

THE PARISH VISITOR AND THE “GERMAN FOUNDLING”

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Abstract

At the centre of this paper is the story of Mary Wilson and an abandoned child. Mary Wilson was the eldest sister of Elizabeth Wilson, lady's maid to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. From the early 1870s, Mary was a parish visitor in Lancaster. I discovered the story while researching the lives of the sisters of Elizabeth Wilson. The reports of the “German Foundling” were an unexpected find.

Introduction

Elizabeth Wilson was lady's maid to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (who called her ‘Wilson’), nursemaid to Elizabeth and Robert Browning's son Pen (who called her ‘Lily’), and housekeeper and carer to the volatile poet Walter Savage Landor in his final years. Research into the lives of her sisters led to the discovery that three of her unmarried sisters spent the last years of their lives in Lancaster, and were buried at Holy Trinity Church, Bolton-le-Sands. In particular, I came across intriguing newspaper articles headed ‘The German Foundling’ involving her sister Mary.

Elizabeth Wilson accompanied the Brownings to Italy in September 1846 where she spent most of the rest of her life. She died in 1902 in Asolo – the setting for Robert Browning's early work ‘Pippa Passes’ and his last work ‘Asolando’. Elizabeth Wilson's life is well documented in the letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (available online at www.browningscorrespondence.com). After Elizabeth Barrett Browning's death in 1861, letters from Robert Browning in London to his friend Isa Blagden in Florence provide evidence of Elizabeth Wilson's life until Isa's death in 1873 (McAleer 1951), and there are occasional surviving letters after that date which refer to Elizabeth. There are occasional references to her sisters (though only Frances and Ellen by name) in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's letters to her sister Arabella, and unkind references to them in Robert Browning's letters to Isa. The story of the Brownings' marriage cannot be told without including ‘Wilson’ but Elizabeth's life story, with some details of her family, is told more fully in Scott Lewis's ‘Elizabeth Wilson: A Biographical Sketch’ (1996) and in Margaret Forster's novel, *Lady's Maid* (1990) which blends fact and fiction to tell Elizabeth's story up to the death of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Forster invents letters between Elizabeth and her sisters, invents a marriage for the youngest sister Ellen, and invents two other sisters. It was this novel which led me to search for evidence of the lives of Elizabeth Wilson's sisters. Their lives must have been representative of many lower-middle-class, single women who needed to support themselves, but who lived in a world where marriage and children were seen as the proper sphere for a woman, and opportunities for education and employment were limited. ‘What shall we do with our old maids?’ asked Frances Power Cobbe in 1862, observing that 30 per cent of women in England never married.

Evidence of the lives of the sisters has been gleaned from baptismal and burial registers, census records, local directories, newspapers, death certificates and the transcription of the memorial stone in Holy Trinity churchyard, Bolton-le-Sands. There are no surviving letters from or to the sisters, although a few lines of one letter, to Elizabeth from a sister who addresses her as ‘dear Bessie’, were quoted in a letter from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Arabella (4 January 1859).

After 1846, Elizabeth Wilson returned four times to her sisters, who were living in East Retford, Nottinghamshire: for short holidays in 1851 and 1852, and for the birth of her first son, Oreste, in 1855 whom she left with her sisters so she could return to the Brownings and to her husband, Ferdinando Romagnoli, who was cook to the Brownings. Elizabeth Barrett Browning would not take her back as lady's maid and nursemaid *with* the child. Elizabeth did not see her son again for six years and Oreste did not meet his brother Pilade, born in 1857 in Florence, until 1862.

Elizabeth's final visit to England was in 1866 when she attempted to set up as a landlady in Scarborough, using a bequest from the Landor family in England in gratitude for her care of Walter Savage Landor in Florence during the last years of his life. However, she returned penniless to Florence in 1867. Robert Browning's letters to Isa Blagden are the only evidence of the failed attempt in Scarborough and the return to Florence. Browning blamed Elizabeth's sisters for encouraging her to spend all her money on the enterprise in Scarborough, for encouraging her to return to Florence and for refusing to take her into their dressmaking business. Letters were exchanged between Browning and one of the sisters – which one is not known but it seems she was bold enough to speak her mind to the eminent poet and offence was taken on both sides. We have only Browning's side of the story (McAleer 1951, 260–3, 321–3).

Elizabeth Wilson's sisters

Mary Wilson, born in 1812, was the eldest of the six daughters of Edward and Mary Wilson. The sisters, Mary, Jane, Elizabeth, Frances, Anna Ursula, and Ellen, and their two brothers, James and Edward, were born in Rothbury, Northumberland between 1810 and 1828 where their father was a merchant and farmer. The family left Rothbury in 1840 but it is likely they stayed in the north-east until moving to East Retford, Nottinghamshire where Edward worked for the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway as a coal agent from 1851 to 1857.

All the daughters, except Mary, went into service or dressmaking. Mary was a school teacher. These were the limited options for unmarried women of the lower middle class who needed to earn a living, though as the nineteenth century progressed more options became available. In the 1851 census, Mary is a national schoolteacher in Chatton, Northumberland, but by 1861 she had moved to Nottinghamshire and was living in the school house in the village of Ranby close to East Retford. In the 1861 census, her father, widowed in 1853, and her sisters Jane and Anna were in East Retford, along with Elizabeth Wilson's five-year-old son, Oreste. Their father died in 1865. Jane and Anna, well and respectably established in East Retford with a dressmaking business and a Berlin wool repository, stayed in East Retford until the early 1880s, their younger sister Ellen with them in 1871 and 1881. Also with them in 1871 is Oreste, who had perhaps stayed behind with his aunts in his old home when his mother returned to Italy in 1867, but he had re-joined his family in Florence by 1873.

Mary Wilson: Parish Visitor

Mary did not stay in Nottinghamshire. She was in Cheetham, Manchester in 1871, and no longer a schoolteacher but a parish visitor. The work of a parish visitor included calling at houses to assess needs and circumstances, encouraging thrift and good household management, encouraging parents to send their children to school, and encouraging church attendance. A parish visitor's work was a blend of evangelical and social work. The parish visitor (other titles included mission sister and bible woman) worked under the supervision of the vicar of the parish or one of the philanthropic agencies, notably Ellen Ranyard's London-based Bible Women, and Caroline Talbot's Parochial Mission Women, which were springing up in the second half of the nineteenth century as both Church and society realised the need for such help. 'Ladies' had always involved themselves in unpaid philanthropic work but now there was an opportunity for women who needed to earn a living to offer their services in *paid* philanthropic work (Heeney 1988, 46ff). Mary, a single woman with no independent means, had to support herself, and philanthropic workers were desperately needed in the ever-growing industrial towns where many families struggled in appalling conditions. Mary was not without family support in Manchester. Her sister Frances who had been in service in London where she had married John Parnell, a draper, was now living in Gorton with her family.

Soon after the 1871 census Mary moved further north to Lancaster where she became parish visitor to St Mary's Church (the Priory Church) with a salary of £54 a year. In his annual letter (*Lancaster Guardian* 19 May 1877, 7) the vicar of St Mary's Church, John Allen, refers to the work of St

Mary's "invaluable parish visitor whose visits are many more than twenty per week, and generally much more helpful than the conventional 'shilling' that used to be considered the only possible way of relieving the wants of the poor in their homes". Later in the letter she is named as Miss Wilson.

The "German Foundling"

Mary lodged with the Coke family at 7 St Mary's Gate, close to Lancaster Castle and St Mary's Church. Mrs Mary Ann Coke was a widow with four children, the two older ones with the surname Ellithorn. On 10 December 1874 an infant came unexpectedly into all their lives. A German couple, who gave their names as Leopold and Sophia Behrens, were travelling on the Liverpool to Glasgow train when Sophia went into labour. At Lancaster Castle Station she was carried from the train to the Ladies' Waiting Room where she gave birth to a daughter. Mother and child were taken to the house of Mrs Coke close by, where they stayed for a month. Mary Wilson "the kindly home missionary attached to the Parish Church" (*Lancaster Guardian* 26 June 1880, 5) arranged for the child to be baptized at St Mary's Church on Christmas Day. Mrs Coke's eldest daughter Ella and her prospective son-in-law, Joseph Ward, stood as godparents and Mary Wilson as the second godmother. The child was named Mary Ella (sometimes referred to as Mary Ellen). The occupation of the child's father, Leopold, is given as baker in the baptismal register. Early in the New Year, mother and baby continued their journey to Glasgow and the Cokes and Mary bid them farewell. In March, mother and child returned. Sophia said she needed to go to Liverpool on business and asked Ella to look after her daughter until she returned, saying she would be back the next day. But she did not return the next day or the day after. When several days had passed, a letter was sent to Leopold Behrens at the address they had been given but it was returned "unknown". The parents could not be traced and did not return. Mary Ella was handed over to the Lancaster Workhouse and there she stayed (*Preston Herald* 24 March 1875, 4).

The workhouse baby thrived and in December 1878 "Miss Wilson, Parish Visitor of Lancaster and Mr Mashiter of Caton, Farmer, respectively" applied for custody of Mary Behrens who was now four years old (Minutes of the Board of Guardians, 21 December 1878). Both Mary Wilson and Mr Mashiter were asked to attend the next meeting of the Board of Guardians and were questioned at that meeting "to ascertain whether the provision they proposed to make for the child was suitable" (Minutes of the Board of Guardians 28 December 1878). At the Board of Guardians' meeting on 11 January 1879 it was resolved that Mary Behrens should be allowed to live with her Godmother, Mary Wilson, now living at New Road, Lancaster, on condition that the child would not live outside the Lancaster Union area and that she should not be "consigned to the care of any other person without the consent of the Guardians". There is no reference to Mr Mashiter's application in the minutes of this meeting, but it seems that one reason for the rejection of his application would have been because Caton was in the Lunesdale Union. Though permission was granted, nothing happened. At first this was because the child had abscesses and it was thought best that she should be in good health before she left the workhouse (*Lancaster Gazette* 19 June 1880, 8). Mary made a further application which was discussed at the Board of Guardian's meeting on 3 July 1880 and reported in the *Lancaster Gazette* (10 July 1880, 6) but this time it was an application for the child to be sent to an orphanage in London. Mary must have been persuaded, perhaps by the ladies of the Church or by her sisters in East Retford, that caring for the child herself was not in the child's best interests. Mary was already in her sixties. The new application had been instigated by Mrs Austin and other Church ladies but it was Mary Wilson who wrote the letter to the Board of Guardians.

"4 New-road
June

Gentlemen,

As Godmother to the child named Mary Ellen Behren who is at present an inmate of the workhouse, I beg leave to withdraw her in order that she may be sent to an orphanage at Kilburn, Mrs Austin

having kindly procured a promise of admission for her. In that institution she will be thoroughly well cared for, and I therefore hope you will agree to my request –

I remain, gentlemen, yours
M Wilson, Parish Visitor”

The Orphanage of Mercy at Kilburn had been opened in 1875 for girls who had lost both parents and who had no other relatives who could support them. It was part of the Church Extension Association, founded in 1864 by Emily Harriet Elizabeth Ayckbowm to improve the accessibility of the Anglican Church to the poor and those of limited education.

Mrs Coke had offered to care for the child rather than sending her to London but this seems to have gone unheeded, perhaps because she wanted some financial assistance from the Board of Guardians. Some of the Guardians felt they had not been given enough information about the Orphanage, and a comment was made that for the godmother, Miss Wilson, to wish to send her godchild a couple of hundred miles away seemed not the usual way of showing affection. The application was rejected. Mr Ball seemed determined to keep the child at the workhouse. The *Lancaster Gazette* noted (10 July 1880, 4): “Mr Ball seems to be of the opinion that the workhouse is a most desirable place for bringing up a friendless child, and one to be preferred to an institution specially established by English ladies for destitute children. We altogether disagree with him.”

On 24 July 1880 a letter appeared in the *Lancaster Guardian* (p.4) from J S Ward who, though he does not acknowledge this in his letter, must be Joseph Ward, godfather to Mary Ella and now husband of Mrs Coke’s daughter Ella, so familiar does he appear to be with the Cokes’ part in the story. He writes in defence of Mrs Coke and Ella to correct what he sees as inaccuracies in a letter written by the Curate at St Mary’s Church, Rev. C. H. Joberns, in support of Miss Wilson. Mr Ward’s letter suggests some animosity between the Cokes and Miss Wilson. Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate Rev. Joberns’ letter.

In August another motherless child needed comfort from Mary. A terrible train disaster had happened at Wennington, some fifteen miles from Lancaster. The train from Leeds to Morecambe had come off the rails leaving passengers dead and injured. Twelve-year-old Maud Shepherd fractured both her legs and was taken to Lancaster Infirmary along with the other injured passengers, and it was Mary who broke the news to her a few days later that her stepmother had been killed in the accident. Maud had guessed this as her stepmother had not come to her aid when she was lying injured in the train. The child was reported to bear her misfortunes remarkably well although she had already in her young life lost a mother and a stepmother. Unlike Mary Ella, she was not alone in the world, having a father and brothers and sisters at home in Yorkshire, though she would not be able to return to them until October (*Manchester Courier & Lancashire General Advertiser* 16 Aug 1880, 6)

At the Board of Guardians’ meeting on 4 September 1880, Mr Gregson, one of the Guardians, reopened the discussion relating to sending Mary Ella to Kilburn, hoping that the Guardians would reverse their decision. He emphasised Mrs Austin’s part in the application. Mrs Austin must surely be Fanny Austin, daughter of a local surgeon and wife of the prominent architect Hubert Austin, and of much higher social status than Mary Wilson. Mr Gregson provided very full details of the Orphanage, but still there was opposition. Mr Ball felt that it would be far better for the child to stay in the workhouse where “it had a good healthy cheerful home and was well-attended to”. Mr Ball won and the decision remained by nine votes to five. Mary Ella was then brought into the room to answer some simple questions – “a bright, healthy little girl, of rather prepossessing appearance” (*Lancaster Gazette* 11 Sept 1880, 6).

The Minutes of the Board of Guardians give none of the details of the discussions that are given in the newspaper reports. The minutes simply record the receipt of the applications and the resolutions to reject them. The newspaper reports suggest uneasiness among some of the Guardians that the Kilburn Orphanage might be run on High Church or ritualistic lines, and further uneasiness regarding the financial stability of the Orphanage, which depended on charitable donations. There seems to have been a desire to keep the child within the Lancaster Union where they would still have oversight of her welfare. Mr Ball certainly seems to have been proud of the workhouse and to have had a paternalistic attitude towards the child who had been nurtured there.

So Mary Ella spent her childhood in the workhouse. By 1891 she was boarding with a family in Clitheroe and working as a cotton weaver. In 1901 she was a housemaid in Blackburn, and in 1911 in service in Easingwold. In 1912, aged thirty-seven and single, she emigrated to New York. She is described on the ship's register as 5ft 2in. tall, with dark hair, grey eyes and a clear complexion.

Final Years

It is not known whether Mary Wilson continued to take an interest in her godchild in the workhouse and after she left. Mary was still in Lancaster in 1891 by when her sister Ellen had joined her. In the early 1880s Mary's sisters, Jane, Anna and Ellen, gave up their dressmaking business and the Berlin wool repository and left East Retford after thirty years, following in Mary's footsteps by becoming parish visitors. Jane moved to Dalston, London, where she died in 1883. On her death certificate she is described as a Bible Mission Woman. Anna and Ellen moved to the north-west. By 1891 Mary and Ellen were living at 19 St Mary's Parade, Lancaster. Mary, now 78 years old, is described in the census as parish church visitor and Ellen as assistant visitor. Anna (Ursula on the census) is a parish visitor living with her sister Frances, now widowed, in Chorlton-on-Medlock. Intriguingly, Anna Ursula is described on her death certificate as a "Lay Reader for the Church of England" – seventy years before women were permitted to be lay readers in the Church of England.



Figure 1 The church, churchyard and graves at Holy Trinity Church, Bolton-le-Sands

Mary, Anna and Ellen appear to have spent their last years together in Bolton-le-Sands, near Lancaster, and were buried at Holy Trinity Church. Anna died in November 1899, Ellen in

November 1900, Mary in October 1904. Their entries on Holy Trinity Church burial registers give the abode for Anna and Ellen as Bolton-le-Sands, and “Paton Park Rd, Southgate, London. Formerly of Bolton le Sands” for Mary. Mary died at the home of her three unmarried nieces, Edward’s daughters, in London but was buried at Holy Trinity Church, Bolton-le-Sands. One of the three nieces, Catherine, had been present at Ellen’s death in Bolton-le-Sands and it seems likely she took Mary back to London with her as Mary was living with her nieces when the 1901 census was taken. It was perhaps the nieces who provided the gravestone for the churchyard at Holy Trinity Church which gives the names and exact dates of birth and death of the three sisters buried there and of their sister Jane.

Unlike her single sisters who seem to have supported themselves and each other successfully throughout their lives, Elizabeth Wilson seems to have been unable to support herself, and her husband seems to have been little help in supporting her. Her life in Florence after her return in 1867 was one of impoverishment. In 1872, Robert Browning, the “impertinent” letter from the sister in 1867 still rankling (McAleer 1951, 374), was prompted by the concerns of others into allowing Elizabeth £10 a year until his death in 1889. Pen Browning returned to Florence in 1891 for the first time since leaving with his father after the death of his mother in 1861, and found his old nurse in a “weak state of body and mind” (Letter from Sarianna Browning to Michael Field 1891). He took her into his household in Venice, and then Asolo where she died in 1902. Her husband Ferdinando had died in 1893, son Oreste had emigrated to Canada in 1887, and younger son Pilade had died in the Military Hospital in Milan in 1879. Pen, almost a son to Elizabeth in the first twelve years of his life, was the closest to a family she had at the end.

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Author Profile

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