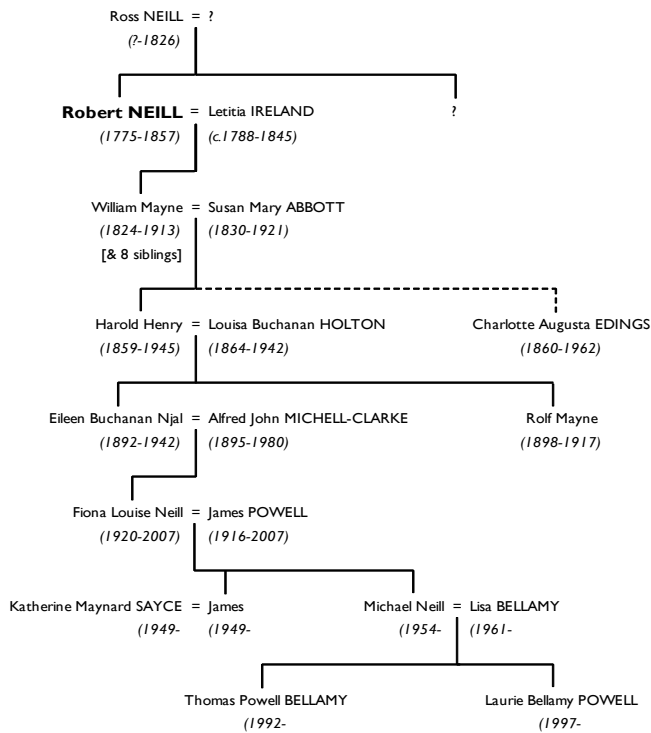


The family of

ROBERT & LETITIA NEILL

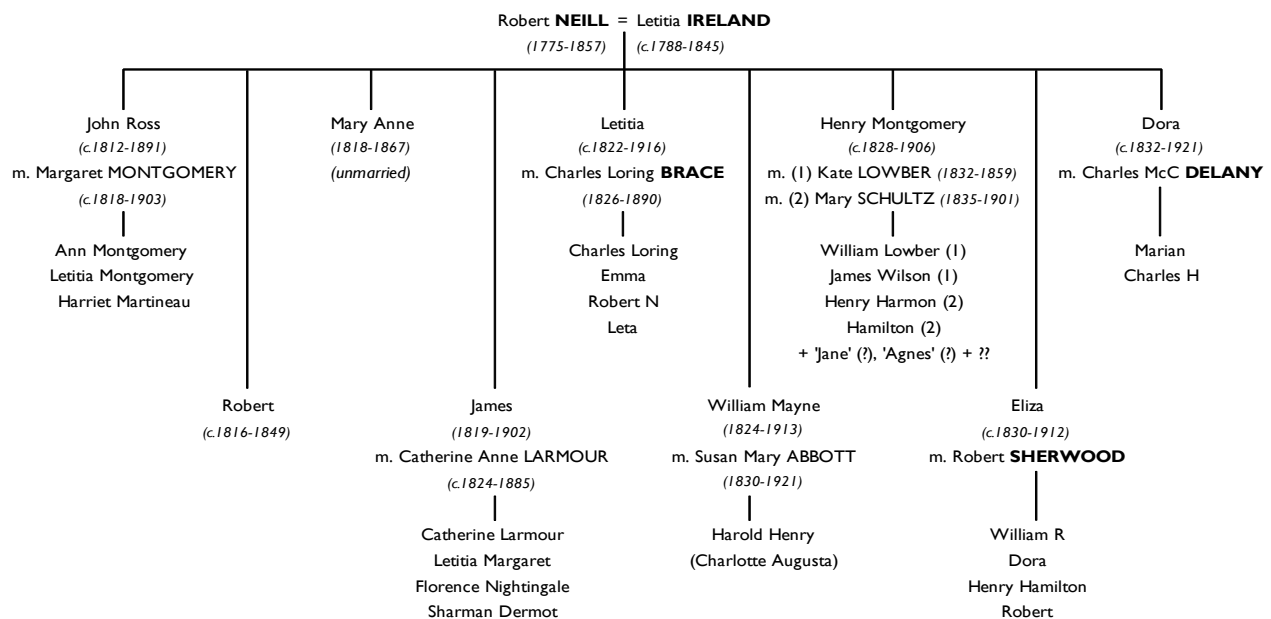
(1775 – 27 January 1857 & c.1788 – 15 July 1845)



Robert Neill was a quintessential 19th century self-made man, head of a large family that spread with distinction across the United Kingdom and the USA. The son of a baker, he trained as a silversmith, started a successful jewellery business and immersed himself in social reform, notably in the anti-slavery movement. So much social reform in the 19th century was driven by two Christian sects: the Quakers and the Unitarians. This family were passionate Unitarians.

Robert and his wife Letitia, née Ireland, had five surviving sons and four daughters. Two sons carried on their father's jewellery business in Belfast. Another, my ancestor, was a cotton merchant, married the daughter of the novelist Thomas Love Peacock and led a cultured life in New York and London.

Another son became the leading cotton crop expert in America. Of the daughters, three married Americans. One of them married the social reformer and pioneer of child adoption, Charles Loring Brace. What I know about the lives of all the members of this remarkable family is recounted here.



A preliminary caveat

It is a perilous undertaking to research the Neills of Belfast. Ireland does not lack for Neills (or O'Neills) and different families are easily confused. To make matters worse, almost all public records for the whole of Ireland were destroyed during the Battle of Dublin in the Irish Civil War in June 1922.

Many documents on the internet confuse two Neill families in Belfast in the early 19th century, probably because documents lodged in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland make the same mistake. Both fathers were named Robert Neill. One (my ancestor) was a jeweller and silversmith. The other was a tobacco merchant. I suspect that the two families were related, but they were not the same.

I have tried to disentangle this knotted skein, helped considerably by family correspondence that establishes William, Mary Anne, James, Letitia, Henry, Eliza and Dora Neill as siblings, and by public sources that establish John Ross and James as siblings, and John Ross, Robert, Letitia and William as the children of Robert Neill the jeweller. As a result, I am now confident that the family tree that appears above is substantially correct, despite what other sources may say.

Robert Neill (1775-1857) and Letitia Ireland (c.1788-1845)

The first reference to Robert is a baptismal record for the Rosemary Street 3rd Presbyterian Church, Belfast. It reads: "29 October 1775 Robert Neill son of Ross Neil Baker".¹ It is presumed that Ross Neil[I] was a baker, not that he was named Baker. Ross Neill was reported¹ as being present at a seat holders meeting of the Belfast 2nd Presbyterian Church on 28 April 1792. Also present were John and Robert Ireland, who may well have been related to Letitia. Ross died in Belfast on 3 March 1826.² I know nothing else about him, but his first name, and those of other family members, suggests that the family may have originated in Scotland, far from unusual in the north of Ireland, then or now.

The next reference to Robert is to his marriage in November 1811: "Married on Tuesday Evening by the Rev Doctor Drummond, Mr Robert Neill to Miss Letitia Ireland, both of this town."³ (William Hamilton Drummond was a leading Irish non-subscribing Presbyterian minister and Unitarian Christian theologian, and also a poet, educationalist and early advocate of animal rights.) So far, I have not been able to discover anything further about Letitia or her family, although her son William visited Ireland relatives in both Germany and Philadelphia.



Dr. Drummond



Robert trained as a silversmith. "He served his apprenticeship with Job Rider at the Shambles (Corn Market), starting business in September 1803 in High Street, next door to the old market-house. He was for some time a partner with Henry L. Gardner, and removed to No. 25 later [in fact, no. 23]."⁴ The firm developed into a successful firm of jewellers, watchmakers and opticians. Under the subsequent management of Robert's son James, and then James's son Sharman, it manufactured several public clocks in the north of Ireland. The present Belfast jewellers, Sharman D Neill Ltd, have no connection with the family, but decided to borrow its name.

Robert and Letitia had nine known surviving children, whose lives are described in this paper. They were: John Ross (born c.1812), Robert (c.1816), Mary Anne (1818), James (1819), Letitia (c.1822), William Mayne (1824), Henry Montgomery (c.1828), Eliza (c.1830) and Dora (c.1832). Some of the gaps (especially between 1812 and 1816) suggest that there may have been other children who did not survive infancy. John Ross's death notice on 9 December 1891⁵ states that "he was married age 80 years and a retired jeweller". If this record is literally true, John Ross would have been born before, or very shortly after, Robert and Letitia were married. It seems more likely that he was born in 1812 and died in his 80th year.

In 1854, Robert resided in Albion Place, Belfast. He died in Holywood in 1857, where he may have been living with his son James. Holywood is about five miles from Belfast, on the Irish Sea, and became a fashionable home for the Belfast middle classes once the railway link had been opened in 1848. Letitia predeceased him by 12 years. A headstone in the Clifton Street Cemetery, Belfast, records the deaths of both of them: "Sacred To the memory of Robert Neill of Belfast died 27th Jan'y 1857 Aged 82 and of his Wife Letitia Neill died 15th July 1845 Aged 57."⁶

DEATHS.
January 26, at Holywood, Mr. Robert Neill, aged 82 years. His remains will be removed, for interment at the New Burying-ground, Belfast, on to-morrow (Wednesday) morning, at nine o'clock.

Robert Neill and political activism

In our disinterested age, where basic freedoms are taken for granted and our political involvement consists in turning up at a polling station once every five years, if we can be bothered at all, it is difficult to appreciate the utterly different attitude of a man like Robert Neill. To him, perhaps recently enfranchised, it was a political necessity and a moral and religious duty to use his time and his influence for the benefit of those who were not enfranchised, not even free.

From 1830 until 1853, his name appears regularly in the columns of the *Belfast News-Letter* as the advocate of radical, progressive causes, to many of which he pledged his own money. This activity appears to have increased following Letitia's death and his impending retirement from business. To give an indication of the breadth and depth of his interests beyond business, here is a summary of just some of the activities in which he was involved, all culled from the *News-Letter*.

Meeting in support of Parliamentary reform (30 November 1830); Belfast Petition for Parliamentary reform (14 October 1831); subscription for the relief of cholera (2 March 1832); meeting of the Belfast Anti-Slavery Committee (28 August 1832); Sunday School Society petition (24 September 1833); meeting of subscribers to the Belfast Cholera Hospital (21 January 1834); subscriber to the Belfast Poor House (10 January 1837); meeting to discuss new Down/Antrim bridge (13 April 1838); opposition to the Irish Registration Bill (28 April 1840); dinner of the Belfast Reform Association (19 March 1841); subscriber to public baths and wash-houses (14 March 1845); supporter of proposal for the opening of ports for the free admission of food, to alleviate Irish potato famine (31 October 1845); public meeting to advance the same cause (4 November 1845); support for a Day Asylum and House of Refuge (5 March 1847); subscription to the Belfast General Relief Fund for Ireland (23 March 1847); meeting to help prevent the progress of fever in Belfast (4 May 1847); support for measures to provide a place of interment for poor persons dying in Belfast (16 July 1847); petition of support for the Crown in opposition to seditious activity in the south of Ireland (11 April 1848); protest against papal aggression (3 January 1851); attendance at the sixth annual committee meeting of the first 'Ragged School' in Belfast (29 April 1853).

Such a subtlety of attitude would become lost as the 19th century grew older and, in the 20th century, it was obliterated altogether. Robert saw himself as an Irishman. He was happy to celebrate *St Patrick's Day*. He believed in a united Ireland. But he believed in its unity under the British crown, not under Irish independence. He believed that because he also believed, not without reason at the time, that an independent Ireland would mean a Roman Catholic theocracy, medieval in its instincts and inimical to a free-thinker like himself.

Of all Robert's activities, it was the fight against slavery that seems to have engaged him the most. Apart from the campaign to end it in the British colonies, he lent his support to the movement in America, principally by acting as host to visiting abolitionist lecturers. "He was a strong anti-slavery man, and numbered amongst his American friends, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry C. Wright, and Frederick Douglass, who had all been his guests."⁸ These three all visited Belfast in October 1846. But the visitor who was to have the greatest impact on Robert Neill and his family was Charles Loring Brace, of whom more later, and it is to Brace that we owe the only known remarks on Robert's wife, Letitia:

"You must remember," he writes to one of his sons, "that you get from the Neill women a disinterestedness beyond compare, sincerity, and a wonderful devotion to ideal things, such as friendship, religion, music, art, poetry, and the like, besides sweetness, patience, and love. The best has all come from your grandmother (Neill) [Letitia]. The Neill women are unselfish in the highest degree usually. You may bless God evermore for your mother; few are like unto her."⁸



William Lloyd Garrison



Henry C Wright



Frederick Douglass

In now describing what is known of the lives of Robert and Letitia's children, it makes more sense to the narrative partially to depart from their order of seniority.

John Ross Neill (c.1812-1891)

John Ross, the eldest child of Robert and Letitia, was one of their less adventurous children. As far as is known, he remained in Ireland all his life. He worked as a jeweller in Belfast, initially with his father, then in partnership with his brother James, and finally on his own account.

He was born, probably, in 1812. From 1817 to 1825, he was a pupil at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, listed as the son of Robert Neill, High Street, Belfast.⁹ This is curious as the RBAI was principally for pupils in their mid-teens or older. However, since it had been founded

Ross Neill and James Neill as Watchmakers, Jewellers, Silversmith, Opticians and Nautical Instrument makers, at 23 High Street and No. 6, Donegall Place, Belfast under the firm and style of Neill Brothers has been this day dissolved by Mutual Consent."¹²

Nothing survives that explains this abrupt turn of events, but a certain amount of confusion seems to have surrounded it. In the same announcement, it was stated that: "All debts due by and to the late firm will be paid and received by the said James Neill who will from this date continue to carry on said business at the above mentioned places on his own account, under the firm of Neill & Company."¹² However, two months later, on 22 February 1864, another announcement states: "The Clearance Sale of Watches, Plate, Jewellery etc etc. is now going on in consequence of the dissolution of partnership of the late firm of Neill Brothers and will shortly be discontinued, after which the establishment, 23, High Street will be carried on by John Ross Neill and that at 8 Donegall Place by James Neill and Company, each on his own account and the interests of the two concerns will be entirely disconnected."¹² And this is what appears to have happened. One can speculate endlessly on the causes and motivations, but no evidence survives.

However, there is a later implication of a falling-out between John Ross and his brother James. In consecutive advertisements in the *Belfast News-Letter* of 13 December 1871, James Neill advertises his own independent shop at 14 Donegall Place, but John Ross advertises himself under the name of Neill, Brothers. He describes himself as "Senior Partner of the above long-established Firm" and informs the public that "he continues the Business in the same central Premises". It sounds as if John Ross is pulling rank and trying to convince people that the two shops are the same business and that he has the main branch. Perhaps James is being conspicuously more successful.

John Ross continued his business in the High Street until 1881, ten years before he died. An announcement on 9 November 1881 stated that: "The property of John Ross Neill, High Street, watchmaker, Goldsmith and Jewellery stock will be sold by auction and the sale will be continued from day to day till all be sold."¹²

Away from his business and family, there is limited reference to John Ross's other interests. He is mentioned as being a Trustee of the Belfast Permanent Building and Investment Society¹⁶ and an agent for the United Kingdom Temperance Institution.¹² He was elected (with two votes!) as an Assessor of St George's Ward, Belfast.¹⁷ On 9 November 1882, he "Attended Lecture on Mesmerism by Dr. Spencer Hall, ... the subject being Seven Years Investigation of Mesmerism and its kindred Phenomena, who cured Harriet Martineau When she had been suffering a most painful disease for many years."¹² Towards the end of his life, he attended meetings of the Unitarian Sunday School Conference, the Ulster Unitarian Christian Association and the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society.¹²

John Ross Neill died on 9 December 1891 at Milecross, Newtownards, four days after the death of his eldest daughter at the same address.⁵ They were buried together in Belfast City Cemetery, in a grave belonging to A M Carlisle. His widow, Margaret, died on 4 May 1903, also in Newtownards, at the age of 85.⁵

Robert Neill (junior) (c.1816-1849)

Robert's is the shortest entry in this list of Robert and Letitia's children. All we know about him is the announcement of his death and that he was buried in his parents' grave in Belfast, with this part of the inscription: "and of their Son Robert Neill died at Naples 2nd July 1849 Aged 32."⁶

There is no record of any marriage or children; no record of Robert having any connection with the family business. And no explanation as to why he was in Naples. This was not exactly a family prone to the Grand Tour, or to any ostentatious travelling. Perhaps he had a business, with interests in Naples. Or perhaps his early death there might have been from tuberculosis, which led many people in Britain to seek a milder climate. Illness might also account for his lack of recorded activity.

DEATHS.
On the 2d inst., at Naples, Robert, second son of Mr. Robert Neill, of Belfast.

James Neill (1819-1902)

James, the third son of Robert and Letitia, was born in Belfast on 16 November 1819 and baptised at the 2nd Presbyterian Church on 5 December.¹ He may have started his career as a jeweller as early as 15, because the Belfast Street Directory for 1835 shows a James Neill, jeweller, at 20 Crown Entry – perhaps a studio. It seems that he then worked for several years in Londonderry. That was the address given when he married in 1846. The Londonderry street directories show a firm of Neills & Minniece, watchmakers, jewellers and opticians, in Shipquay Street. "Neills" would suggest more than one of them. Perhaps the other was John Ross, and perhaps they both worked in Londonderry until soon before their father's retirement in 1849.

JAMES NEILL & CO.,
GOLDSMITHS,
WATCHMAKERS, SILVERSMITHS, AND
OPTICIANS,
14, DONEGALL PLACE,
(off the late Firm of Robert Neill & Sons),
Established 1805.

HAVE ADDED LARGELY TO THEIR STOCK FOR THE PRESENT SEASON.

In the Jewellery Department they would direct attention to their Stock, consisting of
EMERALD, BRILLIANT, EMBROID, and NECKLET, set with Gems of the Finest Water and Patent Colour.

FINE GOLD SETS IN DIAMONDS,	} From £20 to £500.
SETS IN DIAMOND & PEARLS,	
SETS IN EMERALD,	
SETS IN CARNEIOL AND PEARLS,	
SETS IN AGATA MARINEA,	
SETS OF EMERALD & PEARLS,	
SETS WITHOUT GEMS,	
SETS OF EMERALD AND PEARLS,	

Also, HALF-SETS in the above and all the leading styles, and a general Stock of FINE GOLD JEWELLERY, at prices suitable to all classes of customers.

Their Stock of WATCHES, including the "KEYSTONE," to which they have devoted much care, is most extensive.

They also direct attention to their splendid Stock of SILVER PLATE, suitable for

PRESENTATION.
ELECTRO-PLATE OF FINEST QUALITY.

JAMES NEILL & CO., 14, DONEGALL PLACE.
1854

James's life as a retail jeweller from then until 1863 is recounted under the entry for his older brother, John Ross Neill. After their partnership was dissolved, James continued the business on his own account at 6-8 and later 14 Donegall Place, Belfast. "On Saturday, New Years Day [1870], the employes [*s/c*] of the establishment of Messrs. James Neill & Co, Jeweller, Donegall Place were entertained at dinner in Thompson's Hotel by Mr. J. Neill, who, with his son Mr. Lamour [*s/c*] Neill was present. The chair was ably chaired by Mr. Neill's manager, Mr. Lee; and the vice chair by Mr. Adams. The dinner had also reference to recent extensive alterations. The proceedings were of a very gratifying character."¹²

By January 1884, aged 64, James was preparing for retirement. "Respecting the advertisements which have recently appeared in these columns as to the stock of Messrs. James Neill and Son, Jewellers Donegall Place, we beg to say there are some high class class, both in jewelry and plate, still remaining unsold, which must be disposed of previous to offering the remainder of the general stock in one lot, inspection of which is invited by the nobility and gentry of Belfast and District."¹²

On 28 May 1884, James does retire. "I beg to intimate to my friends and the public I have now retired from the Watch, Jewelry Optical Business, with which I have so long been connected in Belfast For the kind patronage which has been extended to the late firm of James Neill & Son, I beg to express my most sincere and grateful thanks. My son Mr. S. D. Neill, having received very gratifying encouragement from many of the supporters of the late firm, to commence business on his own account, has decided on



doing so, and for this purpose has taken suitable premises on Donegall Place. I feel sure that their confidence in him will not be mis-placed and that he will prove worthy of a share of public patronage, James Neill."¹² (Copious further information on the progress of the business under Sharman Dermot Neill's management is given in the same source.)

However, it is not James's business career that is of primary interest to me, nor even James himself, but rather his wife Kate. Because Kate appears to have been the catalyst for my great-great-grandfather William meeting his wife Susan.

James married Catherine Ann Larmour of Bonny Glen, Donegal, on 15 December 1846. "On the 15th inst., at Inver Church, MR. JAMES NEILL, of Londonderry, to CATHERINE ANNE, second daughter of ROBERT LARMOUR, ESQ., Bonny Glen, Donegal."¹⁸ Bonny Glen was an estate in the Inver parish. As far as I can establish, the main house was owned by a Murray Babington at that time, so possibly the Larmours occupied another house on the estate. I do not yet know anything else about the Larmour family, other than that Kate had an Aunt Ursula, a relative called Ellen and another relative (possibly a brother) who died in 1859.¹⁹

It is strange that Kate and Susan came to meet in the first place. Susan was the younger by about five years. At the time of Kate's marriage in 1846, Susan was 16 and had no known connection to Ireland. After the wedding, married to a jeweller in Belfast, it is hard to see Kate spending much time in England. Yet, by 1859, Kate was Susan's "dearest friend in the world".¹⁹ All the indications are that William met Susan in London in September 1858 upon Kate's introduction, and that Susan was at that time planning to start a new life in Ireland. She had left friends in London "under an impression that you were going to settle down in Belfast."²⁰ The context makes it clear that this remark had nothing to do with William, of whose existence they were unaware. Susan was certainly planning to visit Kate then, and may well have been going to live with her and James in Hollywood.

Two things give tiny clues as to the possible basis of the friendship. On 12 October 1858, William writes to Susan "I shall expect you & Kate to be ready to come then or to follow me a day or two later for London",¹⁹ which suggests that Kate already has connections in London. And several later letters written by William to Susan from New York¹⁹ contain instructions for Susan to tell Kate of meetings he has had with abolitionists and other social reformers, clearly expecting Kate to be interested in more than a casual way. My best guess is that it was some aspect of social reform that brought Kate and Susan together, probably in London, and possibly under the auspices of Mary Meredith.

At any rate, Kate was the only Neill to be a witness to William and Susan's marriage,²¹ and the only one to be a godparent to their son Harold,¹⁹ despite the fact that she was not a Neill by blood. It was to James and Kate's home in Hollywood that Susan returned from New York in September 1859, to give birth to Harold in November. It was Kate who looked after Susan in those long and difficult months, her husband still in America.

James lived in at least three different houses in Hollywood over the years. Initially, he and Kate were at 107 High Street,¹³ which is probably where Susan stayed with them and where Harold may have been born. By 1878, they were at a house called Oranmore, on Station Road, Craigavad.¹² By 1901, the widower James was at 4 Martello Terrace, Victoria Road,²² although that house may have been owned by his son Sharman, with whom he was then living.

James and Kate had four children: Catherine Larmour, Letitia Margaret, Florence Nightingale and Sharman Dermot. (I believe the reference in the *Belfast News-Letter*, quoted earlier, to another

son called Larmour was an error for Sharman.) Florence died in 1878, aged 13.¹² Catherine (Kate) married Edward Vernon Shawcross on 20 January 1897.¹² The 1901 census shows them living in Swinton, Lancashire, with Edward working as a cotton yarn salesman and Kate as a teacher of singing. By 1911, they were in Bolton, with no children. Sharman carried on his father's trade, but lost both his sons in the First World War.²³ Letitia was living at home in 1901, aged 48 and unmarried.²² If there are any remaining descendants of this line of the Neill family, they will be through Sharman's three daughters. Kate died on 24 April 1885, aged 60. James survived her by 17 years, dying on 22 April 1902, aged 82. They are buried together in the Holywood graveyard, with their daughter Florence.²⁴

Henry Montgomery Neill (c.1828-1906)

Henry was the youngest of the five Neill sons, the most interesting, the most successful, and the first cause and originator of the family emigration to America. For that reason, his life, and the lives of his families, are the subject of two separate articles. In this piece, I will mention only the bare facts.

Henry's early life is entirely undocumented. Not a single Irish mention of him has been found: no birth, baptism or education record; no mentions in newspapers. Given the destruction of most Irish records in 1922, that is not altogether surprising, but at least something has survived on most of his siblings.

The first certain thing known about Henry is that he left for America, probably in 1847, at the age of about 19.²⁵ Apart from regular visits back to Britain, he was to stay there until his death in 1906, although he remained a British citizen until the end. Over those 60 years, he established such a reputation (accompanied by much controversy) that, in its obituary of him, the *New York Times* described him as reputedly "the greatest cotton crop estimate expert in the world".²⁶ In the 1850s, together with his brother William, he established the firm of Neill Brothers & Co in both the UK and the US, one function of which was a monthly bulletin, paid for by subscription, that reported the state of the US cotton market to British merchants and factory owners. After William's return to Britain in 1860, Henry ran the American end of the business and William the British end.

The partnership had to withstand the devastating consequences of the Civil War for the cotton trade – a period that coincided with other devastations in Henry's private life. But, from the nadir of 1865, the business, and Henry's reputation for estimating the size of each year's cotton crop, strengthened over the succeeding decades until, by the 1890s, Henry was the undisputed master of his trade. "Standing amid this late-century whirlwind of commodity speculation and government and private crop forecasts was "resident alien" Henry Neill... Neill, who also worked as a cotton trader, was one of the earliest members of the New York Cotton Exchange and also a member of the cotton exchange in New Orleans, from where he exerted considerable influence on spot and futures markets in New Orleans, New York, and Liverpool. Newspapers hailed Neill as "the greatest cotton crop estimate expert in the world," "the leading statistician of the South," [and] "the accepted authority on cotton".²⁷

NEILL STICKS TO IT.
THE NEW-ORLEANS EXPERT REITER-
ATES HIS FIGURES.

Henry was no stranger to controversy. Just before the Civil War, he was nearly turfed out of Louisiana for his abolitionist sentiments.²⁸ During the Civil War, he had one father-in-law who was

an undercover agent for the Union, and another who was an undercover agent for the Confederacy. Henry himself was arrested by a Union gunboat off Charleston in May 1862, trying to run the blockade.²⁹ Even at the time of his greatest fame, the 1890s, while the *New York Times* extolled his expertise, the Southern press ripped him to shreds.

Henry mostly lived, and was based, in New Orleans, although he spent his early years in America in Mobile, AL. He was married twice: first to Catherine (Kate) Lowber (née Schultz), the adopted daughter of Daniel C and Mary Lowber of New Orleans and, secondly, after her death in 1859, to her cousin Mary Lowber Schultz, of Fishkill, NY. There were two sons from his first marriage (William Lowber and James Wilson) and one surviving son from his second (Henry Harmon). However, he also seems to have had two illegitimate daughters, and possibly other illegitimate children as well.

Henry was killed in a streetcar accident in New Orleans in 1906. His extraordinary life is documented more fully in two other pieces: *The life and families of Henry Montgomery Neill* and *The Neills & the American Civil War*.

William Mayne Neill (1824-1913)

William was my great-great-grandfather, and my reason for wanting to research his family. He wrote copious letters, many of which have survived. Along with records and newspaper reports from Belfast and elsewhere, those letters are my principal source of information for the Neill family. Almost all the letters were written to **William's** wife, Susan. Of the few others, only one exists from before the time he met and married her. After his marriage, he and Susan lived together in New York for nine months, so no letters were written to her in that period. It is only when William is in America later, without Susan, that the flow of letters begins.

Later, I will write a **separate article on William's life after his marriage to Susan Mary Abbott** in 1858, when he was 34. This piece will dwell on his life before then, which was quite eventful enough. Here, I will draw on the surviving letters only in as far as **they reflect on William's siblings**.

It is abundantly clear from the letters, but also from his early life, that William was an unusual man: energetic, passionate, entrepreneurial, principled, emotionally expressive (although perhaps not emotionally self-aware), courageous, impulsive and sometimes sorely lacking in judgment. I think that Susan had a steadying influence on him in due course, and it was much needed.

Give or take a day, William was born on 12 March 1824. Like his brother John Ross (and possibly brothers Robert, James and Henry too, although no records survive), William attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, from August 1832 to 1836,⁹ leaving with a Certificate in Classical Exercises.³⁰ There is no evidence of further education, although it is not impossible.



Royal Belfast Academical Institution

By 1846, when he was 22, William already had his own business. A newspaper advertisement shows him offering Indian corn and meal for sale from premises at 33 Chichester Street, Belfast.³¹ By the following year, he was at 22 Skipper Street, Belfast. Other advertisements show him offering American hams and pork,³² and he is elsewhere described as a "General Merchant". Although this business had no obvious connection with the family jewellery business, it was run under its auspices,

perhaps to give William some financial protection, perhaps to enable him to benefit from its reputation. Either way, it was not long before William hit financial difficulties and – when he did – the family business was conspicuous by its absence from proceedings.

The first trouble came in November 1848, when he appears in a court list, with Francis William Lelland, Edward Atkinson and others seeking damages against him for non-fulfilment of a charter party.³³ (The ‘father’ of William’s future wife, Susan, had a law partnership with an Edward Atkinson. This is probably a coincidence.) The following month, an Alexander Dickson is distancing himself from William: “The subscriber intimates, that, by the completion of certain Contracts, he, on the First day of Oct., 1847, ceased to have any interest in the business carried on in Skipper-street, Belfast, by Messrs. Robert Neill & Sons, and Mr. William Mayne Neill, Importers of Indian corn and General Merchants.”³⁴

Worse was to follow. In December 1851, by now a corn merchant in Liverpool, William was up before the Bankrupt Court in London. “This was the meeting for choice of assignees in the case of William Mayne Neill, merchant, of Liverpool. The bankrupt had been connected in business with Spencer Ashlin, corn-factor, of Eastcheap, also a bankrupt. His debts are stated at £21,924 on his own account, and £28,881 on account of the partnership; the assets in both estates are estimated at about £3,000. Debts to the amount of £2,868 were proved, and Mr. O. T. Williams, of London Street, gentleman, was chosen trade assignee.”³⁵ At today’s values, his combined debts would have been close to £5 million. It would appear that a large part of William’s problems stemmed from his association with Ashlin. At any rate, William’s bankruptcy was annulled in July 1854, when he managed to settle with his creditors and “emerge without a stain on his character”.³⁶

At that time, a combination of circumstances brought about a major change in William’s life. It seems reasonable to presume that continuing business difficulties, culminating in his bankruptcy, had predisposed him anyway to making a fresh start in a fresh place. His younger brother, Henry, was now established in America in the cotton trade, and their sister Eliza was with him. They must have begun, at the instigation of one or other of them, to discuss the prospects for starting a cotton business together. On top of that, in 1850, their sister Letitia had met the young American clergyman and social reformer, Charles Loring Brace. In 1854 they married in Belfast and Letitia left Ireland to live in America.



E L Godkin

Finally, William’s friendship with E L (Edwin) Godkin, the Irish-born American journalist and newspaper editor (later founder of *The Nation* and editor-in-chief of the *New York Evening Post*) may have influenced him. Godkin left Belfast in 1851 to study law in London, where he shared rooms with William in Richmond-upon-Thames for the summer.³⁷ At this point an undischarged bankrupt, it is hard to believe that William did not discuss plans for the future with Edwin, and hard to believe that those plans did not involve America.

BANKRUPT COURT.—LONDON, Dec. 12.

[Before Mr. Commissioner Goulburn.]

In re Neill.

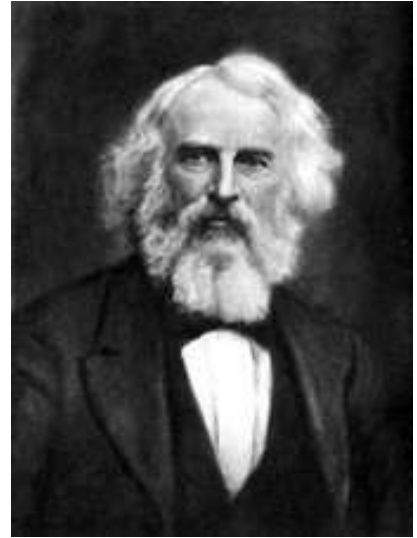
THIS was the meeting for choice of assignees in the case of William Mayne Neill, merchant, of Liverpool. The bankrupt had been connected in business with Spencer Ashlin, corn-factor, of Eastcheap, also a bankrupt. His debts are stated at £21,924 on his own account, and £28,881 on account of the partnership; the assets in both estates are estimated at about £3,000. Debts to the amount of £2,868 were proved, and Mr. O. T. Williams, of London Street, gentleman, was chosen trade assignee.

It would appear that William left for America in 1854, a few months after the annulment of his bankruptcy. Letitia was married to Brace on 21 August of that year. On 27 November, William arrived in New York on board the *SS Baltic*,³⁸ although that was not necessarily his first visit. In 1854, or soon afterwards, he and Henry founded the firm of Neill Brothers & Co, cotton and general commission merchants of New York, Mobile, and New Orleans.

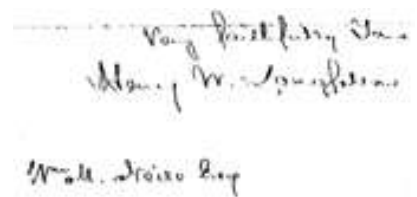


Fred Olmsted

William did not waste time in building a social life in America, as well as in building a business. Most of his early contacts were provided by Charles Loring Brace and his friend Fred Olmsted, the designer of Central Park, New York. Amongst them was the poet Henry Longfellow, who writes to William on 18 January 1855 from Cambridge, Mass.: "I owe you many thanks



for your hospitable invitation, which ... I am sorry to say I cannot accept, as I very rarely go out from home, and never without my **infantry**."¹⁹ It seems likely that the many friends and contacts mentioned in **William's later letters to Susan** came into his life during these four years in New York before meeting her.



By the time he leaves America in late July 1858, on what proves to be a life-changing business trip *cum* holiday to Europe, he has bought a house on 23rd Street, New York, his business seems to be flourishing, and he has a wide circle of friends, most of them involved in either the creative arts or social reform. He has come a long way from the British bankruptcy courts.

But he has not found a wife, and his first love letter to Susan provides an explanation: "I have met in my varied career hosts of delightful girls but year after year disappointed my friends by half loving and half criticising my favourites among them, and not wholly loving any. Thus I have sauntered along – even to the verge of old bachelor-hood till I had begun to fear that an excess of personal vanity, an excess of love of beauty to charm the eye while the reason sought something more solid and almost incompatible with it, or an excess of caution would prevent my ever risking the exchange of my precious self even for the most fascinating whom I could hope to win."¹⁹

The best indication of the state of William's heart on the eve of his meeting Susan comes from a long letter¹⁹ to America, started on 15 September 1858 on a steamer from Stockholm to Stettin. It was written to "my dear friend Mary". This was Mary Schultz, later to be married to his brother Henry, and William's housekeeper in New York. Much of the letter is a travelogue of his visit to Scandinavia, Germany and the Baltic, starting in Bergen in August. The journey seems mainly to have been for pleasure. The letter contains a description (with illustration, right) of the Donati Comet.



Then there are the women he has met ... "I only saw one lady from Bergen to Christiansand and the sight of a petticoat became quite an excitement." In Christiansand, he attends "a dinner



*William Mayne Neill
(unauthenticated)*

party at which alas, while there were over twenty gentlemen, there were only two ladies!". However, he then meets again a "most charming person, a young baroness, whom I had met four years before on the Rhine, and conceived a violent attachment for." The reason why this violent attachment never led to anything is immediately explained: "[It was] kept in check mainly by the fact of her being on her wedding trip." Had he been deterred by this? Not entirely. "I had lost her address & there being two or three barons of the same name in different parts of Sweden I found the chance of discovering her infinitely too small & had about given it up. But now comes an extraordinary piece of luck ..." He meets her again on the canal journey from Gothenburg to Stockholm, and four years have not diminished his ardour. He sees her family in Stockholm and is invited by her father "out to his country place", which sadly time does not permit.

We are not yet finished with the women. "... Thence down to Schleswig to visit the delightful friend I made on the Rigi last year, Madame Macquardsur[?], of whom I have told you previously. She lives at Heidelberg but was visiting at her mother in law in Schleswig. I do think she and the baroness are two of the most lovely women that walk the earth & first heroines of romance. A good writer of such would attempt to describe them to you which I shall not. Alas they are both delicate with a tendency to consumption. I very much fear the Baroness will not last on this earth more than two or three years & indeed her exquisite purity & earnestness fit her better for another sphere ... One or both of them will come to Manchester to visit us if this telegraph allows us to tear our selves away from our dear America."

The letter concludes with an admission that William has not written recently to his sisters, and with a request to Mary to forward "the second third & fourth sheets of this" to them. So why does he not want Mary to forward the first sheet? The only things on it he might want to conceal from his sisters (or from anyone) are the fulsome compliments he pays to Mary herself. "... Thoughts of you, and pleasant grateful sweet thoughts they are, are present with me in these distant parts ..." The letter is signed: "Your own W.M.Neill."

One mystery is how this letter ended up in the family's possession at all. It is one of the few to have done so that was not written either to himself or to Susan. Perhaps William had his eye on Mary as a possible wife. It seems possible that, failing to post the letter immediately upon his arrival in London (c. 24 September 1858), he then met Susan (30 September) and decided not to send it at all, but to keep it, as he also kept his first, unposted, letter of proposal to Susan.

So, by September 1858, William was settled in New York, apparently successful in both his business and his social life and, from the sound of it, sexually frustrated. His father had died a year earlier. Given that background, and his own impetuosity, his whirlwind courtship of Susan Mary Abbott comes as less



All Souls, Langham Place

of a surprise. That story is recounted in more detail in *The early life of Susan Mary Abbott*. William and Susan met on 30 September 1858. On 9 October, they were engaged. On 22 November, they were married at All Souls, Langham Place, London.²¹ By the end of the year they were living, man and wife, virtual strangers, in New York.

Mary Anne Neill (1818-1867)

As we have seen, the Neill sons ended up being pulled in two directions. John Ross and James felt the tug from their father, following him into the family business in Belfast. William and Henry felt the tug from America. All four daughters went with the tug from America. Mary Anne, Letitia, Eliza and Dora spent most or all of their adult lives there.

Mary Anne was the eldest daughter of Robert and Letitia. She was born on 23 June 1818 and baptised at the Belfast 2nd Presbyterian Church on 23 August of that year.¹ The next probable sighting of her was forty years later, on 15 September 1858, when William – writing from Europe to Mary Schultz in America, where he was then resident – asks Mary to forward his letter to “**the girls**” (perm any or all from Mary Anne, Eliza and Dora), to whom he has not written recently.¹⁹ Mary Anne already appears to be living in America in 1858, and she does not leave it. The inference from **William’s letters is that** all those three sisters help him and/or Henry and/or Letitia in some capacity. It is likely that the business, and the Braces, also funded them in America.

Of the three sisters, Mary Anne seems to have been the one most closely connected to the Braces, less so to the Neills. She appears to have played a significant part in helping to raise the Brace children. However, at least for a time, she shared **William’s** house in New York. After he and Susan had decided to return to England, when William was alone in New York, selling the house and winding up affairs, there are a number of references to Mary Anne in his letters home: “**I wrote Mary Anne a long letter for the California steamer**” (6 December 1859); “**My greatest perplexity is about the sale of house & furniture with neither of us or Mary Anne or Dora or Charles here. I must get Letitia to take some interest**” (18 December 1859); “**Poor Mary Anne is greatly cut up about our leaving N York. How I wish she & Dora could live near us. We must try to effect it some day if D settles into old maidenhood**” (22 January 1860).¹⁹

Interpreting what one can into these few lines, Mary Anne seems at this point to be in California, probably with her sister Eliza and recently born nephew in San Francisco. But she is due to return, because she will miss William and Susan in New York. It is Dora, not Mary Anne, who **may “settle into old maidenhood”, despite the fact that Mary Anne was the elder by at least ten years.** This perhaps suggests that “**old maidenhood**” was already assumed for Mary Anne, or that she was **unlikely ever to “live near us” because she would remain in America with the Braces, or both.**

The next significant role of Mary Anne was as the probable facilitator of **William and Susan’s** adoption of Charlotte in May 1867. Her role in this is discussed in another piece, *The early life of Charlotte Augusta Edings*. Soon after, on about 18 July 1867, she died. At the time, she was caring for the Brace children in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, while Charles Loring Brace was on an extended recuperation from illness in California, accompanied by his wife Letitia.

Emma Brace, daughter: “**While health was coming back to him [Charles], he and Mrs. Brace were overtaken by a terrible sorrow in the death of the sister, Miss Mary Anne Neill, who was faithfully caring for their children in their absence. She was infinitely dear to them both, and the**

fear that death had come in their service made it a doubly cruel blow. His wife started for New York at once, leaving Mr. Brace to finish his prescribed rest cure alone."⁸

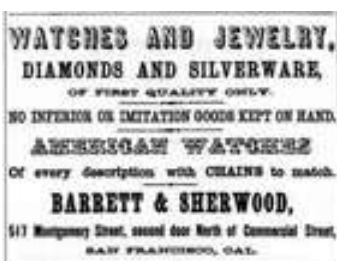
Charles Loring Brace to Dora Neill, July 1867: "My dear Dora: ... I recall all her last words and looks, and I know she is not sorry to die. "To live so that in dying one does not cease to be loved," is the great problem which she has solved... Yesterday H.'s [Henry's?] telegram came like a thunderbolt on us, and plunged us in the deep waters of sorrow."⁸

CLB to Miss G Schuyler from San Francisco, 19 July 1867: "To-day I bade good-by to Mrs. Brace, and our journey was brought to a gloomy turn by the terrible news from Hastings. We do not grieve for her who is gone so much. She always lived in the light of the Unseen, and in the service of love... But the loss of this life to her sisters and brothers and us all is immense, as she bore the burdens of so many, and took so many on her heart. She was like a mother to my wife, and no one can ever love her so much."⁸

Eliza Neill (c.1830-1912)

I feel that there is probably an interesting tale to tell about Eliza's early life, if only there was enough information to tell it. It is impossible to know her year of birth with certainty. She appears on five US census returns, with the extrapolated birth years of 1832, 1832, 1838, 1827 and 1830 respectively. I think we can discount 1838. In which case, she was probably born either in about 1830 or, as Dora's twin, in 1832. Eliza was the second of the siblings to leave for America, in 1849, apparently aged about 19.²⁵

My guess is that Eliza went to America – probably to Mobile, AL – to be with Henry, who was still unmarried when she went, and to help him with housekeeping and with running his business. One of the named locations of Neill Brothers & Co was Mobile. Henry's two eldest sons, William and James, were born in Mobile in 1855 and 1857.²⁵ Eliza herself was married in Mobile, on 31 January 1855.³⁹ Her husband was Robert Sherwood, also from Ireland, a jeweller like her father. (The marriage date appears to conflict with Emma Brace's statement that: "In January, 1855, Mr. Brace writes to his sister-in-law in Ireland, Miss Eliza Neill."⁸)



"Robert Sherwood came to San Francisco in 1850 and began working in the mines of Calaveras County. Barrett & Sherwood began advertising, in 1852, as watchmakers, manufacturers and importers of watches and jewelry as well as diamonds. They claimed to have a constant supply from London, Paris and New York trying to appeal to the elegant tastes of this young city."⁴⁰

Eliza and Robert had four children, all named after members of Eliza's family: William (born about 1856), Dora (about 1857), Henry (1859) and Robert (about 1866).²⁵ So you would think that she had her hands full at the time of William's letters home from 1859-60. Far from it. In principle, the Sherwoods were living in San Francisco, where their son Harry (Henry) was born on 10 September 1859.⁴¹ Eliza must have travelled to New York almost immediately afterwards, because by October she is staying with William in New York. On 17 October, William writes that "Eliza the minx is off to Mobile".¹⁹ It sounds as though she is showing off her new baby around the country.

It gets more complicated. On 3 January 1860, William writes: "[Eliza] has left the Lees after a fearful row they treating her shamefully. Henry has got her another situation."¹⁹ What situation?

Work? It seems unlikely with three young children. Board and lodgings? Possibly, but where, and what about her husband? Eliza might have returned to San Francisco by now. However, if Henry was involved, she must surely have still been in Mobile. But it was in December 1859 that William “wrote Mary Anne a long letter for the California steamer”, and it is hard to think what Mary Anne was doing in California if not visiting her sister. There is no mention of Robert in any of this, so presumably he was running his business in San Francisco. However, by 1 June 1860, Eliza and Robert were certainly in San Francisco,²⁵ where they remained.

In 1867, Charles and Letitia Brace visited them there, during Charles’s recuperation from illness. “They went direct to a sister of Mrs. Brace, whose home was in an exquisite valley about twenty miles from San Francisco... The crowning experience comes in a grand trip to the Yosemite to which he and Mrs. Brace are generously invited by their brother, Mr. Sherwood.”⁸ Letitia was probably with Eliza when they heard of Mary Anne’s death.

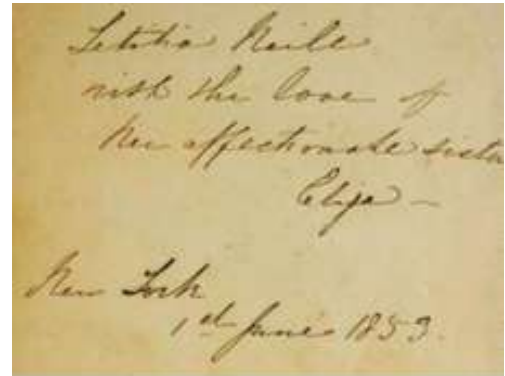
By the time of the 1880 census, Robert no longer described himself as a jeweller, but as president of a mining company. He was said to be “the inventor of the art of manufacturing quartz rock jewelry.”⁴⁰ In May 1876, he had been named an executor of William’s will. He died in 1893.⁴⁰ His and Eliza’s son Harry Hamilton Sherwood “was an 1882 graduate of Harvard University. He was a dry goods merchant/wine importer and the owner/president of Sherwood & Sherwood, later Sherwood & Co. of San Francisco, California. [He] and his brother William R. Sherwood began life as grocers and became importers around 1886. Their liquor operations were based at 212-214 Market St. with additional warehouses at 15-17 Pine. They operated until Prohibition. In 1909, [Harry] founded the San Francisco Tourist and Convention League, now the San Francisco Convention & Visitors Bureau and he served as its first president.”⁴¹

In 1910, Eliza was living with her daughter Dora Chapman in San Francisco.²⁵ She died on 30 May 1912.⁴²

Dora Neill (c.1832-1921)

Exactly when Dora was born is also open to question. She appears on four US census returns, with the extrapolated birth years of 1845, 1840, 1832 and 1832 respectively. Since the first of the two leaps downwards followed the death of her husband, and since the last two returns were consistent, I am inclined to accept 1832. Dora first came to America in 1857²⁵, three years after William and Letitia. A year later, in his letter to Mary Schultz, William writes: “I presume you went [to Vermont] in August with Dora & the Braces.” In the same letter, William envisages living in “a quiet English country house with my sister my horses & dogs & books.” He does not specify which sister but, given his later remark to Susan, Dora seems the most likely candidate. A year further on, William reports that Dora is coming to New York that night, and they are going to “the house in the morning to look over things”, but she cannot be long away from Letitia, who is ill.¹⁹

A few days later, William tells Susan that “Dora & Henry left on Sat for Savannah & Mobile.”¹⁹ The same letter relates that Henry has badly upset Dora. It suggests that the intention was for her to



ABOLITIONIST FAMILY'S COPY OF AN ANTHOLOGY
CONTAINING FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S
ONLY WORK OF FICTION
Autographs for Freedom

bring up Henry's children after the death of his first wife – a decision partly, if not entirely, caused by William's return to England and the fact that Dora could not afford to live independently.

I do not know how long the arrangement with Henry lasted. At some point, Dora may have been sharing a house with a woman called Saider in New York, who appears to have worked intermittently for William and Susan. However, in June 1862, Dora accompanied Henry back from America following his capture as a blockade runner.⁴³ My guess is that, immediately before then, she had been caring for Henry's illegitimate daughters in America and that those daughters may have come back with them.



Moncure Daniel Conway

Once back in Britain, she seems to have stayed there for several years. In the autumn of 1863, Dora was in Ireland, where she was visited by the Unitarian clergyman and author, Moncure Daniel Conway. "The week preceding the arrival of my family was passed in the north of Ireland in response to an invitation from the Neills of Belfast. I had met Miss Dora Neill when we were both visiting Theodore Weld's school at Eagleswood, N.J. She and her sister Mrs Sherwood took me on an excursion which included the Giant's Causeway, and I became well posted in Irish customs and in the peculiar demerits of the low-backed ear."⁴⁴

Less than two years later, Dora was living with William and Susan in London. Charles Loring Brace writes to her on 17 March 1865: "I don't know what you will all say when you hear that our society are going to send me out to London to the International Reformatory Union in May, leaving here the last of April (say 29th)... The only unpleasant point is leaving wife and family here with [Mary Anne]."⁴⁵

By 17 October 1865, Dora was with William's wife Susan and son Harold in Paris for a few weeks, while William was in New York. On 14 January 1866, William writes to Susan: "I had some talk with Saider about going over this spring but not knowing certainly about whether we shd be in our house or not or how I shd feel in money matters I did not press it. Now however I feel inclined to have her & doubt not you would be very glad and that it wd be a new lease of life to Dora – so I shall try to get her to come. But what about poor Dora when we come out to New York? Will she come too & stand the winter knocking about – or will she go somewhere with Saider (who talks of spending a year in Germany) till our return next summer, or go to Holywood? But then it wd be a great loss to us not to have Saider in New York while we are there. Still we shd abandon her rather than drag Dora across the Atlantic & perhaps not get her back for a good while."¹⁹

After the visit to Paris, Dora went back to London and lived for a further time with William and Susan at Belsize Lodge, Hampstead. In June 1866, Dora – along with Susan – was one of the signatories to the Kensington Society's women's suffrage petition, which is regarded by many as the first significant event of the suffragette movement.⁴⁵

TO THE HONOURABLE THE COMMONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED.

The Humble Petition of the undersigned, sheweth--

That it having been expressly laid down by high authorities that the possession of property in this country carries with it the right to vote in the election of Representatives in Parliament, it is an evident anomaly that some holders of property are allowed to use this right, while others, forming no less a constituent part of the nation, and equally qualified by law to hold property, are not able to exercise this privilege.

That the participation of women in the Government is consistent with the principles of the British Constitution, inasmuch as women in these islands have always been held capable of sovereignty, and women are eligible for various public offices.

Your Petitioners therefore humbly pray your honourable House to consider the expediency of providing for the representation of all householders, without distinction of sex, who possess such property or rental qualification as your honourable House may determine.

And your Petitioners will ever pray.

Mrs. W. M. Neill, Belsize Lodge, Hampstead, N.W.
Dora Neill. ditto

At that point, aged about 34, perhaps Dora herself felt she might “settle into old maidenhood”, and perhaps William and Susan were looking forward to having her live with them indefinitely. If so, it did not happen. Within four years, Dora was married to Charles McC Delany,

MARRIAGES.
July 28, at Forest Hill, Crystal Springs, San Francisco, Charles McCarthy Delaney, Esq., San Francisco, to Dora, youngest daughter of the late Robert Neill, Esq., Belfast.

an Irishman and Attorney at Law. I do not know whether they met in Ireland, England or America, but they were married on 28 July 1870 at Forest Hill, Crystal Springs, San Francisco.⁴⁶ At

the 1880 census, they were living in San Francisco with two children – Marian, born about 1873, and Charles H, born about 1875. Thereafter the family remained in San Francisco. Charles was a witness to William’s will, made in San Francisco on 19 May 1876. They were living then at 519 Montgomery Street.

By the time of the 1900 census, Charles had died. Towards the end of her life, Dora was living with both her children and a grand-daughter. She died on 28 August 1921,⁴² the last of the Neill siblings.

Dora was adored. William was fond of all his sisters, but perhaps of Dora especially, as Susan seems to have been also. So was Charles Loring Brace, who shared William’s habit of writing ecstatically to women who were not his wife. On 20 September 1858, he wrote to Dora: “Do you know, dear, ever since our pleasant time with so many warm hearts, I find myself loving everybody better, and I half think nobody (except [Letitia]) ever softened my bear’s heart so much as your sweet self. You represent youth and hope to me, and my sister, and perhaps I love you most because I think I see lighted in your soul one fire that shall never go out, – that kindled on the altar of duty. Do you remember (to myself I would say, will you ever forget?) that starlit talk on the rock in the lake? That seemed to me (I suppose I idealized it) a kind of spiritual union which may last into Eternity... But what a sentimental love-letter I have fallen into! We have so much to tell you and [Mary Anne] when we meet.”⁴⁸

And this beautiful passage, in a later letter from Charles Brace, written on 17 January 1875: “My dear Dora: I hope you never measure our affection here by our correspondence. We all hold you ever near the heart, and wish we could see more of you. There are so many things I should like to speak on with you. But letters are nothing. We move steadily on in the old path ... Life settling itself and gathering its garments for the grand departure, friends slipping away into the unseen, old age coming visibly on many, fires of youth cooling, and the drift of age towards doubt and denial more clear and sometimes depressing, and yet hope, freshness, and spring still.”⁴⁸

Letitia Neill (c.1822-1916)

Considering the fame of her husband, remarkably little public information exists about Letitia. As with most of her siblings, birth and baptism records do not survive. She seems to have been born in Belfast in 1822.²⁵ The first (and only) public record of her there is for her marriage in 1854: “August 21, at the Meeting-house of the First Presbyterian Congregation, Belfast, by the Rev. Henry Montgomery, LL.D., Charles Loring Brace, Esq., New York, to Letitia, second daughter of Robert Neill, Esq., Albion Place, Belfast.”⁴⁷

August 21, at the Meeting-house of the First Presbyterian Congregation, Belfast, by the Rev. Henry Montgomery, LL.D., Charles Loring Brace, Esq., New York, to Letitia, second daughter of Robert Neill, Esq., Albion Place, Belfast.

Since a great deal of information exists on Charles Loring Brace, there is no point in repeating much of it here, but a brief summary will help to provide a context for Letitia’s life. Brace was born on 19 June 1826 in Litchfield, CN, the son of a teacher, John Brace, who taught Harriet Beecher

Stowe, the abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "In 1853, Brace, a 26 year old Congregational minister, concerned with the growing number of "homeless" children he saw wandering the streets of New York, joined together with other "reformers" and founded the Children's Aid Society, where the children were cared for and taught life skills. He and others conceived the Orphan Trains which took children from the streets to homes across the US. From 1854 to 1929, orphan trains from New York "placed out" 150,000 to 200,000 destitute children, mainly to homes in the farming communities of the Midwest."¹² One of the trustees of the Society was Theodore Roosevelt senior, the father of the President. In many ways, the **Children's Aid Society** foreshadowed in America what Dr Thomas Barnardo later did in Britain.

Letitia met Charles in the spring of 1850. "Before going to the continent, the three companions [Brace and Fred & John Olmsted] went to Ireland, to continue the walking trip which had been so great a pleasure to them all. They were supplied with letters of introduction to the family of Mr. Robert Neill of Belfast, who had always welcomed Americans with peculiar friendliness. He was a strong anti-slavery man, and numbered amongst his American friends, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry C. Wright, and Frederick Douglass, who had all been his guests. The young men were heartily welcomed with true Irish hospitality, and warm friendships were soon formed. Writing during the coming winter to Miss Letitia Neill, who afterwards became his wife, Charles said: "How much have you all done for me! I know I much need softening and changing. Such friendliness and kindness has been very delightful to me. And you, dear, trustful friend, how much I hope for a happy and useful future to you. Not, either, happy, but one which shall best fit you for the progress in the life beyond. God aid you, and may we both become more spiritual and nearer Him in our lives. You can have a noble future. It is to be seen whether you will."⁸



Charles Loring Brace

After a lengthy visit to Europe (which included imprisonment in Hungary), Charles next saw Letitia in October 1851. "[Charles] was not freed from the espionage of the gendarme until he reached Trieste, whence he travelled to Rome, and then back to England, where he was hospitably entertained in Liverpool by his friends, Mr. William Neill and Miss Letitia. "Mr William Neill here heard of my stress," he writes on October 17th, to his friend, John Olmsted, "and like a trump sent me a ten-pound note which gave me a new coat ... and vest ..., and sent me here at once.... I live at the Neills', and board in a delightful coffee-house, and appear like a gentleman once more. All the while with Miss Letitia (no danger), delightful sisterly friendship, and walks and talks."⁸

The "sisterly friendship" continued by correspondence for nearly three more years, at a distance of several thousand miles. By 1854, Charles had made up his mind. "In June 1854 Brace set sail from New York to tour of [s/c] British ragged schools and visit the young woman who had been for him, and for whom he had been, primarily a fantasy spun over three years of correspondence... After what their daughter, Emma, would later describe as a "short engagement," they were married in Belfast on August 21, 1854, by a clergyman who worried that this daughter of the respected Neill family did not know what she was getting into by marrying an obscure Yank."⁴⁸

"The young couple, after a trip to the Giant's Causeway, sailed, early in September, for Boston, where they were welcomed by his relatives, Mr. Charles G. Loring's family, and Dr. and Mrs. Asa Gray. Mrs. Gray had, in the meantime, furnished their home for them in New York. Mrs. Brace entered at once into the work of the Children's Aid Society, visiting one of the schools, and teaching. Her sympathy in all her husband's efforts to lessen the suffering in the great, growing city was assured, for she had thrown herself heart and soul into the Ragged School work in Belfast, and came to America with a deep sense of consecration to the work to which his life was already dedicated. The buoyant temperament she brought from the quiet life in the old country was a vast aid to him. Discouragement was not within the possibilities of her comprehension, and in her hopeful and trusting manner of taking whatever came, lay, in large degree, the secret of his courage during the years to come, as well as of her own. Her readiness to accept at once all the duties and interests in this new, full life, is shown in a very characteristic story. On the day of their arrival in New York, while her trunks were being unpacked, the husband came in, saying, "Well, dear, I think we had better go now and see the Fourth Ward School." Perfectly ready, off she went, to the profound astonishment of his friends."⁸

Charles and Letitia had six children, two of whom died in infancy. The survivors were: Charles Loring junior (born 2 June 1855), Emma (born 5 October 1859), Robert (born 3 October 1861) and Leta (born 19 October 1864).⁴⁹ The Brace family home was at Hastings, NY, upstream from New York on the Hudson river. They also maintained a house or apartment in St Mark's Place, New York,¹⁹ where Charles's work was principally based.

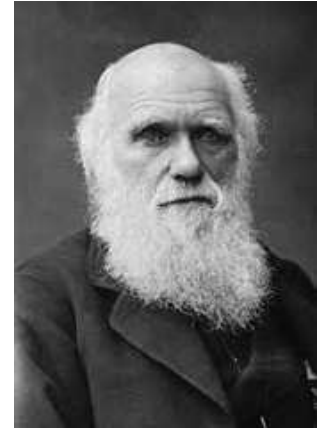
I imagine that Letitia's life was filled chiefly with raising her family (with plenty of help from Mary Anne) and with supporting Charles in his work. Her health was not always good, especially after childbirth, as William's letters home to Susan reveal. William also discloses that "Letitia lost 34 lbs. in the first two years she was in the country."¹⁹ But the Braces probably had an active social life too. Charles knew almost all the New England cultural and abolitionist aristocracy, many of whom he introduced to William. Amongst his friends were Henry Longfellow, Washington Irving, the radical Republican Charles Sumner and the Beecher (Stowe) family. He also saw occasionally, and corresponded with, John Stuart Mill.

As Charles's prestige grew, he was increasingly invited to meetings overseas, especially in Britain. And as the family grew up, Letitia was increasingly free to accompany him. It is worth quoting at some length from his letters home during these visits. They shed interesting light on the fraternity of progressive thought from both sides of the Atlantic. In London, the Braces stayed often (perhaps always) with William and Susan in Hampstead, and many of the people they met there were probably friends or acquaintances of theirs.

Letters from summer 1865, without Letitia:⁸ "He sailed early in May, and went to the beautiful home of his brother-in-law on Hampstead Heath." The letters list those he has met in England: Sir Charles & Lady Lyell, Russell Scott, Henry Crabb Robinson, Lord Kinnaird, Lord Brougham and Mary Carpenter. Another letter reports the reaction to Lincoln's assassination: "The mourning for Lincoln was something unheard of. Almost as deep as in America. You heard of the man cast out of the Liverpool Exchange, because he applauded the assassination?"

Letters from June/July 1872, with Letitia:⁸ "I am at Mr. Darwin's with Mrs. Brace for the night... We had a lively talk on the instincts of dogs." "You will like to know what L. and I have been doing... Among the pleasant events was a most interesting lunch at Miss Cobbe's [Frances Power Cobbe]... We first met at a sermon of Martineau's [probably James Martineau]... We saw the

Lyells twice. Mr. Lyulph Stanley gave me a splendid dinner at his mother's [the guests including five peers and Dickie Doyle, the illustrator for Punch and Conan Doyle's uncle]... Our most interesting dinner was at Mr. Forster's [William Forster], Minister of Education... He picked me up seven years ago, because his wife (Dr. Arnold's daughter) read my books. Very kindly he had asked Tom Hughes [author of Tom Brown's Schooldays], Lefevre [George Shaw-Lefevre], and Mundella [A J Mundella] to meet us... Among other pleasant places, a dinner at Dean of St. Paul's [Richard Church] and at Mr. Russell Guerne's [Gurney, in fact: a Conservative MP married to a member of the Kensington Society], and a very pleasant dinner at home [which must surely refer to Belsize Lodge] with "Spectator" men and Mrs. Dr. Garrett Anderson, etc., etc... Thursday we go to Leamington and Stratford for a visit, and then I go to the Continent and L. to Ireland, after some visiting."



Charles Darwin

Letters from summer 1882, with Letitia:⁸ "Although with full intentions of going abroad to rest, Mr. and Mrs. Brace made in London their first stopping-place, and were at once swallowed in the vortex of society and philanthropy, as they had been in former visits... Among the many pleasures they enjoyed, was a dinner with the Hon. John Morley, who had once visited them in their little home at Hastings. "You know what a brilliant time we had in London. We came at a very exciting time in public affairs, and happened to be thrown in with leading men in Parliament a great deal, so that we were in the centre of English life. Your 'Aunty' [Letitia], being so well up in English and European affairs, could take full part in it all, and we were most warmly received by all." [Thence they go to the Rhine and Switzerland.] After three weeks in the Engadine, Mrs. Brace made a trip with a brother [William, probably] in Italy, while Mr. Brace repeated his delightful experience of ten years before in Hungary. In September they met in England, and after several visits in rural parts, they returned home in October."

More visits to Europe followed, but these were concerned with Charles's health. He seems to have suffered something close to a breakdown in 1857. Now he is suffering from Bright's disease. "It was not until the winter of 1881-82, when he was fifty-six, that he once again became so ill that he had to take time off from his work ... After a summer in London and a visit to a sanitarium at Saint Moritz, he felt fully restored to his normal vigor and fitness. By 1886, ... he needed another summer in Europe. He and Letitia spent June in London and went on to the Alps for three months of hiking and recuperation... In May 1888, Letitia and Brace went abroad again, to England and Germany, with an extended stay at Marienbad... [O]nce again this trip failed to restore him."⁴⁸

On 29 April 1889, just over a year before his death, Charles writes to Letitia: "I often think of what a happy life we have had together, and how much good you have done me... I love you more than ever!"⁴⁸ He died in St Moritz, on another recuperative journey, on 11 August 1890, where he was buried three days later.

I cannot find Letitia on the 1900 census. In 1910, she was living on her own in Manhattan ward 18, New York. In 1915, she was with her son Robert and his wife at 223 East 17th Street, New York.⁵⁰ She died the following year.⁵¹

Postscript

This has been a long piece, yet in many respects it only scratches the surface of this remarkable family. I expect more information will come to light over time. In particular, and despite having discovered so much, I feel sad that I have no photographs of any of these Neills, apart from a probable but uncertain one of William. However, there is a good chance that descendants will exist of John Ross, James, Letitia, Henry, Eliza and Dora. If I can trace one or more of those, perhaps this deficiency – and others – can be overcome.

Jim Powell, 11 October 2013

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