

Powys women

When John Hodgson invited me to give this informal talk, he suggested discussing 'Powys women' and I readily accepted. But I decided to exclude the wives, Margaret, Alyse, Violet, and the other women loved by the brothers, Frances Gregg, Gamel Woolsey. Even Phyllis. Stephen might like to enlighten us one day about his mother, Isobel, a predominant Powys lady. Mary Casey, Lucy's daughter, is also a fascinating personality and should be given the attention she deserves. But today I intend concentrating on the four sisters and their mother.

We have a pretty accurate idea of the personality of each of the brothers, but their sisters seem to form an indistinct group in the background. In his dithyrambic *The Joy of It* Littleton wrote: "Though in tastes and interests no two members of the family were alike, in affection for each other they were bound together by bonds which nothing in this world could ever loosen." The bond was strong indeed, made of the deep affection they bore to each other. But Littleton is right to underline how utterly different they were. When we look at the photographs showing them standing together in front of the vicarage, we can trace the personality of each one, but no definite physical resemblance, especially among the girls. Their different characters are clearly shown in their youthful faces and the way they hold themselves.

Many questions arose in my mind as I considered each of the sisters in turn, and tried to imagine or reconstruct their life: I wondered for instance about their occupations, about the many trivial details and incidents of their everyday life, about their enthusiasms, their sorrows. How extraordinary that these girls who were mostly educated at home and never had any formal education, managed to overcome obvious difficulties, achieve success, write books, manage their independence, live fully. However I have been obliged to make some assumptions, using different sources to do with the social and political life of women at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. I have already drawn a sketch of Gertrude¹, and have also been attracted to Marian's ebullient personality². But what of the two other sisters? Trying to find some facts about them, I was somewhat startled realising how small the space is that the sisters occupy in the letters the brothers exchanged between them, at least the ones I read, from John Cowper or Llewelyn.

But first I would like to turn to their mother. For me she is the archetype of a woman in Victorian times for whom the maximum she could hope for was to be content to become a devoted wife, mother and pillar of the family, whatever her gifts had promised before.

Mary Johnson Powys (1849-1914)

She had been a lively young girl, full of eagerness and curiosity for people and life around her, as her niece Mary Barham Johnson testifies. Another relative described her thus:

Mary is quite delightful. We all compare her to a mountain spring—it is so refreshing to fall in with her. Her conversation flows on so prettily with quaint little sparkles of fun every now and again.³

From her son Littleton⁴ we learn that "she was full of fun and a most entertaining narrator of incidents in the village life. She entered regularly into local social life and was very keen about croquet and archery. She had a deep love of poetry and literature and a voracious appetite for reading. Drawing and painting appealed to her, and when staying with her aunt she had lessons in London and used to go to art galleries and exhibitions. Her sketch books show that she had no small gifts in this direction." She had attended lectures at the Royal Institution, thus showing independence and a taste for culture.

¹ *la lettre powysienne* 6, automne 2003, pp. 34-9

² *The Powys Journal*, vol.17, 2007, pp.10-35

³ Mary Barham Johnson, 'The Powys Mother', *The Powys Review* 8, p.59

⁴ Littleton Powys, *The Powys Family*, privately printed, 1952

In his portrait Littleton noted that

Her love of nature was 'inward and spiritual' (...) Nature meant more to her [than to her husband] and her far-off gaze (...) saw more than the moon, more than the snow-covered fields, more than the wood-clad hill; her soul was, I know it now, in close communion with the spirit of the universe.

Two years after meeting with Charles Francis, they married in 1871, when she was 21. It might have been a personal choice, or her parents' wish. Besides she probably did not wish to remain a spinster like her sisters Dora and Etta. She gave birth to eleven children, the first-born being John Cowper in October 1872. Giving birth at that time was not without danger and at each pregnancy Mary was full of apprehension, she didn't expect to survive. Her fear was not unfounded: until the 1920s and 1930s, the risk of women dying in childbirth was still as high as it had been in the 1850s. The alert and witty young woman disappeared, and slowly emerged a thoughtful and melancholy woman who, worn out by her pregnancies, soon looked older than her age. She was an excellent mother and had a major influence on the children. She gave them lessons, read books to them, English classics, Walter Scott for instance, which would give John Cowper a lasting taste for romance. She allowed them complete freedom, both physically and mentally and let them develop according to their personality. She had two ambitions: that her children should be happy, and that they should love one another.

Llewelyn who loved her so much when he was a child as his letters to her show, was later to describe her as "that strange woman who enjoyed sorrow rather than joy". John held a cult to her, but from a distance. When he knew she was fatally ill, he wrote to Llewelyn that they made too much of the necessity of cheerfulness: "There must be some daughters of darkness and the spirits of the night to represent the other world."⁵ In that same letter, he added: "My feeling for her is strange, (...)—not exactly 'love' or exactly 'pity'—but a curious sort of desperate signalling as of two people from another incarnation being swept apart without having really touched hands!" And when he read her diaries, he exclaimed: "What a pathetically monotonous and uninspiring existence it reveals!" *Autobiography* is dedicated to her, she is present *in absentia*. But he came to worship her and would often evoke her with emotion in his letters to his brothers and sisters:

But in the last resort it is to my ironical May that I finally turn. Aren't we both born in October, and don't we both remember the lined forehead and the great wild eyes under the brown shawl?⁶

There are eighteen years' difference between John Cowper and Lucy, the youngest sister. The four sisters were all born during Victoria's reign and Gertrude was 24 when Edward VII was crowned. Lucy married in 1911, one year after the King died. So their youth was mostly spent during Victorian and Edwardian times. Some important events took place during these years such as the Boer War (1902), the Entente cordiale (1904), the Suffragette movement for franchise (did the sisters vote when finally the vote was given to women over 30 in 1918? I suspect not, as they were neither householders nor married to one, except for Lucy, but she was only 28!) and, of course, the Great War, looming on the horizon. How did the news reach them in Montacute? Did they follow international events? They read the newspapers. But it is somewhat difficult to ascertain how political events affected them.

1914 is the year their mother died, marking the end of an era of happiness for at least two of them, Gertrude who from that time was condemned to stay at home and abandon her hopes of a career as a painter, for duty demanded that she look after her elderly father, and Katie who knew sorrows of her own. Marian had made her escape to New York the previous year, and Lucy was in Hampshire, safely married.

Lucy was the only one of the sisters to get married, and in 1915 a little girl, Mary, was born to her. As for Marian, her son Peter was conceived, defiantly, out of wedlock.

⁵ JCP, *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, I, p. 144

⁶ JCP, in a letter to Marian, 20 January 1916.

If you take a look at the number of children born among the brothers and sisters (I counted ten in all), it seems obvious that no one in the family really wished to emulate the parents in that area. But that was in fact a general phenomenon, for between 1870 and 1939 the national rate of fertility declined from 34 births per 1000 to under 14. However in the case of Gertrude, we cannot but wonder: why didn't she marry? She was beautiful, intelligent, elegant, poised. It might have been her choice to remain single, so as to devote herself to her art. Nobody can imagine Katie, exalted, passionate as she was, being engulfed in motherhood. But again, figures show that in 1891, 44 per cent of all women over 30 had never been married and the figures would decline even more during and after the bloodshed of the First World War.

It is not easy either to know their ideas about religion. Were they in any way influenced by the stand taken in different ways by their turbulent brothers, John Cowper's extravagant cult to many gods, Theodore's desperate feud with God, or Llewelyn's paganism, or like Littleton had they embraced their parents' belief? Apparently Katie reacted strongly against the church which to her mind was associated with the enforced boredom she had felt as a young girl during service. Gertrude and Marian do not give the impression of being particularly religious-minded. As for Lucy who declared to Glen that "Light—sunlight—is a form of blessing", she was all gratefulness for everything she had received in her life, but she also confided how she had early discovered John Cowper's writings and the effect they had had on her whole outlook: "it sets one free!"

They came to Montacute in November 1885 and were to live at the Vicarage thirty-two years. How about the way that big house was managed? In her reminiscences written in 1983 Lucy reminded her readers that during her childhood there was no electricity or gas in the house, only oil lamps and candles. No bathroom or hot water pipes—"so all bath-water was carried to the bedrooms in large cans, and baths were taken by an open fire." There were obviously maids in the house, although seldom mentioned. Only their old nurse Emily Clare is sometimes remembered with affection, as well as at least one of their governesses, Miss Beale. With such a huge family it would have been impossible for the mother to look single-handed after her children and bring them up, see to the organisation of the house, not forgetting her duties as wife of a parson. Littleton mentions a gardener, governesses and maids. Lucy wrote that they had three maids and a nurse until she was three years old. There was of course also a cook, Ellen, and a groom called Montacute who gave Katie riding lessons. Their governess left when Lucy was eight. The two elder girls certainly helped their mother. What would have been their normal duties and occupations? Gertrude and Marian taught in the Sunday school and played the organ if the organist was away. Gertrude was also helping her father in his parochial duties. Both girls seconded their mother and gave lessons to Katie and Lucy, and all children were expected to go and visit the old and sick in the parish. How much money were they given, since they all depended on their father? They certainly lacked nothing and received an allowance for their expenses, "pin money" as it was called. As for their clothes, they were either bought in Yeovil, or made by a seamstress or by themselves.

It must have been a lively and cheerful house, especially during the holidays. Apart from their duties as was expected from the vicar's sons and daughters, they were left to do what they liked and enjoyed huge freedom. Brothers and sisters in their youth shared many interests and games, indoors and outdoors. There would be lawn-tennis, cricket, excursions on their own, long walks, skating in winter, gardening, hiding in the trees when visitors came... Marian was the hostess in the beloved 'Mabelulu' house Bertie had built. John Cowper when at home invented exciting games, which according to Lucy were almost terrifying to the young ones. Indoors, when their mother could not read to them, they took to reading to themselves, played invented games or took part in the plays, usually taken from Shakespeare, John Cowper directed. According to Littleton they were not very sociable, but they would sometimes join the Phelps children at Montacute House on special occasions, and they also met the children of other vicarages all around. There is a recurring theme in John's letters, that of not parting company one from another and that is especially true in the strong love uniting John Cowper and Llewelyn "O if only, if only it had been possible for us to live together always!" he wrote to Llewelyn in 1909 when he heard of

Lulu's consumption. Just as it had also been his dream to live with his younger sister Eleanor, and the same will occur later with Marian. It was also Bertie's dream to live with his siblings, "his fixed idea of a Powys Castle", as JCP puts it. And Katie had dreamed of living with Lucy. We don't know if Gertrude shared this trait.

However, when the young men left home for a public school, and later for university, the discrepancy in the treatment dealt to the children was made clear. The brothers affronted a new world to which the sisters were denied entry. Among well-to-do families the unfairness of treatment concerning the education of their children is a grievance to which Virginia Woolf gave a lot of thought in *Three Guineas*, and even though her nephew Nigel Nicolson boldly asserts that attending university would have killed her creativity, I think the anger she shows is valid. Besides at university, the young men were often more interested by friends, games, social life. Littleton himself recognised: "I was very conscious of the fact that I was wasting much of my time, and was not making the most of the many opportunities of learning offered to me." The fees, ("Arthur's Education Fund", as Virginia Woolf pleasantly called it), were high and it was not unusual in 1900 to spend £2,000 for the education of a boy whereas £20 or 30 covered the entire cost bestowed on the education of his sister. It is obvious the girls were deliberately sacrificed and had to be content with the education a mother or their governess could give them at home. They were in any case deprived of the discoveries and experiments their brothers gathered in the outside world. I would like to underline the fact that Girton College for instance, founded in 1872, was not recognised by the university authorities as part of the university. Newnham College was established in Cambridge in 1880. By 1910 there were just over a thousand women students in both universities, but they had to obtain permission to attend lectures and were not allowed to take degrees until 1921. In 1900 there were only 200 women doctors, but no diplomats, barristers or judges...

The ignorance in which they were kept would induce a lack of confidence in many women, who dreaded their "ignorance", and tried to hide it. Anne J. Clough, the first Principal of Newnham wrote: "I always feel the defects of my education most painfully when I go out."⁷ Hence their apparent indifference to the outside world. To widen their knowledge, all they could do was reading (something which the young Virginia also did, free to use her father's huge library) but many women at the time resented such injustice and inequality, although I must say I never felt such was the case for the Powys sisters, excepting, perhaps, Marian.

The public sphere of education, work and organised recreation was a man's world, whereas the domestic sphere was that of the women. The only way the two worlds could meet was when the brothers brought home their friends. It was considered a fraternal duty to invite school-friends home, because they were supposed to bring eligible young men for the sisters. It was through his friendship with Henry Lyon at Cambridge that John Cowper met his sister Margaret. Louis Wilkinson himself was not immune to the charms of the young Lucy, and for some time was in love with her. Lucy decided to marry a young miller, a friend of her brother Will, met at the time she had come to help him at his farm at Witcombe.

The gap widened between the brothers who went to university and the sisters who stayed at home. I was surprised to find an odd undertone, verging on scorn in the way John sometimes spoke of his sisters. For instance, during that famous summer in 1910 when Lucy and Katie had gone to give a hand to brother Will, John writing to Llewelyn, made fun of them, describing them

singing 20 comic songs, among which we may remark on the pleasant swing of 'Yip-I-addy-I-ay'.

I rejoice in these untrammelled manifestations of the Innate Whore latent in all our sisters! Nay! in all men's sisters!

He may have been bantering, but all the same isn't there a vague antagonism, some misogyny towards his sisters? Obviously the brothers were treated quite differently. For instance, at about the same time he declared to Llewelyn still at Clavadel:

Yes indeed! The happiness of JCP, LCP, ARP (what! do I leave out TFP? his also!) WEP and all the rest of this insane family, who have the grotesque

⁷ Blanche Athena Clough, *Memoir of Anne J. Clough*, 1903, p.60. Quoted in V. Woolf, *Three Guineas*.

singularity of being attached to one another, depends on your getting well.
(mid-August 1910)

In fact, my suspicions about the difference of treatment were proved true later, for unexpectedly I found in Louis Wilkinson a witness. He had indeed noticed this difference, and in *Welsh Ambassadors* he wrote:

Powys solidarity never embraced them [the women of the family] with the same completeness as it embraced their brothers. At Montacute Vicarage I was always conscious of a very real division between the sexes: the sisters were not Powyses in quite the same way as the brothers were, they were not isolated with the same deeply-drawing power from the rest of the human race.(...) That the sisters did not share the intimacy, the union that bound the brothers, I am quite sure.⁸

There can be detected at times in the brothers' writings a marked tendency to viewing women as belonging to an altogether different set of creatures from men. I am thinking of Theodore's rustic wenches or nasty old women, but Llewelyn too suffers from a lack of empathy with women, seeing them essentially as source of pleasure. Even John Cowper, who however has much more finesse and understanding than his brothers when dealing with his sisters as well as his feminine characters, can sometimes be rough. As he once said to Louis at Montacute: "There are times when one feels *petticoated*. Times when you must *get clear*."⁹

Apart from the holidays spent with their parents (Dorset, Devon or Wales), the three elder sisters did a lot of travelling: Switzerland mostly to care for Llewelyn, but also Paris, Florence, Venice for Gertrude. Katie went to Paris with Gertrude, spent a few months in New York and later stayed ten months in Kenya at Will's house. After Norfolk and Cornwall Marian would travel to Belgium, France, Germany, Italy to investigate lace craftsmanship, before settling in New York. She often came to Britain and would later also visit Kenya. Lucy never really travelled much, but she once accompanied Phyllis to Paris and twice went for long periods at Will's in Kenya, the first time in 1949. Their mother had never left Great Britain.

Louis noticed that Powys physical characteristics were less strongly marked in the sisters, and as I already said, no two are alike. There is also a huge difference in character between the composed and secret Gertrude and the exuberant Katie, between the extrovert personality of Marian and the quiet and intellectual demeanour of Lucy.

Gertrude Mary (1877-1952)

The family's centre & mainstay. The artist whose career as a painter was sacrificed for family's sake. She was educated at home by resident governesses. Then she went to the Slade School of Art to study painting, then to Paris at the famous 'Academie de La Grande Chaumière' in Montparnasse which had just then been founded, and went back after Charles Powys's death. As I already said, she seconded her father in his religious duties, helped her mother with the care of the younger ones, and after Mary Powys died would tend her father until his death. John Cowper said he admired her for looking after their father and thought she was "the most noble being who has ever lived"¹⁰. She had her say as head of the family, as for instance when she strongly urged that Llewelyn should remain a few years in Africa for his health. She was anxious about the welfare of her brothers & sisters and would advise them in their difficulties: in the summer of 1921 she lent Llewelyn the money for his passage from England to New York and, more importantly, intervened wisely during the drama Llewelyn, Alyse and Gamel went through in 1929. "She helped with her wonderful sympathy and love each one of us, if ever difficult circumstances arose", said Littleton. She had a tranquil spirit, at least outwardly. But she kept her thoughts to herself and may have been the most secretive of them all. Alyse thought Gertrude had "in ultimate things the most disillusioned mind

⁸ L. Wilkinson, *Welsh Ambassadors*, pp.17-8

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18

¹⁰ JCP, *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, I, p. 171.

of any one in the family” and saw her as a combination of “earth mother” and “Chinese sage” with her “compassionate heart, and her cool wisdom”. Louis seems to have been in awe of her. She impressed him. He noted her dignity, power and gentleness, the deep kindness of her presence, and admired her paintings for the same kind of power and insight.

Rereading the letters John Cowper wrote to Llewelyn, I was somewhat shocked realising how Gertrude was so much taken advantage of by her brothers. When Llewelyn was sent to Clavadel in 1910 John, devastated by sorrow, told him he would ask their father to send her to him, so that Llewelyn would not be alone, she would be near him. He said to Louis “he wants someone to hand things to him and to arrange his pillows”, and to his brother he was even more direct: “You can pack the old girl off (bless her devoted and fierce championship of her brothers!) as soon as you are really well enough to do a bit of tarting.”¹¹ How elegantly these things are said! He acted as though she had no will of her own, as though one could dispose of her at one’s own whim. However there were times when he also worried that once Marian had left, Gertrude would be the only one at home. He wrote: “It is a grievous pity that she should be teased with so many Sunday classes. How she does detest Hezekiah and St Paul’s Journeys and the other stock boredoms!”¹² Littleton had produced a little book on his family in which he had described Gertrude thus: “So busy was her life in the service of others that she was never really free to develop her art to the full.” Shocked by his description she reacted with unusual vigour and asked Alyse “to write something to be left for posterity to set some of his misconceptions right”¹³. Lucy fondly remembered her as “the most valuable and entertaining sister to us all. Always saying unexpected things, and bringing an artist’s touch to everything around. Complete and independent in her own mind, she helped us to be less frightened of life and to value its beauty and its humour.”

After their father’s death in 1923, she came to live in Chydyok which became a meeting place for the family. There Gertrude painted, looked after bees, tended the garden with Katie, planted trees. Her paintings of the landscapes of Dorset and her portraits of the members of the family are proof that she would have become indeed a great painter, had she had the opportunity.

Eleanor (‘Nellie’) (1879-1892)

an attractive but delicate child, “full of romantic and poetic ideas”, she died at 13 of peritonitis but more precisely because of the wrong diagnosis of the doctors who examined her. In 1950 John wrote to Katie stating that he had wanted to live with her, for “she and I were exactly alike in our mental life, our aesthetic or artistic life, our emotional life, our imaginative life, and our erotic life.” Lucy in particular remarked that like Gertrude, Nellie was gifted for drawing and she mentioned a little picture Nellie had drawn of “a fancy dress children’s ball, with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, a picture Jack kept near his couch to the end of his life.” In her paper “On ‘The Ridge’ and the Other”¹⁴ Cicely Hill makes a perceptive comment when she writes that “Wolf and Christie’s intense unspoken brother-and-sister relationship has exactly the quality John Cowper described when speaking of his sister Eleanor”.

Her last moments on earth were tragic and the cruelty of losing a child must have been excruciating for the bereaved mother. Mary Powys would always keep by her a little box with the diaries and letters of her “darling Nellie”. The children were shocked by the sudden death of their sister, and she was always remembered in later years, often mentioned by John Cowper.

Emily Marian (May) (1882-1972)

the most adventurous and daring, a quite indomitable character, as can clearly be seen by the expression of her eyes in the photographs. Alyse compared her to “a fortress”.

¹¹ JCP, *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, I, p. 57-59.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, p.79.

¹³ See *lettre powysienne* n°18

¹⁴ Powys Newsletter 63, pp.27-33.

John Cowper thought that her “well-known mischief” was like his own, the temptation he knew only too well of “teasing everyone”, although probably unconsciously. They were very close and as he wrote to her:

Marian’s the only one I seem really to know & understand *in & out*—... and that’s because we are alike in a certain shameless devilry I suppose!¹⁵

We remember that Mrs Solent in *Wolf Solent* shares many features with Marian. Louis noticed “as John alone of the others does, a Jewish strain, possibly derived from a maternal great-grandmother, whose name was Livius. She shows, in hair and mouth, another strain too, a seemingly negroid one, which is seen in the same way in Willie, but in no other brother or sister.”¹⁶ Like Gertrude, she was also sent to Clavadel in 1910 to help Llewelyn at his sanatorium. But she had early realised that in order to become independent she had to study hard. Hence her long stay with her aunts in Norwich where she attended the Norwich High School. She was the only one among the sisters to learn typewriting and shorthand, and she was fortunate to receive the full support of her aunt Dora in particular. As I already stated in my study of Marian, after learning all she could about lace in England and in many other European countries, she left for the United States, greatly helped in her escape by John. To his surprise, she had “a perfect mania for ‘going into Society’ of every and any kind.”¹⁷ She became one of the most knowledgeable lace specialists. Louis in *Welsh Ambassadors* recognises that there was a mutual “vexing antipathy” between Marian and him, and this shows in his comments on her: “she showed good business qualities in conducting the lace-selling business...” Note the disparaging words “lace-selling business”! Yes indeed, she was practical-minded, lively, eager to live with all her might, and thanks to her skill and integrity became the lace expert whose knowledge would be sought by Museums and US Customs. She had the courage to bring up a child, born illegitimately, with pride and great tenderness, and that must not have been too easy at the time, even in the States. When she was already 76 and crippled by arthritis, she flew to Africa to see Will, then went to visit John and Phyllis in Blaenau Ffestiniog, and finally Katie and Lucy in Dorset, and stopped in Greece on her way back, no mean feat! As her son Peter, her friends and Glen Cavaliero remembered her, she showed a ferocious energy in everything she undertook.

I will now turn to Katie, who this time has totally absorbed my attention and to whom I have devoted a lot of thought. She was the most passionate by far of the sisters, and even of the brothers, a free spirit, and she lived with an extraordinary intensity, like a burning flame. Angela Pitt had given us an inspiring lecture on Katie in the summer of 1991, (published in the 1992 Powys Journal¹⁸.) It is well worth re-reading it if you share my interest in Katie.

Catharine Edith Philippa ('Katie') (1886-1962)

“made one with Nature” (Louis), “with an ardently affectionate nature, an ardent impetuous creature” (Sylvia Townsend Warner). But it was Alyse who described most perceptively her sister-in-law, with tact and sensitivity:

I have wondered who has ever really known her heart where so many turbulent battles have raged, so many bitter disenchantments been brought to terms... someone so delicately balanced, combining so vigorous an egoism with so burning a capacity for love and so great a need for reassurance.

For Glen Cavaliero, she is “a tragic figure, an embodiment of unfulfilment”. As a young girl, she had developed a sense of inferiority with her brothers, owing, says Alyse, to the instability of her nerves and the difficulty she had to concentrate. There was in her a terrible thirst for knowledge, but she did not quite possess the intellectual means to

¹⁵ Letter to Marian, 24 October 1924.

¹⁶ L. Wilkinson, *Welsh Ambassadors*, p.18.

¹⁷ *Letters to his Brother Llewelyn*, I, p.169.

¹⁸ Angela Pitt, ‘The Diaries of Katie Powys’, *The Powys Journal* II, 1992, pp.7-27

understand philosophical complexities. She brought the same passion in her loves and her friendships. Among her brothers the favourite one was Llewelyn whom she adored and she felt very close to Lucy, so much so that in their youth they had shared the dream of later living together on a farm.

While on holiday at Sidmouth in the summer of 1909 with her family when she was 23 she met Stephen Reynolds, a young writer five years older, of left wing sympathies, who lived with his fishermen friends. He willingly discussed literature and politics with Katie, lent her the book he'd published, *A Poor Man's House*, made her feel her opinion mattered. She was much impressed by his status of writer and started to think seriously of writing herself. It was also the beginning of her interest in politics. Her reactions to political events were passionate and radical. The Civil War in Spain, the threat Germany posed from Munich on, were of the greatest interest to her. She remained staunchly left-wing, and supported Russia even after the war, having, she wrote, "awful fights with Alyse over that great country". During the war she shared with John Cowper her reactions and emotion over its different phases and especially over the progress of the Soviet army against the Nazis, as we can see from JCP's replies, who had the honesty to remind her that

I am *not* converted to your Communism but that shouldn't prevent me being excitedly grateful to Russia and thrilled with admiration for the Russians. (20 July 1941)

The passion she immediately felt for the young writer was most unfortunate, for he was a homosexual. Although Stephen Reynolds was friendly, kind and considerate, he kept her at arm's length. Katie finally grasped, not the truth (it could not be told) but that he eluded her, and in a few years' time there were alarming signs, panic fits, which were the beginning of a serious nervous breakdown. Lucy's marriage in 1911 by disrupting her plans, accelerated her illness. In August 1912 she collapsed. First it was on Gertrude and Marian that fell the strain of having to care for her, but she finally had to be sent to a sanatorium in Bristol. She would write a poignant avowal of her plight, a long prose poem, *Phoenix*, extracts of which would later be published in 'The Dial'.

Once she had recovered in 1913, she took up farming, and finally worked in a small dairy in Montacute, near the vicarage, given by her father, where she remained several years, making butter, selling milk. Stephen Reynolds died in 1919 from influenza but would remain the great love of her life. As John Cowper would write to her when Llewelyn died:

But it is your fate and Llewelyn knew it, & so do I, to feel things and to love what you *do* love about *twice as much* as ordinary people!

Her five months spent in New York with Llewelyn and Alyse in 1923, were for her "a great liberating experience" according to Alyse, because she felt for the first time a person in her own right. During her stay Katie took an interest in Gurdjieff, an influential spiritual teacher, what we would later call a "guru", who, at the time, was visiting New York in order to gather money and find patrons for his clinic in France. She persuaded Llewelyn and Alyse to attend one of his conferences, and invited his disciple, the literary critic A.R. Orage¹⁹, to tea at Patchin Place in order to discuss the new cult. (She would even visit Gurdjieff's Institute at Fontainebleau, Le Prieuré, when she went to Paris with Gertrude three years later.)

Coming back from America in April 1924 she moved to Chydyok with Gertrude. Their relationship was not always easy. Sylvia Townsend Warner described her with some amusement to a friend during a visit Katie made to her and Valentine:

while she is here she intends to contradict us, and argue back, because that is a thing she cannot do with her sister Gertrude at home.

Katie would also regularly visit her fishermen friends in Sidmouth where she had rented a cottage just off the front. She would give them cups of tea when they came

¹⁹ Orage remained several years in the United States, as Gurdjieff's representative, and came to see JCP and Phyllis at Hillsdale, in 1930, which elicited a long letter from JCP to him after his visit.

back at night, and join them in their expeditions.

But she was doomed to be attracted to people who could not reciprocate her love. Thus when Valentine Ackland came to live in East Chaldon in 1925, Katie became obsessed by her, longing for her presence, wanting to see her all the time, discuss poetry with her. She was soon utterly miserable when she realised the impossibility of her love for Valentine. Katie found the situation even more unbearable when Sylvia came on the scene, and in her diary she almost raved:

Cursed is my fate. God gave me power to love but I may only cast it upon rocks and barrenness.

There must have been something androgynous in her nature and at the same time deeply empathetic. Here for instance is part of a letter she wrote in Nov. 1939 to Elizabeth Wade, an intimate American friend of Valentine, to console her, for Valentine had come back from New York:

I don't think I know anyone who leaves such a desolation behind when she leaves—I always feel she is like the sea or rather echoes that verse in the Bible, 'Blessed is the - - for he giveth yet he taketh away.' I always feel the sea does that & so does Valentine—yet what ever she may do to us, we still crave for her whether we are left satisfied or unsatisfied in our relationship with her.

It was only in 1931 that Katie was to finally find a satisfactory amorous relationship in the person of a fisherman who lived in Lulworth, Jack Miller, and she would meet him at night on the downs. Katie at last had someone of her own.

I do not repent. He seems to me in my imagination to personify these hills; they have taken the shape of a man to give their love. Oh! How cautious I have to be and lucky for me he realises this. I would have no one know it and particularly Gertrude as I would loath to pain her.

She kept the affair secret, even from John Cowper. When Jack Miller died in 1938, she wrote in her diary: "He satisfied as none has the living want of my womanhood."

There are many other things one would like to say, when evoking Katie: her wild canterings on her horse Josephine, her retreats to Rat's Barn in minimal comfort but with intense rapture, Katie waving her stick exultant, Katie gathering wood on the downs for the fires in Chydyok, Katie almost mad with anger when John Cowper once dared to read T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* with a mocking voice, and Katie reading poetry with "a wild chanting abandon", as Gerard Casey had fondly noticed²⁰.

Apart from her lifelong devotion to the memory of Stephen Reynolds, her most intense love by far was for Walt Whitman, her mythic spouse. I still remember Angela Pitt at the end of her moving lecture on Katie, reading to us some of the annotations Katie had written in her beloved *Leaves of Grass* volume, given by Jack, next to the poems. For instance, next to Whitman's theoretical question "Who wishes to walk with me?", she wrote *I, Katie*, and under the line "Carry me when you go over land or sea", she wrote "*you are always & always with me—*". Her novel *The Blackthorn Winter* as well as her volume of poems, *Driftwood* were both published in 1930. *Blackthorn Winter*, taken up again and again with anguish, describing with such veracity the life of the gypsies as though she had lived with them all her life, shows what an imagination she had. The story is powerful and not easily forgotten. She also wrote a play, other novels and poems, which were never published. It would be fascinating to have a chance of reading another of her novels. They have marvellous titles such as 'The Tragedy of Budvale', 'Idle Days in Summertime' or 'The Path of the Gale'.

Louis was generous enough to recognise that "she has written poetry and poetic prose in which there are at least the seeds of greatness"²¹. According to Alyse, who was herself a writer and a remarkable critic,

Philippa was as highly endowed as any of her famous brothers, but she lacked

²⁰ Gerard Casey, 'Lucy, Katie, Will: a Pattern of Memories', *The Powys Review* 24, p.49.

²¹ Louis Marlow, *Welsh Ambassadors*, pp.20-1

the initial instruction, sustained application and literary craftsmanship to compete in the contemporary world of fiction.²²

In spite of innocence of rhyme and lack of knowledge of poetic rules, at its best it rises into the ranks of greatness. It is original, inspired, surprising in its delicacy, impressive in its depth and nobility of feeling.²³

For Theodore, as well as Phyllis and John Cowper, it was in her poetry far more than in her novels that lay Katie's genius, and when *Driftwood* was published John enthusiastically wrote to her in January 11, 1931:

yes over those things such as bread, honey, milk, branches, rocks, moss, rooks, tumuli, foxes, gates, and so forth—you alone really hit the mark. (...) These Poems represent all that our life (at Montacute & Weymouth) with MCP & CFP as a background culminate in. These are the crest of the wave...

As an homage to her, I would like to echo Angela Pitt who ended her portrait of Katie with two lines taken out of *Leaves of Grass* which "stand as a pointer to the complex woman that she was":

I give you fair warning before you attempt me further
I am not what you supposed, but far different

Lucy Amelia Penny, née Powys (1890-1986)

at the same time delicate and tough, with a will of iron, said Katie. She was remarkably like her mother, according to Louis Wilkinson, "with a pale face, dark hair, large, eloquent eyes, a sensitive and generous mouth."²⁴ Like all the Powys, nature was for her of great import, but she was also an avid reader. "Books and nature were everything to her"²⁵. In 'And I was the youngest...', the little piece she wrote for the Colgate Newsletter²⁶ Lucy mentioned being taught by Marian and Gertrude, adding charmingly that Marian taught well, but "it was lessons with Gertrude that were the happy ones." Her mother read to her *Paradise Lost* and *The Divine Comedy*, and all the novels of Sir Walter Scott before she was ten years old. She also remembered with fondness the hours spent with Katie: "she was the leader and we shared our lives closely. Walking was always important... And we had a horse and dog cart which Katie often borrowed from my Father so that we could drive along the lanes we knew so well"²⁷.

Louis Wilkinson was strongly attracted to her and he wrote about ten letters to her, all very proper, which Lucy kept all her life. In *Swan's Milk*, Louis alluded to the romantic interlude of his hero, "for the only time in his life a chivalrous amonist", "engaged in the most purely romantic experience he ever had in his adult life."

As already mentioned, Lucy and Katie came to Will's farm at Witcombe to give a hand. And there Lucy met her future husband, Hounsell Penny, a young miller from Somerset. John who was visiting at the time praises²⁸ her beauty in lyrical terms:

a great glorious buxom strapping round-armed wench as you could wish. She's got a fine rose colour (...) a maid such as Shakespeare would love—

Hounsell fell deeply in love with the young girl, and it was mutual, for as Lucy once confided to Louise, "love draws out love". So the following year, on 22 April, the wedding of Lucy, aged twenty, with Rowland George Hounsell Penny was celebrated. Littleton however did not approve of the match and did not attend the wedding.

And then she left Montacute to go and live with her husband on the banks of the

²² Alyse Gregory, 'Philippa Powys', *The Powys Review* 20, 1987, p.68.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ L. Wilkinson, *Welsh Ambassadors*, p.19.

²⁵ Littleton Powys, *The Joy of It*.

²⁶ *The Powys Newsletter Six* (Colgate), 1983.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Letters to His Brother Llewelyn*, May 19, 1910

river Test in Hampshire, to the consternation of Katie who noted in her diary

(...) I don't, to speak selfishly, like Lucy to leave me at all. In fact I feel at times that it must be impossible. So all the old plans fall, those which had such promises ahead. It only shows the world again. One can't have all one's wants... marriage before friendship or sisterhood—it's like trying to stop a magnetic power.

Hounsell offered Lucy the peaceful life she yearned for. But in a letter of 30 August 1923 to Katie, John showed concern about her welfare, hinting at a too quiet life:

I do pray all is well with her... I feel anxious about her happiness sometimes—you know? but she has said that she *had* to have a very peaceful life because of her nerves... But perhaps not quite the kind she has got...

In 1938, due to Hounsell's poor health, they moved to Shootash Hill near Romsey, where later Gerard came to visit them, sent by Will, and there met their daughter Mary. When Hounsell Penny died in 1945, John Cowper writing to Katie remarked on Lucy's spirit: "she has I fancy reserves of strength and of power below all her nervous apprehensions & shrinkings that few of us realise." And Glen noted in her "a disciplined austerity" governing her reactions, even when confronting her ailments or Mary's death in January 1980.

In 1950 Lucy decided to come and live in Mappowder near Theodore, and bought a house there. Glen Cavaliero who often visited her at Mappowder wrote that "she was an avid but discriminating reader of fiction, travel-books, philosophy, theology and poetry" and that in Mappowder

she communed with Theodore, shared his responses, accompanied his walks. He and she were probably the most naturally religious of the brothers and sisters. In both of them one recognizes a sounding-out of a spiritual universe inseparable from the material world in which they lived.

She had a remarkable memory, and showed a lively and passionate interest in the people she met. Her teas in the garden were famous as Glen remembers. In his eyes she was the most purely intellectual member of the family, as well as the most naturally religious. He praises "her loving heart and interest in others".

There can be no proper conclusion to this talk, I think. I tried to show that these four sisters were far from being unworthy of their famous brothers. They did not have the same chances at the beginning, nor exactly the same upbringing, but each of the sisters showed they were of the same metal: courageous, intelligent, cultured, and living to the full their lives, in harmony with nature in a true Powysian manner.

Jacqueline Peltier
Dorchester, June 5, 2010

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