

# A Homage to Mary Paley<sup>1</sup>

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*Of all the “waste products” which are beginning to be utilised, perhaps the life of young and energetic women is the most valuable.*

Mary Paley: *Ladies at Work* by Lady Jeune; *The Economic Journal*, 3 (Dec. 1893), p. 680

A few miles north of Peterborough, on the A1, can be found the little town of Wansford and if you turn right here you cross an area where the houses and villages are more and more thinly scattered and the woods are more frequent and shadier. Then the road climbs a low hill and as you go round the last bend, just before descending, you can see quite suddenly Ufford a pretty village of some 350 souls. The parish church of St Andrew's and its rectory lie at the southwestern corner of the village. At the foot of a gentle hill, on the west side of the main street, is Ufford Hall, a building of some character but clearly unused. From the centre of the village a road leads off to Barnack, the biggest place in the area, and the parish to which St Andrew's church nowadays belongs. In the distance, towards Stamford, on a higher hill, you can see the outline of Burghley House.

Ufford must not have been very different in its appearance when, on 24 October 1850, Mary Paley was born there. Of course in 1850 there were no railways, neither the one that skirt the parish to the west, nor the branch line to Essendine and Stamford. And railways, as we know, change the life of the areas they cross. It should be said, however, that major stagecoach routes already served the area and Wansford was an important stopping place for change of horses. So it cannot be said that Ufford, however isolated, was really cut off from the outside world.

The people of Ufford numbered around 250 at this time. The village, despite being so close to the coaching route linking London and Edinburgh, had retained a very traditional structure. A number of farming families and those of their agricultural labourers constituted the bulk of the local population. Most food supplies were produced locally: wheat, barley, milk and meat. Farming activities left enough time for the womenfolk, and sometimes – when their products were in demand – for the men to engage in the ancient craft of lace-making. The hamlet of Ashton, one mile north of Ufford, was the seat of much of this craft work, which at certain times (e.g. when the Franco-Prussian war created a shortage of French lace) achieved considerable importance. It was said that this kind of work had employed over 100 people – in 1698.

Another trade of some importance, at least down to 1880, was the making of clay pipes, which gave the area the unusual feature of a female population – especially the older women – that smoked pipes at a time when smoking was not much practiced among men.

The village was of course provided with all the essential services, from the midwife to the baker, from the carpenter to the blacksmith, from the stonemason to the cobbler, from the priest to the gravedigger. There was also an emporium where you could buy all the things from town. Above this working population there was a small clique of country gentlemen, as snobbish as they were penniless, such as, for example, the tenants of Ufford Hall. Still higher were the haughty local

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aristocrats, much given to fox-hunting, horse racing and gambling. Above all of them, but far away, at Burghley House, on the highest hill, lived the 'lord' of the area, the Marquis of Exeter. Stories were told about him, such as the one that recounted how, since he was against any railway crossing his little realm, he had hastened to have built, at his own expense, a branch line from Essendine to Stamford so that he might not be completely cut off from progress, and perhaps from the increase in land values that would follow it. The coloured liveries of his servants who were supervising the building of the Marquis' private railway were among the first sights to strike the imagination of the young Mary.

The population was completed by the usual pair of village idiots and by some part-time teachers-cum-child minders of the lads and lasses of school age. The 'paternalist' intimacy of the English village of the time clearly emerges from Mary's constant references, in her autobiographical essay<sup>2</sup> to the fact that the 'lower classes' were always bowing and scraping to their 'betters'.

In the logic of this micro-system, the Anglican parish priest of Ufford was the link between the different parts of the little community. It was an easier task in Ufford than in other villages, since the Church of England there was not harassed by the presence of a nonconformist chapel.

But Thomas Paley, Mary's father and the Rector of Ufford from 1847 to 1880 (the son of a certain Robert Paley, a doctor at Ripon in Yorkshire who had married a certain Mary Paley, the third daughter of the great William Paley), was no ordinary fellow. Thomas, born in Halifax on 11 May 1810, had studied at Cambridge where he was to have graduated in medicine but where he in fact took a degree in mathematics (27th wrangler) in 1833. He had then been elected a Fellow (1835) of his College, St John's, and then been ordained.

During his studies at Cambridge, Thomas had come under the influence of the ideas of Charles Simeon, the famous Vicar of Holy Trinity, acquiring from him a marked contempt for worldly forms of religion. This youthful experience imprinted on him a lifelong evangelical sternness that made him a living anachronism even in the narrow-minded and stern atmosphere of mid-Victorian Britain. To see and hear that tall, thin old man, with his face suffused by inner fire, white-haired and black-clad, serious, dignified and solemn, was like scanning a page – according to an obituary – of past history.

Thomas Paley was an active and enthusiastic member of the "British and Foreign Bible Society" and used to visit towns and villages, often far from Ufford, subjecting himself to long journeys in a trap or in the saddle in order to give sermons and take part in the meetings of that society. What distinguished the Rector of Ufford from the many bureaucrats of the Church of England was his conviction that the word of the Gospel was nothing in itself and only the evangelical spirit can save us. Being firm on this point, just like his teacher Simeon, he did not disdain to stop and pray in Scottish Presbyterian chapels that he came across in his travels. It is to this search for authenticity and contempt for the exterior forms of worship that an episode is linked which remained remarkably impressed on the young Mary's mind.

[M]y sister – Mary writes – had pulled off the cloth that covered a table where the communion wine was standing so as to hide the table legs. My father rebuked her harshly because, he said, the legs showed that it was a table and not an altar. Things had to look what they really were.

There was another side to his personality that set him in a special category of clergymen; Thomas was interested in the new art of photography and was keen on chemical and electrical experiments for which he made use of microscopes and other scientific instruments. His degree in

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<sup>2</sup> 'I did not realise the beauty of the place until I visited it years later, as an old woman'.

maths and his postgraduate visits to St John's College in Cambridge had evidently instilled in him knowledge and interests that not even the isolation of Ufford could extinguish.

Thomas Paley's financial circumstances were fairly good; by giving him the living of Ufford cum Bainton, St John's had guaranteed him an income of £680 per year, which was not a large sum but – topped up by some family income – was enough to ensure a good standard of living for the Paley family. And indeed Thomas Paley, as well as his wife and three children, maintained, so to speak, two housemaids, a cook, a gardener-groom, and for a certain period also a nanny. Overall, therefore, the Rev. Thomas Paley's family was peaceful and well set up, comfortably off and with close relatives (the Paleys in Ripon and the Wormalds in Barton on Humber) who were ready on occasion to come to their aid. It was in this natural, social and family context that Mary Paley was born and grew up.

Among Mary's childhood experiences that figure largest in her memoirs was the sudden death of her younger brother, her chum. Their play, their bird-nesting, the merry, innocent closeness between the two sisters and their little brother that emerge from Mary's memoirs paint a picture of a peaceful childhood that her little brother Thomas' death from diphtheria – a common enough illness among English children of the period – rudely interrupts. It is plausible to imagine that the birth in 1860 of the last born George, when Ann Eliza, her elder sister, was twelve and Mary ten years of age, was not enough to restore that rich variety of stimuli that are derived from the close company of boys and girls of similar age. All this is very conjectural, but I would not completely rule out the possibility that the sense of isolation, almost of confinement, that colours the memoirs of Mary as an old woman when she recalls her childhood and early adolescence, living rather too exclusively with the women of the family – her mother, her elder sister, her governess, the maids – owes something to the lack of male members of her little world. In 1860, when George Knowles, the second brother, arrives this stage of her childhood is really coming to a close and different problems are arising for Mary.

With her elder sister Ann Eliza (born 27 September 1848) – who married a certain Robert Brown, a solicitor in Barton on Humber – Mary was always to keep up excellent relations and she would often visit her, down to the last years of her life, at Corfe Castle where she had gone to live. Very little is known about her mother Ann Judith. Two things emerge concerning her: on the one hand her cheerful and hard-working acceptance of the role of wife and mother. With a large house on several floors (the coal had to be carried from the cellar up long flights of stairs, the water drawn from pumps outside the house, and the floors of the kitchen and other large rooms made of uneven flagstones), with a husband of impetuous and imperious character, Ann Judith always managed to stay good-tempered (“full of initiative and always happy and amusing”). But at the same time she worried a lot about her daughters' “deportment” as she sought to shape them into perfect brides to be. Ann Judith was a full-time chaperon, taking her girls to their first seaside holidays and on trips to the capital, or to their grandparents in Yorkshire. And I think it may be significant that Mary did not remember her mother for her love and trust (which in any case might have been taken for granted) but only for her functions partly as teacher partly as punisher. Apart from the few, fleeting, often indirect references to her in the first chapter of *What I Remember*, the image of her mother is missing from Mary's memoirs.

The scanty reference to Ann Judith makes a remarkable contrast with the vivid highlighting of the figure of her German governess:

We owe a great deal to our excellent German governess. She did not just teach us French, German, a little drawing and music, but brought variety into our lives.

Yes, ‘variety’ was just what Ann Judith, with her obsession about deportment, did not provide enough of, or perhaps denied altogether, for her two little girls. With their German governess, alongside the foreign languages, there came, one can be sure, a flood of information about those aspects of life and customs in the fabulous countries of the continent, Germany and France, that appeared in books for girls in those days only stealthily, if at all. And together with news about those countries there came from the nice young Fraulein confidences, conjectures, gossip, perhaps even little complicities in affairs of the heart. Affairs of the heart were certainly not lacking: after only four years in her post at the Paley’s, the governess got married to the wealthiest farmer in the village.

The years from 1859 to 1863 – the years of adolescence and young adulthood, of restlessness and the search for identity – were filled by this very special confidant, the German governess. The psychological value of this “opening to the outside world” emerges vividly from Mary’s remark as an old woman on the governess’ departure from the Paley household: “It was after she left [...] that we began to feel bored”.

And finally, her father. Reading Victorian biographies, autobiographies, diaries and correspondence almost always leaves one with the impression of what a crucial role the father played in the shaping of children, both boys and girls. A role far greater than that of the other members of the family and certainly greater than that of fathers today. Certainly in Mary’s case her father appears, in the process of the formation of her character, to have been the key figure.

Our father – wrote Mary- shared our work (studying) and our play [...]. The evening hours, when my father read aloud, were looked forward to all day and the memory of them has lasted all my life.

The picture outlined by these two passages, despite their bashful concision, is one of a deep, tender attachment. Her father, with his sermonising and travelling, with his parish duties, with his hobbies of photography, chemistry and electricity, is very busy but not ‘distant’, he is in their midst. With all his commitments he finds enough time to read to his little daughters in his fine, cultured preacher’s voice, *The Arabian Nights*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare’s comedies (presumably bowdlerised) and – the greatest favourites – the novels of Walter Scott.

Although these references to their games and to the evening readings aloud are the most obvious and nostalgic evocations of the days of her childhood, the references to the long morning prayers and to religious services are at least as significant. Impressed indelibly on Mary’s memory were the twenty-one richly bound and magnificently printed volumes of the *Horae Homilecticae*, a collection of the sermons of Charles Simeon from which Thomas Paley clearly drew inexhaustible inspiration for his preaching. Even her re-evocation of the Sunday services maintain a tone of nostalgia tempered by a gentle irony. “His sermons – she remembered – were not very suited to a country congregation because they were theological rather than practical”. Now and then, Mary noted, Thomas also drew upon the protestant reformers Latimer and Ridley.

One can imagine little Mary, as she mingled with the small crowd of churchgoers on Sunday, gathering from the comments of her father’s parishioners that his learned sermon had not got through to them or, worse, had left them feeling upset and irritated. My guess would be that Mary’s memoirs were tinged with pride at having a father who was “different”, of course from the peasants and craftsmen of the village, but also from the local aristocracy, from whom Thomas took care to distinguish himself (“he sided with the foxes and against the hounds”). I think that the

rebellious streak in Mary's character that comes out in various ways quite often during her life was nourished by, and perhaps originated from, this profound fellow feeling between them.

There are three episodes – barely sketched in by Mary as usual – in the father-daughter relationship that add further touches to the picture and enable us to move on to some more general reflections.

During the Crimean war the price of sugar rose considerably in England. The Rev. Paley took advantage of this rise in prices to accustom his daughters to controlling their desire for personal gratification, suggesting that they exchange their giving up of sugar in their tea in return for a prize of a half penny per week. Attracted, perhaps, by the greater liquidity of cash, Mary thus lost the taste for sweet tea for the rest of her life. The episode may seem quite trivial but if one remembers how much children love sweet things one cannot fail to discern a very Victorian pedagogical principle: the prompting of desire must be repressed.

That this practice of training in self-control was an integral part of Thomas Paley's way of child-rearing is confirmed by two further episodes in Mary's life.

My sister and I – Mary remembered – were allowed to play with dolls until, one sad day, our father burned them because, he said, we were worshipping them.

From then on dolls were banned from the Paley girls playtime.

Now and then we were invited to an evening party or a dance. But my father, who went with us, had a rule that he would take us home in the trap at 9 o'clock sharp, just when the fun was starting.

Thomas Paley clearly believed in the Victorian teaching that the child should be accustomed by persuasion or discipline to give up the things it most desired until – anticipating future benefits – it was able to do so happily for itself. This is the meaning, I think, of the episodes of the dolls, the sugar and the dances. Behind all these events there certainly lurked the belief – oppressive for everyone concerned, both parents and children, but not without a certain logic – that a child's future was to a great extent in the hand of its parents and its early teachers. To allow it to develop its personality in freedom, i.e. uncontrolled, meant that parents and teachers were shirking their responsibilities.

There was nothing odd about this for Mary: she remembered her father's prohibitions as comprehensible educative aspects of her childhood. The only episode that left her puzzled, and perhaps more than puzzled, when she recalled it later, was the "pointless" censorship that Thomas Paley imposed on the reading matter in the house. We have already mentioned the evening reading and the importance they presumably had in the education of Mary's heart and head. But there is a shadow over this otherwise idyllic little picture: Scott was allowed and Dickens was forbidden. It must be remembered that these were the years when Dickens was a visitor, serialised, to a great many households, arousing floods of tears and cries of indignation from the most sensitive souls throughout Britain. Yet his status as a respectable writer was not yet clearly established, as anyone who has read Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* will know. Mary had to be an adult before she could become acquainted with the work of the literary star of her time: "[O]nly later was I able to read *David Copperfield* and always on the sly". About the reasons for this censorship Mary certainly thought deeply and one can perhaps detect a seed, or a sign, of her detachment from part at least of her father's values. In fact, it has been said that while Scott does not openly preach social paternalism his implicit celebration of the stability and excellence of stable social institutions

conveys a paternalistic view of life to the reader. Dickens on the contrary is instinctively antagonistic to the powers that be and to the complementary doctrines of deference and obedience. Moreover Dickens' town-based humanitarianism does not fit rural paternalism. The episode seems to reveal at least part of the 'values' that Thomas Paley was trying to pass on to his children, values that uphold the paternalistic and hierarchical system of which he, notwithstanding all his modernist impulses, was an integral part. What hurt Mary, however, was not so much the prohibition itself as the fact that her father did not bother to explain it to her. Yet it is distinctly doubtful, I think, whether Thomas, if he had been asked to provide them, would have been able to explain completely the reasons for his differing attitudes to Scott and Dickens.

By the time she was eighteen, after steering a course with difficulty between the standards of her father (authenticity above all!), her mother (mind your deportment!) and her governess (life is beautiful!), Mary felt ready to leave the nest.

Mary's first important rebellion against her father in practice occurred in 1869:

[W]hen I reached the age of eighteen my sister got married and since life in the country village was getting duller and duller, I thought I had better follow her example.

I presume that in fact Mary was not just getting fed up with the monotony of village life, which is another way of announcing that one cannot achieve one's goals, but also with the social stigma of someone about to be labelled a spinster. In those days it was believed – Mary recalled – that if a girl did not marry or at least get engaged by the age of twenty she was not likely to marry at all. It does not seem unreasonable to suppose that an important bearer of this belief was the good Ann Judith.

Mary's response was not long in coming: even though she scarcely knew him it appears, she betrothed herself almost overnight to an officer about to leave for India. Who this bold young fellow might have been is not known but one may easily imagine that he belonged to local society, that society that Thomas could not stand, or that he too, like Mary's brother-in-law, came from Barton on Humber. Knowing that Thomas "did not like and never approved of the engagement" one may well wonder how Mary came to defy her father's authority so openly. It is likely, I think, that Ann Judith had a hand in promoting this encounter. The young man might have been a good match and the fact that he would have to stay far away in India for quite a while was, after all, not just a disadvantage, since, as Mary recalled (and she certainly did!), it was quite common for young couples in the village to get married when the girl was already expecting a child! And sometimes, even later, as is clear from the register of births in the village, which reveals a number of unmarried mothers in that period.

Her first dramatic step towards emancipation was thus taken by Mary when she defied her father on a terrain of decisive importance: the choice of her husband. But this was not all: whilst the young man was in India serving the Empire, Mary did not stay locked in the rectory sewing her trousseau and keeping a diary, but rather – having heard about the Higher Examinations for Women – got busy on her studies. She brought in her German governess, now a married woman with children of her own, to help revise her French and German, and Thomas Paley for maths and theology. From which can be seen that Mary had already by then got pretty clear ideas on what she wanted to do with her life. After a while the young man came home, but was apparently not much taken by the idea of an educated wife. And Mary does not hesitate ("it seemed clear that we had few interests in common") and promptly gets rid of him. Between settling down respectably and pursuing her own plans Mary has no doubts at all. What is remarkable in this break with her past is the implicit claim that between husband and wife (and in this particular case between a country girl

– despite her being the great granddaughter of William Paley – and an officer who has seen the world) there ought to be common interests. Could the story of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor have had an effect even in the depths of the countryside? What is clear, anyway, is that the girl is breaking away from both Thomas and Ann Judith.

Within a short time Mary Paley thus uses her mother's support to defy her father and then her father's to defy her mother. And finally she sets the seal on the whole operation by leaving the village and going to London, with her father in train, to take the Higher Examinations for Women and to win a life all for herself at last.

To conclude: the "Thomas-Judith Ann-German governess" learning curve meeting (and clashing!) with certain original traits in Mary produced a fairly mature and balanced twenty-year-old woman, self-confident and with a pretty clear idea of where she wanted her life to go. Mary was certainly thinking of herself, locked in the golden cage of Ufford, when she wrote:

It is hard to realise how girls suffered then, oppressed by an excess of energy with no outlet.

On this sad note Mary Paley closed her autobiographical sketch of a life apparently full of success. The psychological proof of this bitterness is expressed in these words: "I did not realize the beauty of the place until I visited it years later"