



Photo courtesy Stephen Powys Marks taken in 1947 with his Box Brownie camera in front of Theodore's cottage in Mappowder.

From left to right: Theodore, Susan (Theodora), Tamar (Stephen's sister) with Katie Powys behind her, Isobel Powys Marks, Violet and Herbert Marks.

“The Perfect Child” – Theodora Gay Scutt

TUESDAY, 12 JUNE 1934 was a historic day for the Powys clan. John Cowper had returned from America with his partner, Phyllis Playter, who met his siblings in Chaldon for the first time. It was also the first occasion for John and Phyllis to meet Theodore & Violet's adopted niece Susie, twenty-two months old. John wrote in his diary: “we thought little Sue a most beautiful child.”¹ John & Phyllis were living in Rat's Barn and returned to visit Theodore in Beth Car on the 14th and “little Sue showed me her doll & talked to me about her Teddy Bear.”

For the past two years I have visited Theodora Gay Scutt in the West of Ireland nursing home where she now lives. She is a frail 82-year-old, but has a strong memory and loves to talk about childhood in Dorset and her life with the Powys family when she was “little Sue” or “Susie.” It is an honour to meet and converse with someone who was a part of that legendary Powys world. Theodora

¹ Krissdóttir, M. (ed.) *Petrushka & the Dancer: Diaries of John Cowper Powys 1929-1939*, Carcanet, 1995, p.158.

was adopted by Theodore and Violet soon after her birth in 1932 and named Susan Powys. Her biological father was a wayward poet from New Zealand, Count Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk, busy making brushes for the Royal Navy in Wormwood Scrubs. He was serving a six-month sentence for attempting to publish a Rabelaisian poem.

The facts of Susie's birth were concealed for many years. Her biological mother was actually Sally, the wife of Francis Powys, Theodore and Violet's second son. In 1936 Theodore gave an interview to the *Sunday Chronicle* in which he said the death of his son, Dickie, in Kenya "left a great emptiness in our lives."² The intention appears to have been that Susie would help ease the grief of Theodore and Violet. In the same interview Susie is referred to as "the perfect child."

Llewelyn commemorated her arrival in the Powys family circle:

To Susie at her Christening

January 22nd 1933

by Uncle Lulu

Chrisom child
Gentle, mild,
Bring joy
Not annoy
To Violet.

I will be
To thee
Susie
God father,
Though rather
Sea free
Sun free
Lord of Earth
For thee.³

Neither wish would come to pass. Susie developed an intense dislike of her stepmother that does not soften with age. And her "Lord of Earth" died when she was only seven years old.

She narrated her life with the Powys family in her book, *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest*, which describes childhood with Theodore and Violet in East Chaldon and Mappowder. In the 1930s Dorset was a remote rural county where horses were widely used for farming, leisure and transport. Motor cars were few; there was a lot of contact with neighbours and life moved to the rhythm of the seasons. That world ended with the mechanization of agriculture and the enormous social changes after World War Two. Theodora can remember wounded soldiers passing through Weymouth in 1940 coming from Dunkirk.

She was devoted to Theodore ("Daddy") and presents a warm and sympathetic portrait of him in *Cuckoo*. She only came to know him after his stroke when he stopped writing, but remembers many visits from writers—David Garnett, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland ...

² Krissdóttir M., *Descents of Memory*, Overlook/Duckworth, 2007, p.454.

³ *Powys Society Newsletter* 59, p.26.

In her review⁴ of *Cuckoo* Susan Rands suggests that John Cowper used Susie for his depiction of Lovie in *Maiden Castle*. The infant is one of the most sympathetic characters in his fiction and is exactly the same age Susie was when John met her. She has a chapter named in her honour and her innocence is a counterpoint to the complicated adult relationships:

Meanwhile, Lovie, producing from somewhere about her small person the crumpled paper doll, sank back in her seat and began pretending that both she and it were riding to London in a circus-carriage to find the Queen.⁵

Theodora believes firmly that you have to know someone personally to write about him. Her memoir is unique among the many by the Powys clan in that it is written with the joint perception of an insider and outsider, well aware that she is not a Powys, yet she shared their intense inner lives:

And I can remember quite clearly one visit of Uncle Jack's to Mappowder. I didn't like him—this could be because children are on the whole superficial; it could be that Violet made no bones at all of her extreme dislike of him; or because Daddy was always worried and tense when Jack was "in the offing" I thought there was altogether too much of him—he was a big man, but I don't mean that; he seemed to spread out all over the place, like an octopus or some other tentacled creature. He invariably greeted Violet with a passionate embrace and kiss, putting me in mind of a very nasty schoolboy—he knew perfectly well that she didn't like it [...] He had another most unloveable trick on arrival; he would rush out into the kitchen, seize and fill a large jug of water, and go around all the several vases of flowers, declaring loudly that they were thirsty, and overfilling each vase, thereby wetting and staining whatever they were standing on...⁶

The book is especially valuable for its tender portrayal of Theodore in his post-writing phase. Theodora does not like to read Theodore's fiction as she can find so little of the gentleness she remembers as the defining quality of her stepfather. He told John in 1935 that he was content not to write any more, but to dedicate himself to looking after Susie. Of course he did not quite abandon the art of story-telling:

It was while we were walking that Daddy used to tell me stories, which usually were the best antidote to boredom, even in a lively child, that could well be imagined. My favourite hero was Georgie Wormie—he was a little worm boy who lived of course in a worm village and used to get up to no end of adventures. Georgie Wormie began his career as a result of Daddy's habit of picking the worms out of the road and putting them back in the grass and he went on for years—I must have been eleven or older when I finally got fed up with Georgie. Daddy was a marvellous story teller and he hardly ever repeated himself.⁷

Susie went to school as a boarder at Maiden Castle school in Dorchester which later moved north due to the war. She then went to a village school where she was mocked and bullied and also became very ill. As a result Theodore decided to look after her education.

⁴ *Powys Journal* Vol. X1, 2001, p.215-220.

⁵ Powys, J.C., *Maiden Castle*, 1991, Univ. of Wales Press, Cardiff, p.311.

⁶ Scutt, Theodora Gay, *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest*, Brynmill, Norfolk, 2000, p.117.

⁷ *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest*, p.81.

...in those days it was taken for granted that a successful author, the son of a clergyman, was capable of teaching children up to the age of fourteen.⁸

Class consisted of two hours in the morning, but Theodore's methods were erratic.

We read the Scriptures; frankly not for religious reasons, but to find out "what sort of man Christ was".... I had the impression that Christ was the sort of man I would call "a country gentleman,"... highly educated, athletic, kind and generous; feeling very strongly about one or two things and liable to be most furiously angry about them...⁹

For history they read *Tales of a Grandfather* by Sir Walter Scott, but Theodore had problems with teaching arithmetic:

One good thing, which alas, Daddy never knew, came of my lessons in arithmetic; to show how well the abomination could be done without, I became by good luck and obstinate practice, very good at guessing things like distances, weights, and fluid measure. Even figures I can sometimes guess right.

The book abounds in vivid images and insights into Theodore and Violet and into Susie's awareness of herself. As Susie got older Violet let her know that she was not her biological mother, but refused to give any further information. During the war, Francis and Sally came to stay in Mappowder and Susie shared the house unknowingly with her biological mother. Potocki was free, but lived in London where he founded the *Right Review* and proposed an alliance of Germany and Poland against the Soviet Union.

Louis Wilkinson lived nearby and Susie developed a lasting affection for him, especially as Violet disapproved.

Violet was really savagely jealous of him. She was jealous of almost everyone, but where Louis was concerned she rather went over the top... Daddy always brightened up in his company, even laughing aloud; discussing, suggesting, moving more quickly, his hand going, with the tremulous gesture too familiar to us, to his head as if to press back the pain.¹⁰

Louis got lost easily—he was short-sighted and had a poor sense of direction and Theodore would walk him home.

The thing was Louis' incredible short sight, apart from his lack of a sense of direction. It was or could have been a serious handicap, but Louis' humour and great power of mind brushed it aside, and if one had commiserated with him, his answer would almost certainly have been that he could see well enough to tell a pretty girl from a plain one!¹¹

Cuckoo brings the story of her life up to the death of Theodore in 1953. After his death Susie continued to live with Violet and the latter's Aunt Gert. While she was visiting the United States, her cousin Peter Powys Grey revealed the facts of her birth which were confirmed by Louis Wilkinson. Susie met her biological father for the first time in 1960. In the meantime he had declared himself Wladyslaw the Fifth, King of Poland, Hungary and Bohemia etc. etc. etc. and for extra good measure a High Priest of the Sun. He took these claims

⁸ *Cuckoo in the Powys Nest*, p.62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.138.

entirely seriously and was now living in Provence where he struggled to make a living as printer and poet.

Susie invited Potocki to visit her in Dorset where he decided to settle. He became entangled in the complicated relationship with his daughter, Violet and Aunt Gert and a huge menagerie of pets. She documented the saga in *Potocki: A Dorset Worthy?* and marked this new stage in her life by changing her name to Theodora¹² Gay Potocka.

There were in that new house with us a terrible number of cats, maybe two dozen. There were my two Alsatians, Finn and Sally, whom Violet permitted to lie about the house indiscriminately (including on the table), so that I had given up their training in despair, though I hadn't given up loving them or they me. There was a hutch full of guinea-pigs on the landing halfway up the stairs—I like guinea pigs, but not indoors. There was a wild rabbit that Violet had brought up from a baby, in the downstairs loo and just about destroying it—¹³

Potocki decided to rescue Violet and secure an English dwelling for himself at the same time. He would build a bungalow for her if she would give him her existing house as payment.

Violet thought it a grand idea. She had taken a great liking to father and called him “Christopher Robin” because of his habit of saying his prayers aloud. He could do no wrong in her eyes. I knew rather too much about Violet's sudden likes and dislikes to feel at ease, but as I couldn't do anything with either of them, I held my peace.¹⁴

Nothing went according to plan, especially when Potocki's ex-mistress arrived. Relations between Violet and Potocki broke down in 1963 and led to a lasting breach between him and the Powys family which he described in a series of self-published pamphlets, *Dogs' Eggs* (1968-1975).

After his departure Theodora worked on farms in South-East England until she had an unusual encounter.

I was riding my horse on the road and I met another rider. He stopped and told me my horse had a loose shoe. I told him his horse had no shoes at all. He invited me to his place to get my horse shod. So I did. And that is how I met my husband.

Bernard Scutt was thirty years older but the pair were happy travelling around the South of England and dealing in horses. Bernard knew a lot about the natural world: “He was a poacher,” she told me. “He was one of the best—he was never caught.” After his death Theodora found it hard to find work in rural England. She was in her sixties when she came to Ireland, expecting it would be similar to the Dorset of her childhood. She thought she would get a job milking cows. Machinery had taken over in Ireland also, but she found a house and settled with the dogs and horses in rural Leitrim.

For many years she was active in the Powys Society and wrote about her unique perspective on the Powys family; extracts of the *Cuckoo* manuscript were published in the *Powys Review* 9 & 10 (1981-82). She has contributed letters and recollections to many issues of the *Powys Society Newsletter*. One notable contribution was ‘Katie’:

¹² Theodora: gift of the Gods.

¹³ Potocka, Theodora Gay, *Potocki, A Dorset Worthy?*, Typographeum, New Hampshire, 1983, p.8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

Katie was unique. Her character and mine have certain flaws and strengths in common, but Katie was unique. Eccentric, certainly, although I think she wouldn't seem quite so much so today; yet even today the elemental force of her would be recognized and loved or feared. You couldn't be neutral about Katie—except by keeping out of her way.¹⁵

In *Newsletter 28* she wrote a moving appreciation, 'Violet', and attempted an honest analysis of her stepmother:

Her stepfather's house was not one in which the arts were appreciated, also she had no personal experience of a close-knit family, and that alone would have roused her envy and jealousy. She set out to separate her husband from his family, and to some extent succeeded, as T.F. Powys greatly disliked travelling further than he could go on foot, and as most of his brothers and sisters lived beyond this quite considerable range, he only saw them when they came to see him, which might well have been oftener had they not been aware of his wife's hostility. Ridiculously, she very much liked Llewelyn, who was the only one to make no secret of his dislike of her. [...] I tried to love her and I never mistrusted her as she did me. We were the poles apart, I daresay that's why she felt as she did. I fear she had a less than happy life, so I must be more forgiving.¹⁶

A short essay 'Uncle Littleton' in *Newsletter 52* shows how clear her perceptions can be:

I wouldn't consider Uncle Littleton non-eccentric, although his eccentricities were of a gentle and inconspicuous kind; and nobody who knew him personally, however slightly, could possibly call him ordinary.¹⁷

In *Newsletter 54* she wrote 'Marian Powys Grey', a tribute to the lace expert Marian:

I gathered from Peter that she wasn't too sweet-tempered and was in the habit of speaking her mind, but there's nothing wrong with that and she must have had enough to annoy her; she was a woman running a successful business, which even in America in those days women weren't supposed to do, or be capable of doing ...¹⁸

Theodora attended Powys Society conferences and is remembered for bringing her dogs with her. Her preferences in dogs reflect her robust character: the German Shepherd is her favourite—"I like a dog I can see."

Over the years she has assisted scholars researching the Powys family, notably Lawrence Mitchell for his book on Theodore¹⁹ and Stephanie de Montalk for her biography of Potocki²⁰.

She shares the Powys family love of nature and animals and is indifferent to the world of iphones, computers and microchips. While life in the nursing home is comfortable it can be restrictive for someone who loves to be "sea free/sun free." She longs to be at home with her animals, but her frail health does not allow for independent living. Her sense of humour can be a little unsettling, but is not malicious: "I only remember visitors with four legs."

¹⁵ *Powys Society Newsletter 22*, p.41.

¹⁶ *PSN 28*, p.9 & p.14.

¹⁷ *PSN 52*, p.33.

¹⁸ *PSN 54*, p.37.

¹⁹ Mitchell, J. Lawrence, *T.F. Powys, Aspects of a Life*, Brynmill Press, 2005.

²⁰ Montalk (de), Stephanie: *Unquiet World; Count Potocki of Montalk*, Victoria University Press, 2001.

When I visit I can see traces of both fathers—the gentle humour and sharp perception of Theodore and the individualism of Potocki. She likes to keep the present at a distance, loves conversation and prefers to read historical fiction. On my last visit she announced: “When I get out of here I’m going to buy a dog, and a horse.”

Patrick Quigley

Pat Quigley is a writer and lives in Dublin. His latest book *The Polish Irishman: The Life and Times of Count Casimir Markievicz* was published by Liffey Press in 2013. Pat Quigley is fascinated with the sources of the imagination and the influence of the environment on consciousness, both of which are richly explored by John Cowper Powys.