

## Literary Critic and Hostess

The publisher Sir Frederick Macmillan had known and admired William Clifford and he kept up his friendship with Lucy. He and his wife were regular guests at Chilworth Street and both attended Lucy's funeral. Even in Lucy's later days when she was by no means rich, the writer Charles Morgan noted that 'the company in her little drawing room was among the best, though not the smartest, in London'. Sir Frederick trusted her judgement as one of his readers.<sup>1</sup> He considered Lucy to have a vital quality – 'an intuition for literature, and an incapacity to lie about it whether in flattery or spite' and therein lay her strength. Sir Frederick respected her opinions with an 'affectionate . . . reasoned and almost superstitious regard'. She had brought Kipling to them in 1890, and in 1898 she persuaded Frederick Macmillan to back Maurice Hewlett's historical romance *The Forest Lovers*. It had been turned down by the first reader, but Lucy, who knew Hewlett and had encouraged him, read it and judged that it would be extremely popular. It then went to Lord Morley but he was not in favour of it. However, Lucy took Sir Frederick to task, declaring that she was certain of its success and that if he rejected it he was 'throwing away a small fortune'. She made him promise to read the manuscript himself. Lucy won the day; the book was published and Hewlett's reputation was made. It is therefore easy to understand the sincerity of what he wrote in 1901 to Lucy: 'God Bless you. He did bless me when he brought me to your door some fifteen years ago'.<sup>2</sup> After Hewlett's death, when an edition of his letters was published and caused his wife unhappiness, Lucy again endeared herself to his memory. Ignoring the undercurrents and gossip she wrote an appreciation for the *Observer* and earned these words from his wife:

Darling friend, . . . You were his fairy Godmother for years and he loved you. . . . You gave him his first chance and his last tribute . . . he always trusted you . . . you couldn't have done Maurice a better turn than by writing. . . . Oh! how I bless you . . . you knew nothing of the fight and simply wrote from your own knowledge and criticism. . . . I shall burn all his letters now, and then no one can be foolish and rake up what was never meant for the world to see.<sup>3</sup>

Much later in her life, she again did well for Macmillan. Charles Morgan remembers the 80-year-old Sir Frederick along with 'the great survivors of the Victorian age' still visiting Lucy and being influenced by her opinions.<sup>4</sup> Charles Morgan's first novel: *My Name is Legion* had been a great success. When, in 1927, his second novel was rejected by Heinemann, he was shattered. He sent the manuscript to Lucy whom he respected because, as he wrote to her, she was:

an artist whose method is much more straightforward than mine so that I am certain you will not start with the favourable prejudice of some coterie kindred to me; and secondly because, though you yourself are a swift and vigorous narrator, you had an ear for Henry James whose manner was infinitely oblique. Therefore you are the perfect critic for my book.<sup>5</sup>

Lucy again insisted that Sir Frederick read it himself, and so set it on its way – re-titled *Portrait in a Mirror* – to be a best seller and, in 1930, to win the Femina-Vie Heureuse prize. Charles Morgan recorded his gratitude to Lucy in these words:

You have done one service that I shall never forget in bringing me to Macmillan. I have wished to be published by them since, as a child, I realized that those green-bound volumes in my father's library were immortality's mortal representatives! I am sure that between author and Publisher, long association is everything; disloyalty and impatience are the unforgivable sins – an old-fashioned view. Pray heaven the Macmillans share it; if they don't no one does.<sup>6</sup>

A friend wrote of Lucy that she always 'had some mute inglorious Milton up her sleeve. . . . She was always eager to press the claims and advance the interests of those who won her sympathy.'<sup>7</sup> She had been supportive of Noel Coward in his early days. Much later, in 1927, she wrote to him asking if he would help dramatize a book of hers. He replied to her affectionately saying: 'I think your story *Wild Proxy* is excellent but, much to my regret, I can never work on plots that are not my own.' He was glad that she had been in touch and told her to make sure she came round to his dressing room at the theatre.<sup>8</sup> Hugh Walpole tells how Lucy, knowing how he admired Thomas Hardy, took him to meet the great man. Lucy, Hugh Walpole and Hardy sat in helpless silence while Mrs Hardy dominated the conversation. Walpole recalls that, just before they were to leave, Hardy finally got a chance to speak:

Mr Walpole, I understand you intend to write novels. 'Yes' I cried, ready to burst into a grand exposition of my fine purpose and noble ambitions. 'Don't' he said, sadly patting my shoulder, and away we went!<sup>9</sup>

Even when Lucy's literary success was waning, her Sunday afternoon tea parties continued to flourish. Ezra Pound, when he was in London between 1916 and 1919, added some eccentric colour to number 7 Chilworth Street, Lucy's home from 1899 till her death. Theodora Bosanquet, Henry James's secretary, who admired Mrs Clifford, noted that:

Ezra Pound in his brown velvet coat was sunk into his armchair and would have been extremely interesting and was being very witty, only one can only hear half what the creature says in his languid murmur. His account of a tea-party at Marie Corelli's was full of good things, of which I only caught detached fragments of embroidery.<sup>10</sup>

The portrait painter John Collier remained faithful to Lucy after William's death. He was able to carry off what is surely a precarious test of friendship – he could give the most trenchant criticisms of some of her books without her taking offence.<sup>11</sup> He did some illustrations for two of Lucy's books including a beautifully drawn impression of Mrs Keith for the second edition of *Mrs Keith's Crime*. Besides being a most talented portrait painter he was a freethinking philosopher. In his book, *The Religion of an Artist*, he writes: 'Most people assume that some sort of religion is necessary. I do not see the necessity; some of the best people I have ever known have no religion at all.' There is no doubt that amongst 'some of the best people' would have been his twice-time father-in law, Thomas Huxley, and the friend they both loved – William Clifford. He kept up his friendship with Lucy till her death and, with his wife, was frequently at her Salon.

Lucy's day-to-day life in the early London days of her widowhood was very busy indeed. She had to organize her salon, establish herself as a writer, and care for her children. Her fourteen-year commitment to *The Standard* had been taken up soon after William's death. It was a daily paper and, although most of the regular contributors to it are not named, many of the entries under 'Novels of the Day' and 'Christmas Books' are certainly recognisable as Lucy Clifford's work. Lucy's brother, John Lane, also worked for *The Standard* as society correspondent. He was known as a first-rate journalist and extremely popular colleague. Jack Pollock, himself a contributor to *The Standard*, recalls the extraordinary fact that Lucy never spoke to him or acknowledged him as her brother.<sup>12</sup> This untypical coldness was surely a bitter echo of how much early family dislocations had scarred Lucy.

In the early months of 1881 Lucy visited St Germain-en-Laye, west of Paris, and it was to become a favourite escape from the harsh London winter. She used it as a setting for one of her novels, *The Long Duel*, and, in 1888 and 1889, took Ethel and Margaret there with her to improve their French. For another escape from London she accepted the Stephens' offer of Talland House and spent many months there in 1884 and 1885. Olive Schreiner and Leslie Stephen visited her when she stayed at Clarens, near Montreux. This was a favourite resort for writers, poets and musicians and Lucy spent time there in each of the last four years of the decade. Along with all the travelling and writing and voluminous personal correspondence she also helped, in the early days after his death, to get William's books ready for publication. To make ends meet, she often rented out her house in Colville Road while she and the girls were abroad or spending summer weeks in Hindhead with the Pollocks or at Land's End with the Stephens.

The turning-point came six years after William's death when her reputation was made by the success of her novel, *Mrs Keith's Crime*, which is discussed later in the book. This success established her in the literary world and for many years thereafter her books and short stories sold well.

Marie Belloc Lowndes, Hilaire Belloc's sister and a prolific novelist herself, was another of Lucy's close and long-standing friends. She was unstinting

in her praise of Lucy, and wrote that she deserved to be better remembered.<sup>13</sup> She makes the observation that Lucy's charming ways and serene demeanour concealed a 'deep-felt awareness of human unhappiness and a great compassion for it'. Mrs Belloc Lowndes, herself a popular hostess, made many friends through her visits to Lucy's modest home. It was there that she first met the young and unknown Bernard Shaw. She was at the first night of Lucy's play, *The Likeness of the Night*, and wrote showing her pleasure at its success. Over the years, she sent inscribed copies of her books to Lucy as they came out. Lucy's enthusiasm for the quality of Marie's storytelling rings true in the letters she wrote to her. They are not bland: she manages to present critical comments as signs of how interested she was in Marie's work.<sup>14</sup> With women friends, as with men, Lucy had a sensitive touch.

The sensitive touch was totally absent in the letters Bernard Shaw wrote to Lucy. They had a long friendship. In 1928 she had sent him her play *A Woman Alone*. He replied with a friendly bombshell – 'It really is a horrible play!' He goes on to take the theme to pieces and ends:

Why is it that all women who write, whether they are reactionary like you or progressive like — and — and —, all delight in leaving their readers thoroughly discouraged and miserable in the end?

He also burst off the page the next week in his reply to her rejoinder:

I tell you *you* are the dupe of your own experience. Of course W. K. C. was cleverer than you. But he was cleverer than ME – cleverer even than Einstein. . . . So don't argue; but write another play that will not have for its proper title 'Back to the Eighteen-sixties!'<sup>15</sup>

But this was the year before Lucy died and she could no more escape from the limitations of her earlier themes than she could from the limitations of her own age. Shaw had always been interested in Lucy's work and once in 1893 he actually attributed the controversial and anonymously published play, *Alan's Wife*, to Lucy. He declared 'Whoever wrote that play it is of the Kingdom of Clifford from beginning to end – superstitious atheism – sensational anti-Goddity all over.'<sup>16</sup> His first choice guess was Mrs Clifford and his second choice Elizabeth Robins. Thirty years later it was claimed as the joint work of Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins.

Lucy gave a picture of her day-to-day working life in an interview in 1899.<sup>17</sup> She was described as an intensely sympathetic and womanly personality who worked at her writing for long hours in the mornings and evenings, keeping the afternoons for tea and walking and 'desultory reading – so long as it is not indecent or improper'. The room she worked in was at the bottom of the house and her bedroom at the top. Lucy gave an amusing account about the fears that came upon her when she was writing late at night. She regularly fancied that she heard burglars 'about three quarters of an hour after the rest of the house have gone to bed', and was afraid to go upstairs to her bedroom. She had confided her fears to Thomas Huxley who replied that he too, eminent scientist and FRS though he was, suffered in the same way. He told Lucy that he 'not only heard burglars but actually *saw*

them looking through the crack of the door!’<sup>18</sup> Thomas Huxley was twenty years older than Lucy and always signed himself in his letters to her as *Pater*. His letters to both William and Lucy are openly affectionate. He took Lucy under his wing when, soon after William’s death, she had financial problems. ‘Leave it all to be turned over in the mind of that cold-blooded, worldly, cynical old fellow who signs himself your affectionate Pater’ he wrote; and Lucy must have been glad to do just that. Later, in 1895, when Lucy was pressing him to get a friend of hers elected to the Athenaeum, he sagely advised her not to meddle, and defended his advice in this way:

Men, my dear Lucy are very queer animals, a mixture of horse-nervousness, ass-stubbornness, and camel-malice with an angel bobbing around unexpectedly like the apple in the possett, and when they can do exactly as they please, they are very hard to guide. How many men’s chances have I seen smashed by their advocates!<sup>19</sup>

He was President of the Royal Society from 1881 to 1885 and was a tremendously popular public figure. Edward Clodd, the congenial philanthropist and friend of many of the most distinguished among the later Victorians, wrote that it was worth being born just to have known Huxley.<sup>20</sup> Clodd was much loved by his friends. For his sixtieth birthday in 1900 he was presented with a table specially made for the occasion. It was carved with the names of thirty of his closest friends. Lucy’s name is there along with Thomas Hardy, Edmund Gosse, George Gissing, Frederick Macmillan, Holman Hunt, George Meredith, Herbert Spencer and other notables. Huxley’s fiery early days, when he was known as Darwin’s bulldog, and when his sparkingly provocative public lectures attracted the crowds, were finished. Nevertheless his regular attendance at Lucy’s Sunday afternoon gatherings must still have been a magnet for other intellectuals and academics. Much earlier, in 1864, he had founded the powerful and élitist, nine-member *X Club* which flourished for twenty-nine years and was a major influence in the growing Scientific Establishment. Lucy’s close relationship and loyalty to him was constant to the memory of the almost paternal care he had displayed for her husband, and, till the end of his own life in 1895, Huxley kept a practical, watchful and most affectionate eye on Lucy.

### Notes

1. C. Morgan, *House of Macmillan*, 1843-1943, Macmillan 1943, p.148.
2. ALS (one of fourteen), Valehouse Collection.
3. *ibid.*
4. Eiluned Lewis (ed.), *Charles Morgan: A Memoir*, Macmillan, 1967, p.19.
5. As note 2.
6. *ibid.*
7. Unidentified Obituary by ‘A Friend’ 1929.
8. ALS, Valehouse Collection.
9. Hugh Walpole, *The Apple Trees: Four Reminiscences*, Golden Cockerel Press, 1932, p. 45-46.

10. Theodora Bosanquet, *Personal Diary*, 1914-1918, Unpub. Harvard University Library (96-1918).
11. ALS (one of five), Valehouse Collection.
12. Sir John Pollock, *Time's Chariot*, John Murray, 1950, p.80.
13. Mrs Marie Belloc Lowndes, *The Merry Wives of Westminster*, Macmillan, 1946, p. 62.
14. Fifty ALSs from Lucy Clifford including nine to Mrs Belloc Lowndes are held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas.
15. ALS (one of two), Valehouse Collection.
16. Dan H. Laurence (ed.) *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters*. Reinhardt, 1965. Letter to Elizabeth Robins dated 28 April, 1893, p. 393.
17. Mary Angela Dickens, *A Chat with Mrs W. K. Clifford*, Windsor Magazine 1999. Vol 9, p. 483-485.
18. ALS (one of six), Valehouse Collection.
19. *ibid.*
20. Edward Clodd, *Memories*, Chapman and Hall, 1916, p.40.

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