

BYRON, THE DESCENDANTS ¹

John Lytton

Many families have their dark secrets, but if one was to shake the family tree of this half of the Lytton family a cascade of apples, both good and bad, might well be the result! I embark upon this issue with some trepidation because there is one thing that is certain and that is that there are many others (and a good few of them among my readers) who have a much better knowledge of my family, and particularly the descendants of George Gordon, 6th Lord Byron, than I possess myself. Nonetheless, here goes: the starting point for any consideration of descendants must of course be Ada, who, it is fair to say, had a more than unusually difficult upbringing. In her formative years in the 1820's and 1830's, her mother's lot cannot have been an easy one, following the acrimonious separation from a husband who was lionised for his poetry, and whose death at Messolonghi captured the popular imagination about philhellenes across Europe and the oppressed natives of Greece. The iron rod of Ada's upbringing, and her constant battle with the "furies" put in place for her guardianship by her mother, must have seemed like a reflection of her own father's troubled upbringing – or would have been so, had it not been for her mother's careful shielding of this darker force in her parentage.

Ada's life is, however, well documented, not least by Benjamin Woolley. Her association with Charles Babbage and their joint work on the Difference Engine has only relatively recently been explored, and her genius in this pioneering field for what we now know as computer science, recognised. There are two areas where my family, at any rate, fondly hold on to her memory: the first, her supposedly infallible method of betting on racehorses, which proved anything but, was a matter of some amusement across the family dining table. The second is a more tangible one, which is the part of the terraces of the former mansion of Ashley Combe (now demolished) near Porlock in Somerset, which is to this day known in family circles as "Philosopher's Walk"; but here it was that Ada and Babbage are reputed to have walked, discussing the mathematical principles laid behind the Difference Engine.

In 1835 Ada married William King, himself something of an engineer with a fascination for tunnels. There are still some tunnels at Ashley Combe, but more significantly those at Horsley Towers in Surrey are characteristic of his handiwork. William substantially remodelled Ashley Combe from what had previously been a hunting lodge perched in the hillside above the Bristol Channel and overlooking Porlock Bay.

Ada and William had three children: Viscount Ockham, who was sent away to sea, hated the experience, deserted, and finally died eking out a miserable existence as a labourer in a north-western shipyard. Ralph, his brother, eventually succeeded William to the Earldom of Lovelace, and it is to Ralph that posterity owes a debt in his collation of Byron's personal correspondence and papers and his attempt to vindicate his grandmother, the grandmother who was responsible for his and his siblings' upbringing to a very large degree. Ralph's private publication of manuscripts was for the first time an attempt to reverse what successions of commentators and biographers had set in place, namely the unchallenged preeminence of Byron as a poet and a man of action' whose marriage breakdown could not have been any other than the fault of the bigoted wife and aggressive in-laws. In doing so Ralph was responsible for my family being seen in some respects as the unquestioning apologists for Lady Byron, a stigma which even to this day has not entirely disappeared!

Ralph married, firstly Fanny Herriot, but although there was a child from that union, the line died out. His second marriage was to Mary Caroline Stuart-Wortley. She long survived Ralph, and wrote a short biography of him, but the union was childless, and with Ralph's death the Lovelace Earldom passed to a cousin and away from my direct family tree. It is therefore necessary to continue the lineage with William and Ada's daughter, Anne Isabella King-Noel.

1: A summary of a talk to the Byron Society at the House of Lords Dinner, January 2000.

Like her brothers, Anne was brought up very largely by her grandmother, and an excellent upbringing it must have been, for Anne grew into an exceptionally talented young lady. She was a highly competent fiddle player, and once owned a Stradivarius, which, known as the "Lady Blunt", still bears her name. She also spoke upwards of seven languages, seven with a very considerable degree of fluency, including written and spoken Arabic. She studied under Ruskin, and at an early age proved to be a highly competent amateur water-colourist, moving on later in life to oil painting as well.

Little wonder then that she caught the eye of the young diplomat, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, whom she married in 1869.

Wilfrid had led a somewhat turbulent existence; variously posted in the British Legations in Argentina, Portugal and then Paris, he had to be extricated from an affair which threatened to cause a scandal with the infamous courtesan, Skittles (otherwise Catherine Walters). It may be of interest to know that I am the godfather to one of the descendants of the same Walters family, though I have not traced the precise link.

The person responsible for getting Blunt out of this fix was none other than Robert Lytton, then in charge of the British legation in Paris. Nor was this the first time they had met, and despite the episode they forged a friendship which was to surpass, at the personal level, their very sharply differing public standpoints.

Wilfrid came from long established Sussex stock, and as a descendant of Samuel Blunt of Springfield Park, Horsham, was of well-known and respected Sussex stock with a pedigree stretching back to the family of Blount and the knights that accompanied William the Conqueror. In Anne, however, he discovered a soul mate, for although very different in upbringing, they had a common love of travelling. In one of their early journeys through Mesopotamia, they developed skills, and the partnership which enabled them to take in and record in great detail an area that was culturally little known other than to merchants and bounty hunters. The Blunts visited Lytton (now Viceroy) in the summer residence at Simla, and it was here that Blunt caused a good deal of offence by his outspoken comments on the lot of the Indian people and the inequities of many aspects of British occupation of that subcontinent. Despite his diplomatic career, an avowed anti-imperialism was to be one of the enduring features of Blunt's life, something in which he was very substantially supported by his wife. In her enthusiastic travelling, linguistic accomplishment, and anti-imperialism, Anne was a wholehearted orientalist in a style which puts Byron, her grandfather, to shame.

A second major journey by Wilfrid and Anne, through the Nefud or Great Red Sand Desert of Northern Arabia, took them to the Palace of Ibn Raschid in Hail, and the mementos my family has include some of the watercolours and sketches that Anne made of that and other journeys.

Between them they founded what subsequently became a world-famous stud of pure-bred Arabian horses. These fabled steeds, renowned through the centuries for their stamina and beauty, must have seemed to the Blunts as mysterious and illusive as the Holy Grail, but Anne Blunt with her knowledge of Arabic and indeed of Farsi, was together, with Wilfrid, able to unravel from local nomadic tribesmen not only where such horses were to be found, but their pedigrees, family groups and distinctive characteristics. All these she recorded in her tiny but meticulous handwriting in a series of stud books which are still to this day the benchmarks of recording horses by their characteristics and bloodlines.

Due no doubt to the constant travelling, and to Blunt's being none too careful to ensure his wife's comfort in such circumstances, Anne had a series of miscarriages; but between them they had one child, Judith. Judith must have had an odd upbringing; her parents would have been frequently away travelling, and even when they weren't she would be in the care of nurses and governesses. Blunt had really craved for a boy, but it was not to be, and as Judith grew up, she became in effect the son that Blunt had never had. Wilfrid and Anne settled at Crabbet, just east of what is now the modern bustling Sussex town of Crawley. The old Elizabethan timber-box framed farmhouse was flattened to make way for a new mansion, which Wilfrid and Anne designed between them in what some would term a Queen Anne style, but almost certainly owing a good deal to the influence of Ruskin. Here they set up home, and it was at Crabbet that the foundations of the Arab Horse Stud, that is still known

by that name, were laid. It was here as well as at Sheikh Obeyd in Egypt that Judith was brought up, very much a tomboy, but no doubt delighting in the sparkling intelligence of her parents and their ever broadening circle of friends and acquaintances.

Blunt certainly would have liked to have been thought of as a latter day Byron, and wrote much romantic poetry. Some of this, such as the translation and putting into verse of the *Moallarkat*, or the *Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia*, was carried out jointly with Anne, who in addition carried continued with her painting of horses and landscapes, and continued to compile her diaries and journals, which now rest in the archives of the British Library.

Frequent visitors and close friends were of course Robert and Edith Lytton, the common ancestor with my kinsman Lord Cobbold. The Lytton family seat was at Knebworth in Hertfordshire, and I am always as delighted at my good fortune in not having inherited that pile, as I am to see the loving care and constant investment that the house and estate still receive at the hands of my cousins.

Judith, by this time a young woman, would in the 1890's have liked to have married Victor, the eldest Lytton boy, but it was not to be, perhaps because there was resistance to the heir to the Lytton title marrying a Catholic, but there may have been other reasons as well. And so it was that Judith ended up marrying Neville, who as a professional painter was perhaps not able to provide her with the sort of status in life that a young woman of her undoubted intelligence, felt was her due.

Not very long after the marriage and the settlement on Judith and Neville of the entire Crabbet Estate, running to several thousand acres, there started to be signs of strain in the family. Blunt, who had never been other than a bit of a ladies' man, was not entirely faithful to his wife. The running of Crabbet, and Judith's and Neville's profligacy, started running them into debt, and Anne had to reach into her own private resources to help them out.

Judith and Neville had three children. Anthony, the eldest, was my father, born in 1900. Anne followed in 1902 and Winifrid in 1903. Their early upbringing at Crabbet was, according to my Aunt Anne, idyllic, but then things started to change. Money problems at Crabbet became more pressing, and with the outbreak of the first war, Neville took up a post in military intelligence and Judith very often did not know where he was or what he was doing. There had already been friction between Judith and her parents, not only over money but also over ownership of the Arabian Stud and its assets. Neither had things run smoothly between Wilfrid and Anne themselves, and it was at the outbreak of war that Anne Blunt left alone for Sheikh Obeyd. She was never to return to England, and died in 1918, having inherited briefly from her brother Ralph the ancient Barony of Wentworth, first granted in 1529 by Henry VIII, and one of the few titles which can also travel in the female line. At this point the rift between Wilfrid and his daughter became total, leaving Blunt in his old age a lonely man who loved the visits from his grandchildren, but who could have no sensible dialogue with his daughter. Wilfrid died in September 1922, and is buried in the woods at Newbuildings Place, the family home where he and Anne had first brought the Arab horses whilst Crabbet was being built. In his last days Blunt was busy working on a history of the Crabbet Estate in Sussex, which included Newbuildings and the other properties that had come through the Blunts at Horsham, and the inheritance that had come to Samuel Blunt, his ancestor by marriage to Sarah Gale. However, in his latter years, Blunt's great apocalyptic poem *The Wind and the Whirlwind*, which foretold the crumbling and decay of the British Empire, must also have seemed something of a reflection on the turbulent break-up of his own family and that of his wife's ancestor whom he had sought to emulate.

My father Anthony, after leaving Downside, went to Sandhurst, much against the wishes of his mother, who wished to have him at her beck and call to run the Estate with her, but, perhaps fortuitously aided and encouraged by Mary Lovelace, who had effectively made him her heir. Anne and Winifred remained much more under their mother's dominion, with the result that Anne never married, and later in life also fell out with her mother to the extent that had Newbuildings Place not fortuitously become available, she would have been rendered homeless. Anne lived at Newbuildings, breeding Arab horses herself, and judging both Arabs and Mountain and Moorland classes in the UK, North America and Australia. Like her grandmother, she had an intricate knowledge of pedigrees and a firm assessment of good and

bad blood lines. She had represented the family at the Byron Centenary, and when I myself first came to live at Newbuildings, I accompanied her to Westminster Abbey for the unveiling of the Memorial Plaque to Byron in Poet's Corner. Anne died in 1979, at which stage Newbuildings, its contents and mementos came to me.

Winifrid had entered into what might be described as an arranged marriage, arranged that is by her mother. The union with Claude Tryon was childless, and Claude, an engineer, died painfully of cancer. For a while Winifred was consumed with grief, but recovered sufficiently to lead an active life as a doting and thoroughly over-generous aunt who drove a Jeep round Exmoor where she lived, and as a driver was deeply mistrusted by my father!

But going back to Anthony: he spent much of the inter-war years serving as an administrator and keeper of the peace in the area around Lake Rudolph in Kenya. During this time he developed an enormous affection for Africans, an interest which remained with him for the rest of his life.

During the 1930's, he also taught economics at Sandhurst, captivated by J.M.Keynes' great work *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was posted to North Africa, but very shortly afterwards was invalided out, having been a passenger in a vehicle involved in a collision with a military truck. Unable on medical grounds to return to active service, he spent the war in administrative tasks which, for somebody with the physique of an athlete who had boxed and run as part of an army athletics team, would have been very trying. He also developed a particular dislike for the Treasury, an organisation he felt was staffed by faceless civil servants following a creed laid down by Mammon himself. Doubtless this was due to the fact that he saw men being sent on active service with insufficient equipment or weapons to do the job they were required to carry out.

Towards the end of the war, he was part of the British Administration, first in Italy, where he was involved in ensuring that Tito's partisans were properly supplied. During this period he first met Clarissa Palmer, and later when they were both moved in their respective units to Vienna, they courted. When the war ended, my father resigned from the army and came to live on Exmoor, where he took up the role of farmer. Reversing the change of family name that had been made by his mother, the person who had been known as the Hon. Anthony Lytton-Milbanke, became simply Anthony Lytton. But then Victor died, and Neville, who had been separated from Judith after the first war, and who had gone to live in France, inherited the Earldom. But regrettably this did not improve the poverty stricken conditions in which Neville and his new wife and young daughter were living. Neville died in 1952, and the Lytton Earldom came to my father, just in time for him and my mother to attend the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

My father had five children in all, and always proclaimed that since marrying my mother, peace had reigned in the family for the first time in many generations. Indeed it was, and still is a close-knit and happy family, and despite the fact that two of my sisters and my brother have never married, there are now five grand-children to add to the five great-great-grandchildren of the poet, a small cadre of ten in all!

Nor is the talent entirely lost; my daughter is a competent musician, playing both the piano and the flute. My sons show an inventiveness and interest in gadgetry that would undoubtedly have pleased their poetic ancestor. Whilst all of my own generation have shown an intense interest in travel, with one also an excellent linguist and two with a technical training. As yet however no poets – but maybe that is yet to come!