permit his daughter to do.” (Butcher 72). Lady Butcher brings out the paradox of Meredith’s support for women’s rights in his fiction, compared with his extremely protective role as parent. She details aspects of his “meticulous care”: for instance, Mariette was not allowed to travel even the shortest distance alone, but had to be accompanied by a maid or escorted by a male relative; and he objected vehemently to any one “writing to a girl ‘c/o the Master of the House’”, rather than (for example) “‘c/o Mrs. J. E. H. Gordon’” (Butcher 72).

Nevertheless, whether because or in spite of her upbringing, it would appear that Mariette remained a fond and diligent daughter to Meredith.

⁵ Butcher 71. Alice Brandreth (1854-1929) married her cousin J.E.H. Gordon in 1878. Jim Gordon was killed in a fall from his horse in 1893; she remarried in 1898, to John George Butcher (1853-1935), Conservative M.P. for York, knighted 1918 and created Baron Danesfort in 1924.

Frances Sitwell and Sidney Colvin

Returning to the Fetherstonhaugh connection. On the journey back from Australia to England in 1857, the Ponsards were accompanied by one of Susan's sisters, Frances Jane, who had been engaged at the age of sixteen to Albert Hurt Sitwell, a clergyman. Following their marriage, she went with him to take up a chaplaincy in Calcutta, a ministry cut short when both contracted typhoid. Sitwell then took up an East End parish in which Fanny worked too, before they moved to a parish in the eastern part of Kent. An obituary of Frances's younger sister Grace (Mrs Jack Learmonth, 1843-1924) quaintly and succinctly described the breakdown of the marriage: "Mr Sitwell could not be saved from himself".⁶ The separation was formally countenanced in 1874 by Albert's uncle, Archibald Campbell Tait, Archbishop of Canterbury. The pain of this union was compounded by the deaths of both Sitwell sons, one in boyhood in 1873, the other as a young man in 1881.

Frances met Sidney Colvin (1845-1927) through mutual friends in the late 1860s: their friendship matured and they married at last in 1903, after the deaths of Sitwell in 1894, and of Colvin's mother in 1902 (he felt he could not support both his mother and a wife, since his brother had gambled with family funds leaving their widowed mother destitute). Fanny was talented, versatile, and energetic: after her separation from Sitwell she worked as Secretary to the College for Working Men set up by Ruskin, and also wrote journalism and did translations (for example of Charles Yriarte's *Venice: Its History – Art – Industries and Modern Life*, 1880). Among her tasks as a journalist was a review of Meredith's *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), published anonymously in the *National Review*. It accords with other reviews of this difficult novel:

Mr. Meredith is at once at his worst and at his best; more Meredithian than ever in language and manner, but more than ever a searcher of the heart of man, and especially of woman. No one can number among Mr. Meredith's shortcomings sentimentality, failure of insight, or a hand that shrinks from using the scalpel.⁷

She praises particularly the "strength and delicacy of handling that can hardly be overpraised" of his depiction of Nataly and her daughter Nesta, "these two lovely and lovable women, around whom the real interest of the book is centred". Here, "there is scarcely a false note": an astute judgement that shifts attention from Victor Radnor, to whom the title refers (Lucas 207).

Surviving records present Frances, like other of the Fetherstonhaugh women, as ancillary to their menfolk. In accounts of her relationship with Sidney Colvin, both before and after their marriage, she appears as a helpmeet. E. V. Lucas, in *The Colvins and Their Friends* (essentially a collage of quotations from various sources), includes an illuminating alternative

⁶ *Hamilton Spectator*. E.V. Lucas is no more specific: Sitwell was "a man of unfortunate temperament and uncongenial habits" (64).

⁷ My authority for this attribution is Lucas 206. The review appeared in the *National Review*, 17 (July 1891). There is a selection of reviews of *One of Our Conquerors* in Ioan Williams 344-63.

The *National Review* was founded in 1883, as a platform for the Conservative Party. It was edited by Maxse's son Leo (1864-1932) from 1893 until 1932 and then by his sister Violet, Lady Milner (1872-1958), from 1932 to 1948: yet another example of the tendrils of connection among Meredith and his acquaintance.

account of the Colvins' relationship, from the architect Basil Champneys (1842-1935): "Her bright intelligence and instinctive appreciation of excellence of various kinds seemed as it were an efflorescence of the more solid and scholarly judgment of Sidney, while her social tact and ready sympathy supplied whatever might have seemed lacking in him of the lighter graces which conduce to enjoyable social intercourse." (Lucas 64). She proved a cultured and sensitive hostess, their circle including Edward Elgar, who dedicated his Cello Concerto in E Minor (1919) to them. Moreover, she was held to be a beauty, with "irradiating charm ... the soul of honour, discretion and sympathy" and "rare insight into the developments of life's problems" (Lucas 338, quoting the obituary of Frances Colvin in *English Life*).

Within the Fetherstonhaugh family, Cuthbert acknowledges his sister Fanny as having provided notes on family history, including the information that their father "had no fewer than twenty-seven brothers and sisters, seventeen of whom grew up tall, handsome men and women" (52, quoting the *Hamilton Spectator* obituary of Cuthbert senior). Yet Cuthbert barely mentions his mother and sisters, concentrating rather on the equestrian exploits of the males of the family. His comments on the mother acknowledge that she was a cultivated woman: "she was very musical and well read, and to a certain extent a classical scholar. She could read her New Testament in the Greek text, and had a little knowledge of Hebrew." (Fetherstonhaugh 19). Fanny demonstrably had similar abilities, as her sisters perhaps did too: we emphasise her achievements in counterpoise to the assumptions, of Lucas for one, that what Sidney accomplished in the public sphere warrants a detailed account as Fanny's accomplishments do not.

Colvin's career took off from his tenure of the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Cambridge from 1873 to 1885. He was also Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, from 1876 to 1884, when he became Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, a post he held until his retirement in 1912. He published extensively on the fine arts and on literature, editing Robert Louis Stevenson's works including his letters – work in which subsequent scholarship has revealed "bowdlerization and expurgation" (Mehew Colvin).

Frances Sitwell and Colvin had met Stevenson in the summer of 1873. It was to be a significant relationship for them both. Colvin became Stevenson's literary mentor, while the young man fell deeply in love with Mrs Sitwell, writing her frequent long letters which "constitute a touching record of his emotional dependence on her and of his slow growth to maturity." (Mehew Stevenson). Fanny's ability to advise and guide Stevenson was widely exercised, and well acknowledged.

Meredith knew Fanny Sitwell and Sidney Colvin from 1878, with the various relationships becoming closer after Marie's death. Colvin frequently made overnight visits to Box Hill, and Meredith wrote him a charming note on the occasion of his wedding to Fanny:

My dear Sidney Colvin,

This is your birthday, and you are on the eve of a happier day. It could not have been better determined by both parties for the satisfaction of their friends. You seem to be sure of such happiness as the world can give—and that, as you have the wisdom to reflect, is as much as we have the right to claim.

I have not touched my pen for weeks, and I write first to you. Yours heartily,—
With love to the lady,

George Meredith (Cline 3:1484)

The warmth of his greeting to Fanny is unmistakable, though sadly she is invisible elsewhere in his correspondence. We choose to imagine her debating the suffrage with him in the conversations Colvin describes, in which Meredith discourses on such topics as what society owes to women, the desirability of military training, and England's destiny (from the vantage of the Celt) (Colvin 177-80).

Meredith's relationship with the Colvins well exemplifies the interconnectedness of the social circle around the Sage of Box Hill. Mariette may have had in mind that Lady Colvin's sister had for a time been her governess when with her husband Henry Sturgis she attended Colvin's memorial service.

Conclusion

Our discussion has travelled far beyond Box Hill and gifts of neckties and embroideries. In casting fresh light on aspects of Meredith's relationships with family and friends, we have pointed up some of the contradictions in his attitudes and behaviours that have long been seen as typical of him, and incidentally uncovered a tangential connection of Meredith to Australia.

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