

Part One 1845-1875

Lucy's Early Years 1846-1875

Early years are important and most biographical studies begin with them. However, throughout her life, Lucy Clifford very effectively concealed the details of her childhood. In seeking to unravel the hidden beginnings of Lucy's story we must pick up the threads at the end of her life.

In *The Times* of 22 April, 1929, an obituary appeared. It was a glowing tribute to a woman who was 'distinguished as a novelist and for many years an honoured figure in literary London, a link with great writers and scientists of the Victorian Age'. The obituary included a tribute to her distinguished husband and a review of her books and plays. The names of many of her famous friends were included. She was remembered as 'one of the last survivors of those who attended the famous Sunday afternoon gatherings to do homage to George Eliot at The Priory'. Her contributions to periodical literature and journalism were noted, including her regular contributions to the *Standard*, at that time enjoying its Golden Age under the classical and scholarly control of the renowned editors Mudford and Jeyes. Lucy Clifford was described as:

possessing an active, acute mind and social gifts which maintained round her a circle continually reinforced by new writers who were attracted by her genuine kindness. For young ambition she had a particularly tender interest and welcome, and, till her last illness, she never wearied of giving practical help and encouragement.

Two eminent Americans were mentioned:

Writers who were more her contemporaries, such as J. R. Lowell, who wrote her a remarkable series of letters and Henry James, who remembered her in his will, were attached friends.

The following day a further tribute was added:

through her tender interest in aspiring youth she had found the *elixir vitae* which defies old age, and to the very last she was young in spirit because she was loved by the younger generation. . . . In later years at her little house in Chilworth Street she was nearly always at home to welcome, fortify, and encourage any friends who sought escape in that sanctuary from the loneliness of life . . . and for them the world will seem cold and inhospitable without her.¹

The names of Lord Fitzmaurice, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, Augustine Birrell and Rudyard Kipling were added to the previous list of her close friends. She had clearly been a much-loved woman and many other glowing tributes

followed. But it is through her friendship with Henry James that she is most remembered today.

Henry James died in London on 28 February, 1916. In the December of the previous year he had suffered a stroke. On New Year's Day, as he lay in his bed at Carlyle Mansions, Sir Edmund Gosse had crept into the room to whisper to his friend the news that he had been awarded the Order of Merit. Henry James, private to the last, made no response or indication that he had heard. He waited until the door had been closed on Gosse before he opened his eyes and asked the maid to 'turn off the light and spare my blushes'.² Even in this state of near terminal illness and vulnerability he found it easier to dissemble than to show himself. Henry James was exceedingly well known in literary circles in London. He had many friends and even more acquaintances, but for most of them it was difficult to penetrate his habitual camouflage of carefully chosen, carefully delivered words.

Henry James lingered for two months after his stroke. His will was a straightforward document. The James family received the property and insurance. The now-famous Sargent portrait went, as expected, to the National Gallery. As expected, the servants were provided for, and just three of his friends received legacies of £100 – quite a substantial sum in modern terms. These three friends were Jocelyn Persse, Hugh Walpole and Lucy Clifford.

Jocelyn Persse, then aged forty-three, a nephew of Lady Gregory, the Irish playwright and close friend of W. B. Yeats, had enjoyed an 'exquisite relationship' with Henry James. They had met at Mrs Sitwell's wedding to Sidney Colvin in 1903 when he, Lucy Clifford, Robert Browning and Henry James had been among the small group of guests.³ Henry James and Jocelyn had been immediately attracted to each other. They became the closest and most devoted of friends and were loyal to each other for the remaining thirteen years of James's life.

The young writer Hugh Walpole, James's 'dearest darlingest little Hugh' then aged thirty-two, was another of his beloved young men. He had been close to Henry James since they met in 1909 when James was 66. Walpole wrote to James as '*Très cher Maître*'. James was supportive and tender to him, but one senses that Walpole placed himself at James's side for a different reason. He frankly confessed that in his early days in London he 'ran to writers as a kitten runs to milk'. However, he came to true friendship with Henry James and his book of reminiscences, is dedicated, 'For Henry James, as he knows, with love.'⁴

And then there was Lucy Clifford. How was it that this novelist and playwright, then the seventy year old widow of a mathematical genius, came to be so remembered by one of the most eminent of American writers? Eminent men were not unusual in Lucy's life. Her marriage to William Kingdon Clifford had brought her into contact with a galaxy of famous personalities. As a young widow in 1879, she wrote to her friend Fred (Sir Frederick) Pollock, later Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, 'it has been my strange good

fortune to know the best and greatest of men'. But to Lucy the greatest of all of them was always her husband and his philosophy of life is reflected in every one of her books and plays.

Until recently the main source of information about Lucy Clifford has come from Leon Edel in his incomparable biographical quintet: *The Life of Henry James*. Edel makes many references to Mrs W. K. Clifford, and a section in Volume Five is devoted to her. Since her books are not now widely read or easy to find, Lucy Clifford is often perceived to have been simply a woman friend of Henry James. They were indeed very close friends and Somerset Maugham provides a delightful vignette of Lucy and Henry James together. He writes of an evening that the three of them spent at the Aldwych Theatre when *The Cherry Orchard* was being performed:

Henry James was perplexed by *The Cherry Orchard* . . . and in the second interval he set out to explain to us how antagonistic to his French sympathies was this Russian incoherence. Lumbering through his tortuous phrases, he hesitated now and again in a search for the exact word to express his dismay; but Mrs Clifford had a quick and agile mind; she knew the word he was looking for and every time he paused immediately supplied it. This was the last thing he wanted. He was too well-mannered to protest, but an almost imperceptible expression on his face betrayed his irritation and, obstinately refusing the word she offered, he laboriously sought another, and again Mrs Clifford suggested it only to have it again turned down. It was a scene of high comedy.⁵

Lucy demonstrated, throughout twenty-five or more years of friendship, her very unaffected attitude to him. With her he could be relaxed, and it seems likely that Lucy Clifford, of all his wide circle of friends, saw him at his most natural. But she was not quite what she seemed.

During her last illness in April, 1929, her close friends would have come to the house to visit her thinking they were seeing a woman who was seventy-two years old. In fact she was eighty-two. The incorrect age was entered on the certificate of death witnessed by her son-in-law Sir Fisher Wentworth Dilke. Even Lucy's own daughters did not seem to know that she had deceived them about her age. It has never been considered a serious fault for a woman to conceal her age, but Lucy started her deception early by claiming to be only twenty-four when she was really twenty-eight. Her birth certificate states that she was born in Great College Street, Camden Town on 2 August, 1846. However, on all of the official documents that have been traced she never once admitted to 1846 and she avoided mentioning her place of birth. This may have been simply a coquettish whim, but there is evidence that her deception was an attempt to conceal some events of her early years.

Amongst Lucy's possessions is an envelope containing a faded photograph of a distinguished looking, bewhiskered gentleman. Written on it, in Lucy's hand, are the words '*Details of my Grandfather John Brandford*

Lane. Made Chevalier de Malte or Knight of Malta by King Charles X of France'. Also in the envelope are the names of three properties he owned in Barbados. The photograph is labelled, 'Sir John Brandford Lane. September 28 1829 aged 39. Parish Broadwater, Worthing, Sussex'. This was the date of his recorded burial. There were many vicissitudes in the history of the Knights of Malta, resulting in a fragmentation of their records. King Charles X was only on the throne from 1824 to 1830, so Brandford's *Chevalier de Malte* honour must have been given when he was between the ages of thirty-three and thirty-eight. Enquiries in Malta, and from the Order of St John in London, reveal no record of John Brandford Lane, but some of the relevant records are incomplete. There are, however, records of John Brandford Lane as a landowner and member of the House of Assembly in Barbados.

Lucy spoke little of this paternal Barbadian grandfather, or of his son, her father, who was also called John Lane. However, she did encourage the notion that she herself had been born in Barbados. It now seems pretty clear that she was never on that island. The likelihood is that the link with Barbados ended with the 1829 death of Brandford Lane in England. Maybe, to Lucy, Barbados seemed a more attractive and romantic birthplace than Camden Town, and there is little harm in that. However, she was concealing other information about her family background.

When she was left a widow trying to establish herself as a freelance writer, she needed all the help that she could get to break into the world of journalism and publishing. She 'collected' interesting people for her Sunday afternoon salon to make sure that she was at the centre of the literary and social round, and also to gather material for her contributions to the 'gossip' section of the *Athenaeum* between 1881 and 1901. Lucy Clifford was always secretive about her family roots. As far as can be discovered she never told anybody that Thomas Gaspey was her grandfather, that his daughter, Louisa Ellen, had married John Lane in 1844, and that she, Lucy, was the oldest of their children. In fact, in all the hundreds of Lucy's letters that have been retrieved, the name of Gaspey does not appear. Now this name does not perhaps readily spring to mind in the literary world today. But in fact Thomas Gaspey was a most successful journalist, poet, writer, and influential part owner of *The Sunday Times*. He had about twenty, solid, historical volumes to his name. He was for many years the senior member of the council of the Literary Fund. One of his sons had a Ph.D. from Heidelberg and was a successful author. The other was also a prolific writer in prose and verse. What could have made her seek to expunge all tangible links with the maternal side of her family – especially when they had achieved what she aspired to – they had made their reputations in the world of letters. The fact that Lucy was sent to live with her grandfather in Shooters Hill suggests that a family break-up of some sort had taken place. But she always somehow managed to slip out of answering questions about her childhood. One perceptive interviewer observed of Mrs W. K. Clifford that, 'One longs to know what

she was as a little girl; and that little girl is just the one point on which it is impossible to excite her interest.’⁶ Another interviewer observed ‘Mrs Clifford is fluent on all subjects except herself.’⁷ Apart from gleaning tiny snips of information from her letters about her life before she met and married the young man who was to become so famous, we can only look for clues in her writings.

Lucy’s novels and plays, short stories and children’s books are fully discussed in a later chapter. It is interesting to note that all her books and plays are set in the time in which she lived, and the dominant themes in them are the problems faced by women of the middle classes. In several of her novels she is concerned with the plight of divorced women and the dilemma of unhappily married women. Many of the books are about women seeking happiness. Many of them clearly draw upon biographical elements and experiences of Lucy’s own life, and, in just one of her books, she recounts the tragic story of the childhood and unhappy early life of a young girl. It is possible that this story may contain clues to the circumstances that led Lucy to falsify her age on her marriage certificate and ‘lose’ some years of her early life.

Lucy wrote *A Flash of Summer* in 1894 and it was published in episodes in the *Illustrated London News*. In the first publication it was a story of tragic circumstances and unfortunate events ending in a young woman’s suicide. In later editions the devastating ending was rewritten to allow for the possibility of a happy conclusion. The beginning part of *A Flash of Summer* covers the life of a little girl who, between the ages of six and seventeen, is living with her widower uncle in Shooters Hill on the outskirts of London. He is not unduly unkind to her, but affection and gentleness are absent from their relationship. She feels, and is, unwanted in the household but no details are given of her parents. The little girl, Katherine, is pensive, sensitive and artistic. The uncle’s only son dies and Katherine becomes his sole heir. At seventeen her uncle presses her into marriage with his middle-aged, bullying and money-seeking lawyer friend. The inevitably unhappy marriage ends with Katherine running away to travel incognito in Europe, to meet the love of her life, to lose him because she is afraid to tell him the truth about her marriage, and, eventually, to take her own life. The early descriptions of the Shooters Hill area are so accurate that it is easy today to trace the exact paths that ‘Katherine’ took in her childhood. She wrote in detail of the little girl who,

every morning of her life from six to seventeen, save on Sundays and the brief holiday periods she came out of the gate . . . turned to her left and went down the hill, past the church on the one side and the inn on the other, past the stuffed-bird shop and the lane that led to Woolwich, and Ordnance Terrace, and the plantation and the Scrubs.

Every detail is so accurate that Lucy Clifford’s novel has been used by the Woolwich Antiquarian Society to help trace lost landmarks in the area.

Back in real life, we find, in the Census of 1871, that Lucy Lane was living

with her grandfather Thomas Gaspey, the writer-historian, at 4, Ordnance Terrace, Shooters Hill – a house named and described in *A Flash of Summer*. There are many clear parallels between Lucy Clifford and her fictional young heroine. Unfortunately, the 1861 Census records for this area of London are lost. We do not know when Lucy first moved into her grandfather's home. It is not however, fanciful to draw the conclusion that parts of *A Flash of Summer* are autobiographical, and that the reason for Lucy's distancing herself from the Gaspey family might have been that she was in some way made unhappy by her association with them. The 1871 Census document contains the first 'error' in Lucy's recorded age. She is entered as a magazine writer aged twenty-three. In fact she was twenty-five. By the time she was married in April 1875 she had 'lost' four years by giving her age as twenty-four. When the 1881 Census was taken, Lucy was still taking off four years. However, by the 1891 Census she had lost seven years and this had increased to a ten-year disparity by the time of her death. The only other document traced so far is her application to the Literary Fund in 1880. On that she gave her date of birth as 1849 instead of 1846. Of course, records can contain genuine errors, and one can be unintentionally inaccurate about dates, but these inconsistencies are all in one direction, and it is fair to assume that Lucy really did intend to conceal her age. She certainly never took the opportunity, although she had several, to put the record straight. At times the deception led her into a tangled web of evasions – especially over her early publications. Six months before her death she left instructions that her age should not appear on her coffin and should not be given to any enquirer.

She had been a magazine writer and journalist before she met William Clifford. Many of her articles would have been published anonymously, and many of them have not yet been traced. She did publish in the monthly magazine *Quiver*, and her name, Lucy Lane, appears in the list of contributors in the yearly bound edition for 1872. One of these serialised stories, *The Dingy House at Kensington*, was amended and published anonymously in 1882. It was her first book, but she never openly claimed it as her own. Only once, in 1910, in a personal letter written to her publisher George Bentley, does she admit to having written it. She writes of having been proud to see her name on placards advertising the book, 'when I was an infant' – her gentle way of dodging the age issue.⁸ It did well for Lucy and for Ward and Downey in the USA, selling over ten thousand copies. The books on which Lucy's reputation as an author rests are discussed later in this book. However, even frail early writings give insight to later strengths, and, in *The Dingy House at Kensington*, we do see the first intimations of Lucy's pragmatic understanding of men which becomes a major characteristic of her mature writing. She has her young heroine note that, 'men object to having the weak points in their character played upon' and 'hate nothing more than being made to look small – especially by a woman'.

The aspect of Lucy's deception about her age that is most puzzling is her husband's role in it. William knew her parents and he knew two of her sisters

– he must have known that she was in fact only one year younger than himself. If Lucy had reason for ‘losing’ four years of her life when she got married, did she hide it from him or did he accommodate it? In his letters to her he often called her ‘my child’, but this might have been simply an affectionate diminutive. We shall never know what passed between them, and William’s illness and early death released Lucy from the danger that any duplicity would be discovered by him.

If we accept that there is an autobiographical element in Lucy’s writing we will recognise her self-image easily. Her heroines are never conventionally beautiful but have a haunting and attractive remoteness about them. They have a love of the natural world and a reverence for it. They are thoughtful, sensitive women, not afraid to make their own judgements, and Lucy herself must have been a strikingly interesting young woman when, at the age of twenty-eight, but claiming to be twenty-four, she took the public eye in London society as the wife of one of the most eminent and talked-of academics of the age.

Notes

1. *The Times*, Obituary, April 1919, contributed by J. H. Morgan, K.C.
2. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Henry James at Home*, Methuen 1969, p. 281.
3. Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1972, Vol 5, p. 188.
4. Hugh Walpole, *The Apple Trees: Four Reminiscences*, Golden Cockerel Press 1932.
5. Somerset Maugham, *The Vagrant Mood*, Doubleday 1952, p. 209.
6. Mary Angela Dickens, *A Chat with Mrs W. K. Clifford*, Windsor Magazine 1989. Vol 9, p. 483-485.
7. Whitehall Review, *The Whithall Portrait*, December 1893, No. 917.
8. Bodleian Library, ALS (MS: Eng. Lett. E 116).