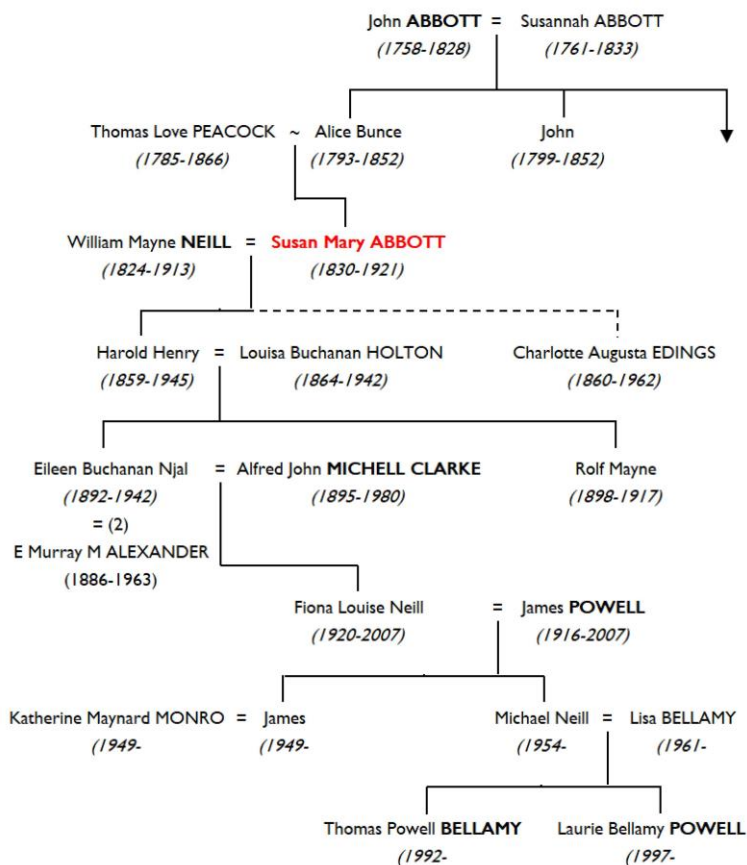


The early life of

SUSAN MARY ABBOTT

(12 October 1830 – 4 March 1921)



In late 2009, looking through a stash of family letters from my parents' attic after their deaths in 2007, I found an envelope that read: 'Destroy or burn at my death, S M Neill,' written in black ink, in an unsteady hand, over a faint pencil notation in which only the name of the novelist George Meredith was legible.¹ This was my introduction to Susan, my great-great-grandmother, the wife of William Neill.

Inside the envelope were seven letters from George Meredith to a woman he addressed as 'Susie Pye', all dating from the period of his first marriage to Mary Ellen, the eldest daughter of Thomas Love Peacock. Accompanying these letters in a

larger cloth envelope, inscribed 'George Meredith's Letters to S', were several newspaper obituaries of Meredith and a rare autograph that he sent in 1906 to Eileen Neill, my grandmother, identifying her as 'the Granddaughter of the Venerable Dame Susie Pye'.

Susan's instruction on the envelope, as impossible for me to obey as it had been for others, led to research that established that Susan was not – as presented – the daughter of John Abbott, but the illegitimate daughter of the novelist Thomas Love Peacock.

This paper is an extended version of an article that first appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*.² The research on which it is based was undertaken in collaboration with Professor Nicholas Joukovsky of Penn State University, the world's foremost authority on

¹ Abbott family letters and papers, held by the author

² N. Joukovsky and J. Powell, 'A Peacock in the Attic', *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 July 2011, pp. 13-15

Peacock and on the early life of George Meredith. Professor Joukovsky's own analysis of the research has been published in *Studies in Philology*.³

Birth, baptism and parentage

It seems so ordinary on the surface. There is a record that says that Susan Mary Abbott was baptised on 1

1	Susan Mary	John Emmeline Spencer	Abbott	Ernest Street	Attorney	R. Act.
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November 1830 at St Pancras Old Church, London.⁴ Her parents are John Abbott (an attorney) and Emmeline Spencer Abbott, and they live nearby in Ernest Street (the old name for what is now part of Robert Street), near Regent's Park. The register states that Susan was born on 12 October. The only thing that raises an eyebrow is that she was born, 20 days before her baptism, in a different parish: St James, Clerkenwell.



The truth of Susan's parentage is revealed in a series of letters to her from the novelist George Meredith.⁵ These are the letters that survived in the family attic, in the envelope marked 'Destroy or burn at my death'.

One of the letters is written by Meredith's wife Mary Ellen, the daughter of Thomas Love Peacock, and is signed 'Your affectionate sister'. Written for

Susan's 25th birthday in 1855, it includes the words: 'Baby sends aunt Susan "me love & a kiss for her nice day." ' In two other letters, Meredith refers to himself as Susan's 'sincere brother-in-law' and 'your affectionate brother'. These words amount to more than an expression of friendship. They indicate a blood relationship. Compounding the mystery was the fact that Meredith addressed Susan in his first letter as 'Mdlle Susie Pye, née Abbott' – an unmarried woman whose name was formerly, but no longer, Abbott.

Because Peacock destroyed almost all his private papers, not much is known about his marriage and family. In November 1819, he proposed by letter to Jane Gryffyd, a Welsh parson's daughter he had neither seen nor written to since April 1811. At first their marriage appears to have been happy, and there is no reason to question the paternity of the four children born to the couple over the next eight years: Mary Ellen (1821–61), Margaret Love (1823–26), Edward Gryffyd (1825–67) and Rosa Jane (1827/8–57).⁶

³ N. Joukovsky, "'Dearest Susie Pye': New Meredith Letters to Peacock's Natural Daughter', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 111 No. 3, 2014, pp. 591-629

⁴ London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, 1660-1950, P90/PAN1

⁵ Abbott family letters and papers

⁶ N. Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', pp. 595-596

But, after the death of Margaret in January 1826, Jane is said to have been 'inconsolable' and to have gradually become, in the words of her granddaughter Edith Nicolls, 'a complete invalid'. (Mary Shelley and George Meredith both described her as 'mad'.) She also became intensely religious, and is likely to have been disturbed by her husband's atheism (perhaps even seeing the death of their daughter as a divine judgement). Her religiosity, her illness, and her complete dependency on Peacock, make it unlikely that she would have had an extramarital affair.⁷ Peacock, on the other hand, was full of energy and had always been amorous. According to his cousin Harriet Love, he was, like Miss Ilex's lover in *Gryll Grange*, 'a sort of universal lover, making half declarations to half the young women he knew.'⁸ The likelihood of Thomas Love Peacock as the father of Susan is plausible; the likelihood of his wife as her mother is not.



A young Peacock

On the Abbott side, the main evidence is a lack of evidence. The Abbotts are a reasonably well-documented family. John was a nephew of the first Baron Tenterden, Lord Chief Justice 1818-1832. There is no record that John ever married. Nor, apart from the entry on Susan's baptismal record, is there anything to suggest that Emmeline Spencer Abbott ever existed. Her own baptism, marriage and death are nowhere recorded. The absence of one such record from the early 19th century is not surprising. The absence of all of them is suspicious.

Even so, this could be regarded as conjecture without the existence of two hard facts. The first is the wording of the Meredith letters (and the fact that Susan wanted them destroyed). The second is that Susan, without any other known or imaginable connection to Thomas Love Peacock, was indisputably living under his roof in the autumn of 1852.⁹ He must have been her father. It is hard to be quite so categorical about the identity of her mother, but a variety of information implies a near certainty that it was John Abbott's sister, Alice Bunce Abbott.

The norm, then as now, would have been for an illegitimate child either to have been raised by her natural mother, or to have been put out for anonymous adoption. There is no reason to suppose that a well-to-do, unmarried, middle-class man like John Abbott would have wanted to adopt someone else's daughter. Besides which, Susan's parentage was not anonymous: Mary Ellen knew that Susan was her sister; Susan knew that Peacock was her father. The presumption must be that Susan was raised by her natural mother.

⁷ B. Bennett, ed., *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980-88), Vol. 2, p. 258; E. Clodd, 'George Meredith (1828-1909)' in *Memories* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1916), p. 142; E. Nicolls, 'Biographical Notice' in H. Cole (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1875)

⁸ Bodleian Library, MS notes on Peacock, MS Eng. lett. c. 582

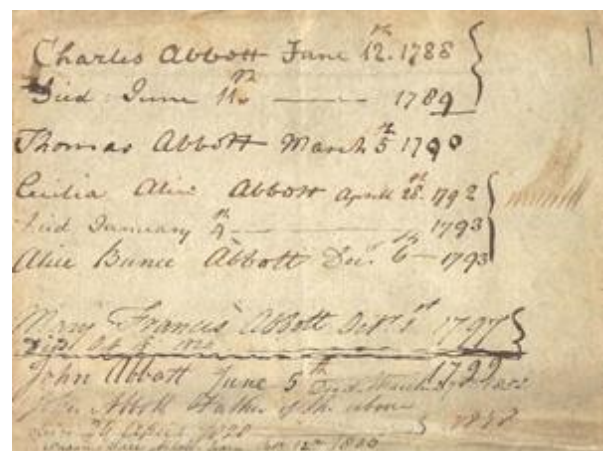
⁹ Letter from Kate Horne to her husband, 18 November 1852, Huntington Library, quoted from microfilm copy in the British Library: RP 800/4

Emmeline Spencer Abbott was almost certainly a fiction. But Alice Bunce Abbott, John's unmarried sister, is known to have lived in a household with her brother and Susan from 1833 at the latest (when Susan would have been two or three) to the time of her death in 1852.¹⁰ The lease on their house in London was owned by Alice,¹¹ not by John, which invites speculation as to who financed it and why, considered later. Susan (supposedly Alice's niece) was the sole legatee of Alice's will, despite the fact that Alice had another niece and a nephew to whom she was close (one, Julia, was her god-daughter; another, Theodosius, witnessed her death), but who stood to inherit anything only if Susan pre-deceased Alice without issue.¹² And, more speculatively, since Alice's middle name seems to have been of importance to her, she chose (otherwise surprisingly) to provide a middle name on the baptismal record that incorporated the same sequence of three letters 'nce'.

It cannot be denied that this evidence is circumstantial. However, it is certainly persuasive, and close to being conclusive. Thomas Love Peacock was Susan's father; Alice Bunce Abbott was her mother. Susan grew up believing that John was her father and that Alice was her aunt, told that her natural mother had died when she was a baby. The unravelling of that legend came later.

The Abbott family

The Abbotts were a well-established family from Canterbury in Kent. There was a John Abbott in three successive generations, and also (to add to the confusion) two Alice Bunces. The first John Abbott (1724-1795) was a barber and wig-maker in Canterbury. He married Alice Bunce on 19 May 1747. They had two daughters and two sons. One son (their youngest child) was Charles Abbott (7 October 1762 - 4 November 1832), who became a barrister and rose to be Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench between 1818 and 1832, as well as being an interim Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1827. He was ennobled as Baron Tenterden, also in 1827.¹³



¹⁰ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 598

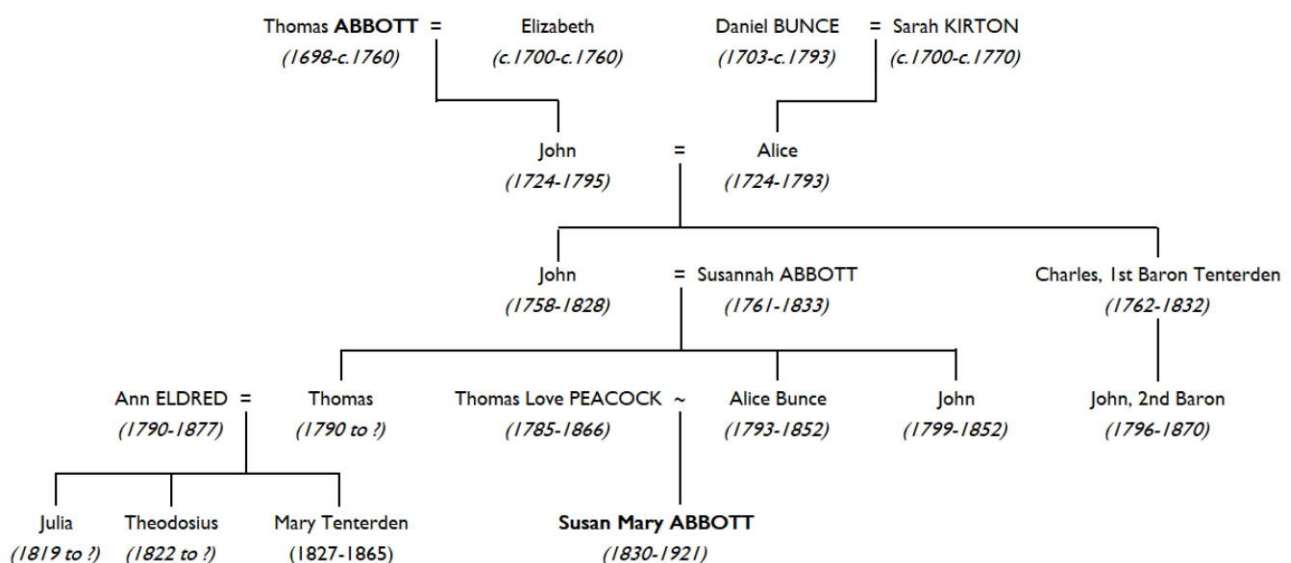
¹¹ Will of Alice Bunce Abbott, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1850-1852, Piece 2155: Vol. 11, Quire Numbers 501-550 (1852)

¹² Will of Alice Bunce Abbott

¹³ When this piece was first written, much of the background on the Abbott family was provided by Jenny Randall and her website www.the-abbotts-of-canterbury.com. That website no longer exists, and much of the information on the Abbott family on Ancestry is inaccurate. Two primary sources confirm the salient family details: *Debrett's Genealogical Peerage of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: William Pickering, 1847), p. 740, and the slip inside the family bible (Abbott family letters and papers).

The other son (their second child) was another John Abbott (1758-1828), who married his cousin Susannah (also given as Susan) Abbott. He was born and died in Canterbury, but is described in Debretts as a merchant of London.¹⁴ They had six children, two of whom died as infants and one as a young adult, all of whom are listed on a slip inside a family bible (previous page) found in my parents' attic. As (at the very bottom) is Susan herself.¹⁵

The three children who survived into adulthood were Thomas (born 1790), Alice Bunce (6 December 1793 - 16 April 1852) and John (5 June 1799 - 27 March 1852). As far as is known, neither John nor Alice Bunce married, and Susan grew up in the household they formed together for the reasons explained above. Thomas did marry and had three children, Julia, Theodosius and Mary.¹⁶



John was born in Canterbury, as was Alice Bunce. But they may well have been raised in London, if that was where their father worked. It is likely that both of them were as much Londoners as they were Canterburians. Indeed, Alice Bunce would need to have been: Thomas Love Peacock had no known connection with Canterbury, so she almost certainly met him in London.

Thomas Love Peacock

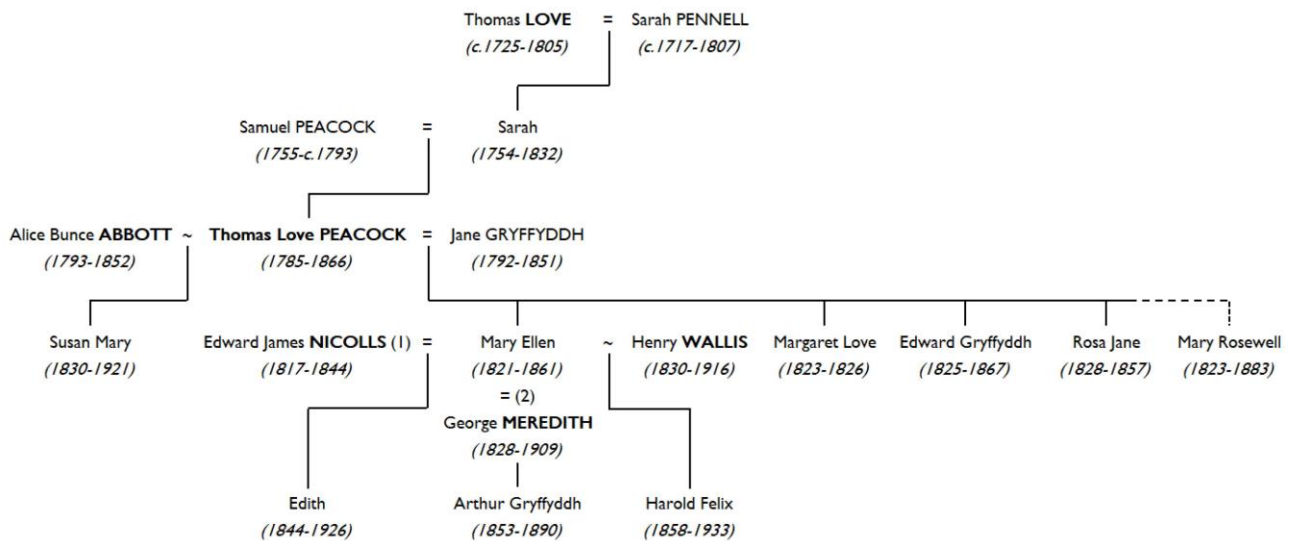
Peacock was born at Weymouth, or Melcombe Regis, Dorset, on 18 October 1785 (making him eight years older than Alice Bunce Abbott). He was the only child of Samuel Peacock (born 1755), a London glass merchant whose father, Josiah Peacock, had been a linen draper and

¹⁴ Debrett's, 1847

¹⁵ Abbott family letters and papers

¹⁶ Will of John Abbott jr, National Archives, PROB 11/2155/339

grocer at Taunton, Somerset, and Sarah Love (born 1754), daughter of Thomas Love, a retired master in the Royal Navy from Topsham, Devon.¹⁷



The probability is that Peacock met Alice Bunce Abbott between the death of his daughter Margaret in 1826 (and his wife's subsequent derangement) and early 1830, when Alice became pregnant with Susan. However, given Peacock's known disposition and behaviour, he could have known Alice before 1826.



An older Peacock

By that time, Peacock had two careers. His day job was a salaried post with the East India Company. In 1836, his official career was crowned by his appointment as Chief Examiner of Indian Correspondence. In that post he was succeeded by John Stuart Mill, and preceded by John Stuart's father, James Mill.¹⁸ But he had also established himself as a popular novelist, poet and satirist, his works by then including *Headlong Hall* (1815), *Melincourt* (1817), *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), *Maid Marian* (1822), *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829) and *Crotchet Castle* (1831).

Peacock's behaviour in love was quixotic and licentious. He once proposed to two sisters, more or less simultaneously, and was rejected by both of them.¹⁹ He proposed to his future wife by letter, eight years after he had last had any contact with her. His affair with Alice Bunce Abbott was very likely not his only one. But that relationship was probably enduring. When Peacock was in London, he would have had little difficulty in seeing Alice. But why should the 1851 Census show Alice, John and Susan to be living in Thames

¹⁷ N. Joukovsky, Thomas Love Peacock, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21681>

¹⁸ D. Johnson, *Lesser Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 55

¹⁹ N. Joukovsky, 'Peacock in Love', *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 85 (2006), pp. 167-198

Ditton,²⁰ an area with which they had no known connection and which would have been inconvenient for John's work, if not for the fact that Peacock's main residence was at Lower Halliford, five miles away? The circumstantial evidence is not just that Peacock fathered a child with Alice, but that she was his mistress over many years.

Peacock died on 23 January 1866. After his death, his grand-daughter Edith Nicolls (Mary Ellen's daughter from her first marriage to Edward Nicolls) set about writing a biography of him, with help from a Mr L'Estrange. These intriguing words appear in this account by Diane Johnson:²¹

Certain things troubled Edith – Grandpapa's amours, for example. It was not that she minded his having them, but what was proper to print? Mr L'Estrange was very judicious: 'I do not think we need touch on the second lady unless you see unmistakeable traces of her, which I do not.'



Edith Nicolls

By the time Peacock died, Alice had been dead for 14 years, and his daughter Mary Ellen, George Meredith's erstwhile wife, for more than four years. By then, Susan was married to William Mayne Neill and living her own life.

The lease on Charlotte Street



*10 Charlotte
Street*

For some fifteen years, from 1833 to 1848 (at the earliest), John Abbott's law offices were located at 10 Charlotte Street, Bedford Square. (This was not the present-day Charlotte Street, but the old name for the portion of Bloomsbury Street between Bedford Square and Great Russell Street.) This was also the residence of Alice Abbott, and Alice's will, dated 10 March 1841, reveals that it was she, rather than her brother, who held a long-term lease on the house.²² The 1841 Census shows Alice Abbott (age given as 45, although she was 47) living at Charlotte Street, together with Helen Garrod (aged 20) and two other women – probably servants.²³

Alice may have bought the lease – in fact a sub-lease from the builder, Robert Grews – from the proceeds of an inheritance, following the death of her mother, Susannah, in February 1833.²⁴ An advertisement by the

²⁰ 1851 England Census

²¹ Johnson, *Lesser Lives*, p. 167

²² Will of Alice Bunce Abbott

²³ 1841 England Census

²⁴ Will of Alice Bunce Abbott

auctioneers Winstanley & Son offered 'a compact, cheerful, and very convenient leasehold family residence ... No. 10, Charlotte-street, Bedford-square, overlooking the gardens of the British Museum; held under His Grace the Duke of Bedford.' It offered immediate possession and was to be sold at auction on 16 August 1833, unless previously disposed of.²⁵

Alice's father had already died on 26 April 1828. At the time of his death, he lived with Susannah at 3 Upper Thornhaugh Street (now Huntley Street) in Bloomsbury, London – a respectable but by no means fashionable address, not far from Bedford Square.²⁶ His will – signed on 24 April 1828, two days before he died, and apparently drawn up hastily – fails to provide a clear indication of the size of his estate. But it is interesting that, despite the fact that both his sons were lawyers, neither of them was appointed an executor. Instead, he appointed his daughter Alice, along with his nephew John Henry Abbott, later the 2nd Baron Tenterden.²⁷

The bulk of John senior's personal estate was to be invested for the benefit of his wife and daughter, while some other unidentified assets were left to his two sons. John junior had apparently borrowed a large but unspecified sum of money from his father, but he was not required to repay the principal as long as he paid interest on it to the estate. Thomas's children were to share a legacy of a thousand pounds. It appears, then, that Alice may have inherited a decent income, but not a large lump sum, in 1828 – at about the time she is likely to have become involved with Peacock.

A record of Susannah's will has not been found, but given the provisions of her husband's will, and given the fact that – despite John also living at 10 Charlotte Street – the leasehold belonged solely to Alice, it would appear that Alice was the main, and perhaps the only, beneficiary of her mother's will. It seems significant that the first record of the Abbotts living in Charlotte Street should be for the same year as Susannah's death.

If this was the sequence of events, it would appear that Alice was not able to afford the purchase of the lease solely from her own resources. In Alice's own will, there is a reference to 'a lien thereon [the lease of 10 Charlotte Street] by the Right Honourable John Henry Baron Tenterden [her first cousin] for the sum of one thousand pounds.'²⁸ But why was her cousin providing extra capital, rather than her brother, who also lived in the house and who used it as his office, if not for the fact that her brother had little or no capital? It is also possible that Peacock contributed to the purchase of the lease. This expense would help to explain the financial problems that he is known to have had in his later years, even with his East India Company salary of £2,000 a year.²⁹

²⁵ *Morning Post*, 5 August 1833

²⁶ Will of John Abbott sr, National Archives, PROB 11/1741/399

²⁷ Will of John Abbott sr

²⁸ Will of Alice Bunce Abbott

²⁹ N. Joukovsky, *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), Vol. 1, pp. xlvi-xlvii

One reason for Susannah's will favouring Alice could be that, by now, Susan had been born. That is another small piece of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Alice was her mother. But this could not account for the provisions of John senior's will, which also favoured Alice over both her brothers. Charles had a successful career as Clerk of Nisi Prius in London and Middlesex, so presumably had adequate means of his own. But what does this say about John junior?

There is no evidence of any personal wealth. The inference is that he was a workaday solicitor, in partnership originally with a Mr Arney,³⁰ and latterly with an Edward Atkinson.³¹ It would seem that he had no great income, and never – as far as we know – owned his own house. He once borrowed a large sum of money from his father, with apparently no means of repaying it. The 1st Baron Tenterden was able to arrange sinecures for several members of his family, including John's brother, but he did not procure one for John, although it sounds as though he could have done with one.³² The likelihood is that John Abbott was something of a disappointment to his family, and was perhaps thought to be reckless with money and not to be trusted with it.

Susan's early life

Before moving on from Susan's infancy, mention must be made of one further extraordinary fact, which has come to light since Professor Joukovsky and I conducted our original research.

Susan was baptised twice.

The first baptism, as already noted, took place on 1 November 1830 at St Pancras Old Church. Susan's parents were given as John and Emmeline Spencer Abbott, living in Ernest Street. The register stated that Susan was born on 12 October 1830. It may be significant that Thomas Abbott, the brother of John and Alice Bunce, lived near, or possibly in, Ernest Street at the time, and that his son Theodosius had also been baptised at St Pancras Old Church.³³

Susan's second baptism took place more than four years later, on 15 January 1835, at Allhallows Barking (now All Hallows by-the-Tower).³⁴ Susan's parents were again given as John and Emmeline Spencer Abbott, living in Ernest Street (although, by this time, they were in Charlotte Street). The register again stated that Susan was born on 12 October 1830. It is impossible to explain this second baptism, into the same religion and with all the details identical.

When Baptized	Child's Christian Name	Parents Name	Abode	Quality, Trade, or Profession	By whom the Ceremony was performed
15th Jan 1835	Susan	John & Emmeline Spencer Abbott	Ernest Street		Rev. Geo. H. B. ...

³⁰ *Bristol Mercury*, 11 June 1836

³¹ *The Legal Observer and Solicitors' Journal*, Vol. 48 (1854), p. 484

³² Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 598

³³ England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975

³⁴ London Metropolitan Archives; Church of England Parish Registers



Robert Clamp

Susan spent her early years in Charlotte Street. At some point, she was sent away to school in Ipswich. The 1841 census (taken when she was 10) shows her at a Ladies' Seminary at Elm House in Elm Street.³⁵ The school was run by Robert and Ann Clamp. The artist Thomas Smythe had earlier attended the same school. Robert Burcham Clamp was an artist himself. The same Census states that almost all the pupils were born in Suffolk, Susan being an exception.

The Ipswich connection was provided by Robert and Sarah Garrod. Sarah, *née* Clamp, was the sister of Susan's headmaster. She was born in Lambeth and was almost exactly the same age as Alice Bunce Abbott.³⁶ There is no evidence to support the assertion, but she is likely to have been a close friend of Alice's.



Robert Garrod and his wife Sarah, née Clamp

The name of her husband, Robert Garrod, runs like a *leitmotif* through Susan's early years. He was a successful auctioneer in Ipswich, Suffolk, and later an Alderman of the town (elected as a Whig-Radical).³⁷ He is first referred to in John Abbott's letter to Susan, below. He was an executor of the wills of both John and Alice Bunce Abbott.³⁸ Helen Garrod, one of his daughters, is shown as living at 10 Charlotte Street in the 1841 Census.³⁹ The gynaecologist Thomas Hawkes Tanner (a Kings College Hospital colleague of Alfred Baring Garrod, the distinguished physician and son of Robert and Sarah) was living at the same address between 1848 and 1862.⁴⁰ Helen Garrod, her husband Robert William Bennett (a Manchester solicitor), and Robert Garrod himself, were all witnesses to Susan's marriage.⁴¹

A letter survives from John Abbott to Susan, while she was at school in Ipswich. Since it is the only such surviving letter, and provides some insight into John's relationship with Susan, it is worth quoting in full:⁴²

³⁵ 1841 England Census

³⁶ Ancestry family tree

³⁷ A. Bearn, *Archibald Garrod and the Individuality of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 197-200; *Ipswich Journal*, 3 March 1838 and 12 June 1877

³⁸ Wills of John Abbott jr and Alice Bunce Abbott

³⁹ 1841 England Census

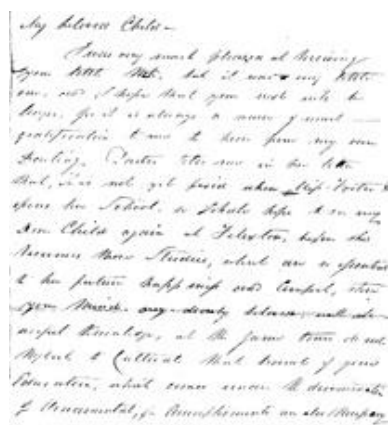
⁴⁰ Bloomsbury Project <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bloomsbury-project/streets/charlotte_street.htm> [accessed 4 June 2021]; Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

⁴¹ Marriage Certificate of William Neill and Susan Abbott, MXE 921282

⁴² Abbott family letters and papers

My beloved Child –

I was very much pleased at receiving your little note, but it was a very little one, and I hope that your next will be longer, for it is always a source of much gratification to me to hear from my own Darling. Dartie[?] tells me in her letter that it is not yet fixed when Miss Foster opens her School, so I shall hope to see my Dear Child again at Felixstowe, before she resumes those Studies, which are so essential to her future happiness and comfort, store your mind my dearly beloved, with all useful knowledge, at the same time do not neglect to cultivate that branch of your Education, which comes under the denomination of Ornamental, for Accomplishments are also necessary. You have abilities sufficient to acquire every thing. I hope neither whim or Idleness will deter you from profiting by the abilities that God has helped you with and the opportunities, which your Affectionate Father affords you, as you grow in years, you will rejoice in the fond affection, of these that love you, it will be the means of happiness to yourself, and them, neglect no opportunity Child of my heart to deserve those Affections, that when you grow up, a young Woman, and your Father increases in years, you may be to him a comfort and a blessing.



My beloved Child –
I was very much pleased at receiving
your little note, but it was a very little
one, and I hope that your next will be
longer, for it is always a source of much
gratification to me to hear from my own
Darling. Dartie tells me in her letter
that it is not yet fixed when Miss Foster
opens her School, so I shall hope to see
my Dear Child again at Felixstowe, before
she resumes those Studies, which are so
essential to her future happiness and
comfort, store your mind, my dearly
beloved, with all useful knowledge, at
the same time do not neglect to cultivate
that branch of your Education, which
comes under the denomination of
Ornamental, for Accomplishments are
also necessary. You have abilities
sufficient to acquire every thing. I
hope neither whim or Idleness will
deter you from profiting by the
abilities that God has helped you
with and the opportunities, which
your Affectionate Father affords you,
as you grow in years, you will
rejoice in the fond affection, of
these that love you, it will be the
means of happiness to yourself, and
them, neglect no opportunity Child
of my heart to deserve those
Affections, that when you grow up,
a young Woman, and your Father
increases in years, you may be to
him a comfort and a blessing.

And so you have made another Swing, and you and Hannah swing till your feet meet, God bless you. You laugh, and you play all day long, and you can make me happy, what a blessing! – ought you not to be grateful for all God's blessings. May you always be happy, My Dear One, but you must embrace the means that are given you to deserve it, otherwise you will not, my dear Child.

If Mr Garrod comes up this week which I believe is his intention to do, I hope to return with him, and then I shall see and kiss my beloved, till when may God bless, and protect you.

Your affectionate Father,

John Abbott

10 Charlotte Street

11 July 1842

The move to Thames Ditton

In 1848, the Abbotts left London and moved to Surrey.⁴³ As far as is known, none of them returned to live in Charlotte Street, and the presumption is that the house provided rental

⁴³ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 601

income until the lease (due to expire in 1880⁴⁴) was eventually sold by Susan herself, probably between 1861 (when Thomas Hawkes Tanner was still living there) and 1863 (when Susan and/or her husband bought Belsize Lodge in Hampstead).

By the time of the 1851 Census, when Susan was 20, she was living on Ditton Common, Thames Ditton, Surrey, in a household containing John Abbott (Solicitor), Alice Abbott, a cook and a housemaid, and two visitors: Annette Blake and Edward Atkinson (John's partner in law, born in Manchester).⁴⁵

John Abbott	Alice Abbott	Edw. Atkinson	Annette Blake	Susan Abbott	Housemaid
20	16	16	16	20	16
Solicitor	Cook	Lawyer	Lawyer	Daughter	Housemaid
Thames Ditton	Thames Ditton	Thames Ditton	Thames Ditton	Thames Ditton	Thames Ditton

A year later, Susan's life changed dramatically, with the deaths of John and Alice Bunce Abbott within three weeks of each other.

In research of this nature, the emphasis is always on the pragmatic: on what can be proved, or at least on what can reasonably be surmised. There is seldom any comment on the emotions, because there is seldom any firm evidence of them. Yet it is worth speculating on Susan's emotions and her general attitudes as a young woman in early 1852, even though there is no certain knowledge what they were.

Susan was an Abbott. She may have thought that her uncle was her father, and that her mother was her aunt, but she was still raised as an Abbott. The one great success of that family was Charles Abbott, 1st Baron Tenterden, John's uncle, who had gone from barber's son to Lord Chief Justice. It is more than likely that John himself was encouraged to seek a career in the law to emulate his uncle. Charles Abbott was a Tory diehard. On any political issue during his public life, he could be relied upon to take a reactionary view. He was an implacable opponent of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, and it seems appropriate that he should have died only a few months after it became law.



Charles Abbott,
1st Baron Tenterden

Yet, as discussed above, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that John did not fit the family mould, and even more evidence that Alice Bunce Abbott would not have done. Apart from the fact of mothering an illegitimate child by a married man, there are also Peacock's

⁴⁴ Email from Bedford Estates Archives

⁴⁵ 1851 England Census

attitudes to consider. Peacock spent much of his literary life lampooning Tory attitudes. It is hard to see him adopting a conventional Tory as his long term mistress. It may be that Alice held opposing views (Robert Garrod's politics may provide vicarious support for this), or that politics did not interest her. Either way, she seems to have been inclined to Bohemian personal behaviour, as was Peacock, which would have set her against the attitudes of her family, irrespective of politics.

Whatever the exigencies of the situation, it is perhaps unlikely that John and Alice would have shared a house for 20 years unless they got on well together and shared at least some similar attitudes. So Susan may have grown up in a less stuffy atmosphere than the bare facts might suggest. In some respects, she held conventional views: she was a committed member of the Church of England and clung to those beliefs when they later came under fierce assault from her Unitarian husband.⁴⁶ But, in other respects, her upbringing probably prepared her for the worlds of Bohemian culture and radical politics into which she was shortly to be pitched.

The letters to Susan from George Meredith, many of them written not long after she had left the Abbott circle for the Meredith circle, suggest that Susan followed John's admonishment not to 'neglect to cultivate that branch of your Education, which comes under the



denomination of Ornamental.' Meredith discusses literature with her as an apparent equal, and comments on her fine ear for music and her skill as a pianist.⁴⁷ Her album of Old Master and other drawings remains in her family, while her notebook on needlework (cover, left) is preserved in the Bodleian Library among the papers of the artist Henry Wallis, Mary Ellen Meredith's lover.⁴⁸

The shock of 1852

On 27 March 1852, John Abbott died at his legal premises, by now at 35 Lincolns Inn Fields, from a 'Rupture of a blood vessel in the Stomach'. This makes it sound like a sudden and unexpected death. John's death was witnessed by William Taylor.⁴⁹

Whether Alice was already ill is

On the 16th inst., at Thames Ditton, Miss Alice Bunce Abbott, in the 59th year of her age.

not known, but she died at Thames Ditton three weeks later, on 16 April 1852, from 'Chronic Bronchitis'. Her death was witnessed by her nephew, Theodosius Abbott.⁵⁰ Within the space of three weeks, Susan had lost her immediate family, at the age of 21.

⁴⁶ Neill family letters and papers, held by the author

⁴⁷ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 601

⁴⁸ Bodleian Library, MS Eng. e. 3401

⁴⁹ Death Certificate of John Abbott, DYC703975



Peacock's house, Lower Halliford

The next known fact about her is that, six months later, she was living in Thomas Love Peacock's house at Lower Halliford. This information is provided in a letter by Kate Horne, the young wife of the writer Richard Henry Horne, who was a visitor to Peacock's house at this time.⁵¹ Susan is presented as staying with Peacock's daughter Mary Ellen and her husband George Meredith, then resident in Peacock's house. Kate clearly didn't know that Susan was Peacock's daughter. It seems more likely that Susan was in fact

the guest of Peacock, but was presented as a guest of the Merediths (who were of a similar generation) to avoid awkward explanations. Conveniently, Peacock's wife had herself died at the end of the previous year.⁵²

What cannot be known is when Susan discovered her true parentage. It might have been a long time earlier. It might have been in the short period between the deaths of John and Alice. Or it might not have been until after Alice's death. With the conventions of the time, one would think it more likely that the last choice is correct, and that John and Alice would never have confessed to Susan's illegitimacy. But two factors suggest that this assumption should not necessarily be made.

The first is that several people already knew the truth. They could hardly not have done, given Alice's pregnancy when she was not married, and the fact that she kept her child. Thomas Abbott, brother to John and Alice, must have known it, and perhaps his children. The Garrods must have known it too. This does not prove that Susan knew, but when a secret is no longer a secret, it perhaps becomes harder to conceal it from the person who most needs to know.

The second factor concerns the precise relationship between Alice and Thomas Love Peacock. Susan may simply have been the product of a brief liaison. But, for the reasons explained above, it seems more probable that Alice was Peacock's long-term mistress. In that case, Peacock would surely have been a frequent visitor to both Charlotte Street and Ditton Common. Both houses would have offered a safe environment for him to conduct his affair with Alice, as well as enabling him to see his daughter, with whose welfare we know he was concerned. It is thus a reasonable supposition that 'Uncle Thomas' was a regular fixture in Susan's life from her early years.

So it is possible that Susan was told the truth sooner rather than later. She cannot have been told before she was 12 or so, or John would never have written her that particular letter. But she might have been told in her teens. Whenever the news was imparted, there must have

⁵⁰ Death Certificate of Alice Bunce Abbott, DYC 547887

⁵¹ Letter from Kate Horne to her husband, 18 November 1852

⁵² Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 602

been enough contact between Peacock and Susan for one of them to have got in touch with the other, and for Peacock to have invited Susan to stay with him.

That invitation could well have been issued immediately after Alice's death. When Kate Horne arrived to stay with the Merediths in Peacock's house in late October, Susan was already there and there is no telling when she had arrived. It could be inferred from Kate Horne's letter that Susan already knew the Merediths quite well. It could be inferred from Peacock's general behaviour towards Susan that he might have felt guilty at leaving her on her own in Thames Ditton, aged 21, suddenly bereft of John and Alice. It seems more likely that Peacock took Susan under his roof as soon as Alice died, and not a few months later.

Of possible relevance to this theory is Peacock's mysterious connection with a Miss Jane Fotheringhame, whose services he retained in some unknown capacity beginning in 1842, and for whom he and Mary Ellen were helping to find lodgings near Halliford in May 1852, the month after Alice's death.⁵³ Professor Joukovsky suggested in his edition of Peacock's letters that she might have been a companion or caregiver for his wife, but he now thinks she may have been a governess or piano teacher for Susan, and that Peacock may have arranged for her to come to Halliford to be near Susan in the difficult days after the deaths of John and Alice.

Financial independence

Whatever Susan's emotions at this time, financially she was well provided for. Alice's will, dated 10 March 1841, left the leasehold of 10 Charlotte Street in trust for the benefit of her brother John Abbott during his lifetime and, after his death, for the benefit of his 'daughter' Susan Mary Abbott, 'now of the age of eleven years or thereabouts and now at School at Ipswich.' It also left the residue of her estate, after a few specific bequests, to John Abbott or – if he was not living at the

time of her death – to his 'daughter' Susan. The trustees (on Susan's behalf) and executors were Robert Garrod and William Rayner, ship broker of Honduras Terrace, Commercial Road, Stepney.⁵⁴

Alice Bunce Abbott

I, Alice Bunce Abbott, do hereby give and devise unto Robert Garrod of Stepney in the County of Suffolk Churchward and to William Rayner of Stepney in the County of Middlesex my leasehold house and premises with the appurtenances in which I now reside situate and being at 10 Charlotte Street Stepney Square in the Parish of Saint Giles in the County of Middlesex for all the term of years of 99 years, reaching 21 days, thereof granted by Sub-Lent of lease bearing date the 25th January 1842 together with the said residue of estate of the several income annuities interest subject on payment to a rent of £11. 11. per annum and to the effect contained in and conditions and also subject to a lien thereon by the said Robert Garrod and William Rayner for the sum of one thousand pounds to be paid by them in trust to permit and suffer my brother John Abbott to use occupy and enjoy the same and the rents and profits thereof for the term of his life, he paying the ground rent and keeping the premises in repair; and upon further trust after the decease of my said brother John Abbott for the benefit of my daughter Susan Mary Abbott who of the age of eleven years or thereabouts and now at school at my brother's expense and to pay and apply the rents issues and profits in her behalf during the minority of the said Susan Mary Abbott and also after she shall be sole and unmarried for and towards her maintenance education and advancement in the world and after she shall be unmarried and shall attain the age of twenty one years or thereabouts of her unmarried widowhood shall the said income be paid to the said Susan Mary Abbott.

⁵³ Joukovsky, *Letters of TLP*, Vol. 2, pp. 305, 314-15, 324, 342-43, 350, 352

⁵⁴ Will of Alice Bunce Abbott

John Abbott's will, dated 23 July 1846, mirrored Alice's, except that Charles Saunders (Middle Temple) replaced William Rayner as one of the trustees and executors.⁵⁵ Both wills stipulated that Susan's inheritance, in the event of her marriage, should not become part of her husband's property, but should remain independently in Susan's name.

It would seem that the property in Charlotte Street was on four floors, plus an attic and basement. The auction prospectus said it contained 'dining and drawing rooms of good proportions, a library or gentleman's dressing room, six bed-chambers, a dressing-room, light kitchen, housekeeper's-room, footman's-pantry, wine-cellar, coal-vaults, paved-yard, two water-closets, and a walled-garden extending about 80 feet in depth.'⁵⁶

Given both the nature of the neighbourhood, and evidence from several census returns, the probability is that only the upper part of the building was in residential use, with the lower floors being let either to a business or to professional practices. The combined rental, in a prime London location, must have given Susan a significant income.

The Peacock and Meredith family circle

Even if Susan had been aware for a while that Peacock was her father, it is doubtful whether Peacock would have told his legitimate children of that fact, and probable that they did not discover it until after Alice's death and Susan's imminent arrival at Lower Halliford in 1852.

By that time, relations between George Meredith and Mary Ellen Peacock were strained. They had been married for only three years, but a combination of temperamental incompatibility, Meredith's impecuniousness as an unfulfilled author and, perhaps, the age difference (Meredith was seven years the younger) was already causing difficulties. It was the lack of income that led to the Merediths living with Peacock for a while.

Kate Horne's letter to her husband of 18 November 1852 alludes directly to the conflict, and to Susan's role in it:⁵⁷

Miss Abbott (Mrs Bell's friend) has lost her father and is left without any near relation, so as Mrs Meredith is very fond of her she is at present living with them, and adds to the bad influence. She is more amiable but as practical as Mrs M. and always sides with her against 'George'. I fancy Mrs M. thought I had a bad influence in an opposite direction for she always carefully prevented our ever being alone together or taking walks alone, though she knew I liked long walks and neither she nor Miss Abbott did.

(It should be mentioned that Kate Horne may have had an affair with George Meredith, and might not have been unbiased in her assessment.)

⁵⁵ Will of John Abbott jr

⁵⁶ *Morning Post*, 5 August 1833

⁵⁷ Letter from Kate Horne to her husband, 18 November 1852, *Selected Letters of George Meredith*, ed. M. Shaheen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 26–29



George Meredith

The first letter to Susan from the Merediths was written by George from Lower Halliford on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day 1854. Susan is evidently no longer living there, but it is not clear when she left. In a letter to her absent husband in September 1853, Kate Horne wrote: 'I have proposed to Miss Abbott, (the Merediths friend you know) to live with me in town in the Winter. Then she will keep house for me &c, and it will in all respects be much better than being alone. She plays very well and will help me.'⁵⁸ This seems not to have happened, but there is no telling when Susan left Peacock's house, nor whether this was her first letter from the Merediths or merely the first surviving one.

A detailed analysis of the Meredith correspondence is provided by Professor Joukovsky in his article for *Studies in Philology*.⁵⁹ The purpose of the present piece is to illuminate Susan's life, not to present a literary critique of George Meredith, so the paragraphs that follow refer only to passages of the correspondence that say something about Susan.

In this first letter, as in several others, George addresses Susan as 'Dearest Susie Pye: (née Abbott).' His playful insistence that Susan's name was formerly Abbott but is now Pye may allude to the discovery that she was Peacock's

daughter. The original Susie Pye was the intrepid heroine of the popular ballad of *Young Beichan and Susie Pye*, but the name may also be a play on the Greek letter *pi*, hence the initial P for Peacock, whose friends called him Greeky-Peaky, and who occasionally used Greek initials to sign his letters.⁶⁰ 'Susie Pye' may even have been what Peacock called Susan.

George's holiday greetings are overshadowed by the Crimean War. He refers to 'your Black Sea Sidebottom – of whom dear Mary is talking to everyone here as "Susan's Sidebottom" who was stunned by the cannonade: She calling him, in consequence "Susan's Stunner", irreverently as I think.' So it would appear that Susan was romantically involved at this time with a soldier named Sidebottom, on service in the Crimean War. He signs off: 'Alack! Alack! I have no gossip for my SUSIE, to cheer her droned-out life: but God bless her! says her sincere brother-in-law George Meredith.'⁶¹

⁵⁸ Letter from Kate Horne to her husband, 1 September 1853, MS in the Huntington Library, quoted from the microfilm copy in the British Library, RP 800/4

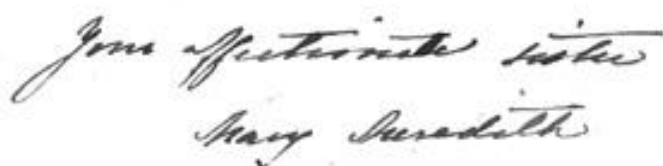
⁵⁹ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye'

⁶⁰ Joukovsky, *Letters of TLP*, Vol. 1, p. 87; Vol. 2, p. 363

⁶¹ Abbott family letters and papers, GM to SMA, December 1854

George's second letter, an extremely long one, is dated 'Thursday: somewhere in March 1855', probably the 15th or 22nd. 'Dearest Susie' is said to be 'dull where she is in the wilds bordering on Manchester.' This letter adds nothing new about Susan.⁶² At the time of his third letter (21 April 1855), it appears that Susan is now staying with Mary Ellen's sister Rosa Collinson, who has been ill, and to whom George sends his 'warm love'.⁶³ This is the first sign, but not the only one, that Susan's absorption into the Peacock/Meredith circle now extends beyond George and Mary Ellen.

The fourth letter, written from Seaford, Sussex, on 12 October 1855 for Susan 25th birthday, is interesting for two reasons. It is the only surviving letter from Mary Ellen to her half-sister, with just a



The image shows a handwritten signature in cursive script. The first line reads 'Your affectionate sister' and the second line reads 'Mary Meredith'.

postscript from George. And it suggests that Susan is not in happy circumstances. 'My dearest Susan', Mary begins, 'I cannot let your birthday pass without a word of congratulation: yes congratulation dear Susan, not for its lonely anniversary but because it renews the term of a good true life that is worth living, that is wealth to you & to your friends. I hope this may be its last lonely year . . .'. The children, Arthur and Edith, also send birthday greetings to their 'aunt Susan'.⁶⁴

One can only speculate on what is making Susan lonely, but given the recency of the reference to 'Black Sea Sidebottom', it seems likely that the relationship has come to an end, whether because Sidebottom has died in the Crimea or for other some other reason. (A Captain George Kershaw Sidebottom of the 5th Dragoon Guards died on board ship returning from the Crimea on 21 July 1855. He had served with the Heavy Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava on 25 October 1854, which may have led to him being 'stunned by the cannonade'.⁶⁵) This letter also reveals that the Merediths, in dire financial straits, have been borrowing from Susan. 'George is in daily expectation of the Ordonance Money, if it comes soon we shall be all right, if not I shall perhaps be glad to be able to borrow again of you – but I hope not to need it.' The letter is signed 'Ever dearest Susan Your affectionate sister Mary Meredith'. George's postscript adds: 'So I wish you all happiness, my dear girl! Life is an odd riddle, which you seem to be quietly solving for yourself in a manner to shame noisier ones.'⁶⁶ These words suggest that he, at least, sees her as a calm and level-headed woman: an appreciation that later events suggest is not the entire truth.

⁶² Abbott family letters and papers, GM to SMA, March 1855

⁶³ Abbott family letters and papers, GM to SMA, April 1855

⁶⁴ Abbott family letters and papers, MEM to SMA, October 1855

⁶⁵ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', p. 615, n. 87

⁶⁶ Abbott family letters and papers, GM postscript to SMA, October 1855

After this letter, there is a gap of more than five years in the surviving correspondence. By this time, Susan is married to William Mayne Neill. Of the rest of her life between leaving Lower Halliford and meeting her husband, we know almost nothing.



*Mary Ellen Meredith,
by Henry Wallis*

But there is a reference to Susan in a letter Mary Ellen writes to (later Sir) Henry Cole on 12 April 1856, seeking a position for George as Under Secretary to the Society of Arts: 'Miss Abbott & myself propose to go & see Mrs Cole & all your circle on Tuesday next unless we hear that it will be inconvenient.'⁶⁷ So Mary Ellen was in some contact (perhaps in regular contact) with Susan after the period covered by the letters. It would be extraordinary if almost all the Meredith letters to Susan had been written by George, and only the one by her sister. Indeed, George's first letter implies that Mary Ellen writes often to her. But none of those other letters now survive, so one cannot say how many there were, nor what period they covered, nor what topics. Mary Ellen's friend Anne Ramsden Bennett remarked that 'Mrs Meredith was

always interested in all kinds of philanthropic works and was therefore heart and soul with the little band of Christian Socialists as they called themselves.'⁶⁸ Mary Ellen may well have involved Susan in her work on philanthropic and feminist issues.

By late 1855/early 1856 (when George's letters to Susan appear to have ceased for the time being), the Merediths were increasingly living apart. Some time after August 1856, what had begun as a platonic friendship between Mary Ellen and the pre-Raphaelite painter Henry Wallis developed into a passionate love affair. In September 1857, pregnant with Wallis's child, Mary Ellen asked George for a separation. The child (Harold 'Felix') was born on 18 April 1858. Mary Ellen, still attached to Wallis but no longer living with him, died in Weybridge on 22 October 1861.⁶⁹



Henry Wallis

The traumatic years covered in this brief paragraph must have had their effect on Susan, by now closely implicated in the lives of Mary Ellen, George and their friends. She probably knew more about the circumstances than almost anyone else; cannot have failed to have had opinions on the subject. The only thing we know about those opinions is that she did not categorically take her sister's side. The later batch of

⁶⁷ N. Joukovsky, 'George and Mary Meredith', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 97 (2000), p. 481

⁶⁸ N. Joukovsky, 'New Correspondence of Mary Ellen Meredith', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 106, No. 4 (2009), p. 491

⁶⁹ Joukovsky, 'Dearest Susie Pye', pp. 604 and 613

letters from George, written shortly before Mary Ellen's death, show that George and Susan were still on friendly terms, and that George was willing to say things to Susan about his failed marriage that he certainly would not be saying if he had felt that Susan was unsympathetic towards him.

We do not know where Susan lived between the time she left Peacock's house (whenever that was, but sometime between November 1852 and December 1854) and when she met her future husband in September 1858. She had inherited the house in Charlotte Street, but there is no evidence that she lived there herself. She might well have continued to live in Thames Ditton. It would have kept her close to Peacock and the Merediths, and the letter quoted beneath suggests that she was living near Kingston-on-Thames.

Whatever the truth, Susan seems to have remained close to Mary Ellen, at least for a while. A letter survives from her to her sister, bizarrely preserved in the New York Public Library and providing recipes. It was probably written in 1853 or 1854:⁷⁰

My dear Mary.

I send you the receipts you asked for. Mrs Drysdale has lent me Soyer's book I have been screaming over some of it, it is so absurd. The papers are directed by Mr Meredith I fear you are not at home, since Bakewell puddings have just arrived You must come over Monday or Tuesday or send for them – Come if you can for a day. The paper due Wednesday arrived on Friday, & Friday's to day. I shall go to Kingston the first opportunity and make a grand riot. I have read the Vestiges & have just begun Humbolt's Cosmos – quite hard books I find to understand the hard words – I shall not send the papers back as I shall expect to see you Monday or Tuesday I have more news but must reserve till we meet.

Love to all I have sent all the papers tell George – Yours ever Susan

Mary Ellen wrote a long review of Soyer's book for *Fraser's Magazine*, and she collaborated with both George and her father on writing a cookbook themselves, although there seems to have been some dispute over who contributed how much to it.⁷¹ Susan would appear to have been involved in this venture, if only peripherally.

The Merediths' letters suggest that Susan lived alone but spent much of her time visiting various friends and relatives, including Peacock's other married daughter, Rosa Collinson, and friends 'in the wilds bordering on Manchester'. Helen Bennett (Robert Garrod's daughter) lived in Altrincham, near Manchester, with her husband Robert, who appears to have had a business relationship with John Abbott.⁷²

⁷⁰ New York Public Library, Helen Hay Whitney Collection, MS 16, ff. 187–8

⁷¹ Johnson, *Lesser Lives*, pp. 81–83 and *passim*

⁷² *London Gazette*, part 2 (London: T. Neuman, 1841), p. 3388

A passage in a later letter from her husband reveals that Susan had lived for a time in Paris: 'If you are lonely or disconsolate now is not your life richer – less isolated – more happy than if still a 'spinster' . . . gadding about Paris as unprotected female.'⁷³ When Susan returned to Paris for a time in late 1865, while William was in America, she was there under the auspices of her friend Nelie, who may well have been the painter N  lie Jacquemart. Susan's album of drawings suggests that she spent considerable time in the Louvre, and – while that could have happened in 1865/66 – it could equally well have happened before her marriage, or both.

William Mayne Neill

Susan Mary Abbott met William Mayne Neill in London on 30 September 1858. He was an Irishman, born in Belfast, resident in New York, and back in Europe for a brief business trip *cum* holiday. That very same evening he wrote her a proposal of marriage:⁷⁴

My dear Miss Abbott,

I am going to do what the world and perhaps you yourself would think very foolish – but I would have you know before utterly condemning me for it that it is an exceptional case. All my best friends have long condemned me for the very opposite fault to that I am now about to commit.



William Mayne Neill

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 bachelorhood 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.

But it now appears that an all-wise all merciful father has given me that caution & held me back for a purpose – that my heart and my hand might be my own to lay at your feet the first day of our meeting. To delay that I might examine and criticize I feel would be almost an insult to you – There may be more beautiful more elegant more cultivated more excellent women on the earth but I can hardly fancy the existence of one who could more fully content my eye – I cannot realise the existence of any who could so melt and draw out the love of my heart while she so thoughtfully commanded the respect of my head. I do not wait to see if you are

⁷³ Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMN, 11 December 1859

⁷⁴ Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMA, 30 September 1858

perfect because I neither expect it nor seek it. If you were you would be far too good for me.

Look at this matter then, let me beseech you, in the same light. Do not let my many short comings our short acquaintance be a bar to my suit – If it be possible be inspired with that faith which I shew in you. I know there is little about me to charm at first sight and I have not the vanity to suppose that I have yet won even the smallest corner of your heart – but, I feel the same confidence that I do in the sun will rise tomorrow, that I shall have the whole of your pure warm loving woman's heart before we are long together. Love, and kindness, and happiness together, beget love and I know that you cannot be the object of my love my solicitude & my toil when at business, you cannot be my joy and reward when I come home, without soon reciprocating my attachment. And as to my faults which you will find plenty enough nothing better do I crave than that you would take them in hand, help me to cure them and lead me up to the higher and truer standard of your nature.

Still I ought not to undervalue your presentiment in this matter. If it tells you that what I seek is impossible – that your whole heart can never be mine I know you will have the firmness and real kindness to tell me so frankly – in unmistakeable language – and then I shall trouble you no more – I shall not even crave an ordinary friendship which would be an impossibility on my side but I shall endeavour never to see you again on this side of the grave and only pray that the incompatibility may be done away with in some future sphere.

*In mine at least with it
Sign myself Your lover
Wm M. Neill
30th Sept 1858*

For once at least will I sign myself

Your lover

Wm. M. Neill

30th Sept 1858

William decided that, even by his standards, this was a little impetuous and he did not send the letter. The next day he set off for a brief business trip to France, first to Le Havre and then to Paris, where he saw *Il Trovatore* at the French Opera. Back in England on 8 October, he writes another proposal, and this time he does send it:⁷⁵

On the very first day of our meeting before retiring to bed I sat down & wrote you a proposal of marriage. Fear alone that my precipitation would ensure a refusal held it back – but I thanked God that for so many long years the longing of my heart for some one to whom I could surrender my whole being had not been gratified since it was to have so rich a fulfilment at last. That I should be disappointed in my suit was

⁷⁵ Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMA, 8 October 1868

an idea I could not entertain for a moment. An instinct like that by which the lamb knows its own mother seemed to tell me you were made to be my wife and the closest arguments that reason might bring forward to the contrary were quite thrown away. Such was the case the first night but the following morning judgment got sufficiently the upper hand to prompt a little delay.

But still though reason may tell me I have no qualities to charm and that my suit is almost hopeless the heart will take no such answer. It has persisted in feeling that it has found its mate and all nature all existence has worn a rosy hue to me in spite of myself... And then my mind would go off castle building to New York. How you would like my house standing so ready to receive you...

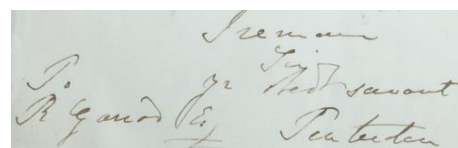
William's impulsiveness was rewarded. The following day, Saturday 9 October, he and Susan became engaged on a train journey from London to Liverpool, thence by steamer to Belfast.⁷⁶ On 22 November they were married in Marylebone.⁷⁷ By the end of the year they were living, man and wife, virtual strangers, in New York.



All Souls, Langham Place

Their wedding was at All Souls, Langham Place, on 22 November 1858. The witnesses were Susan's uncle Thomas Abbott, Robert Garrod, Helen and Robert William Bennett (Garrod's daughter and son-in-law), Jane Cuthbert (a friend of Susan's), Edgar Flower (the youngest son of the Stratford-upon-Avon brewer and a friend of William's), and C. Neill (William's sister-in-law Kate, wife of his brother James and a close friend of Susan's).⁷⁸

Before the wedding, William needed to write to Robert Garrod, as executor of the wills of Alice Bunce and John Abbott, if not to get Garrod's consent to the marriage, at least to confirm William's acceptance of the provisions of those wills, especially with regard to Susan's inheritance remaining in her own name and not becoming part of William's estate.⁷⁹ (A wise provision, it must be said: William had already been bankrupted once, and was later to be so again.) And it was to Robert Garrod, not to Susan herself, that the 2nd Baron Tenterden wrote to offer his congratulations on Susan's engagement.⁸⁰



Elizabeth Bell (identified by Kate Horne as a friend of Susan's) and her husband, Robert, a radical journalist and man of letters, wrote to Susan with their own congratulations:⁸¹

⁷⁶ Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMA, 9-12 October 1858

⁷⁷ Marriage Certificate of William Neill and Susan Abbott

⁷⁸ Marriage Certificate of William Neill and Susan Abbott

⁷⁹ Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMA, 12 October 1858

⁸⁰ Abbott family letters and papers, Lord Tenterden to Robert Garrod, 12 November 1858

⁸¹ Abbott family letters and papers, RB to SMA, 15 October 1858

My dear Susan,
Your news was indeed, a surprise.
Having left us only a few days before under
an impression that you were going to settle
down in Belfast, you may judge you were not
anxious to learn that your destination
was the United States - in a double
sense too!

Your news was, indeed, a surprise. Having left us only a few days before under an impression that you were going to settle down in Belfast, you may judge of our astonishment to learn that your destination was the United States—in a double sense too! I need not say to you how truly we desire that the change may be fraught with happiness to you... Pray present our united compliments & congratulations to Mr Neill, & with sincere wishes for your welfare.

It is uncertain how Susan and William came to meet in the first place. But the inference from William's letters is that Susan was already a friend of Catherine (Kate) Neill (*née* Larmour), a sister-in-law of William, married to his brother James. Susan was already planning to go to Belfast to see Kate, and (according to Robert Bell's letter above) was intending to settle there. Perhaps Kate mentioned that her brother-in-law was coming home from London at much the same time and suggested that they travelled together. In that case, the original meeting in London on 30 September would have been arranged on Kate's introduction, so that her great friend and her brother-in-law could meet before they travelled together a week later.⁸²

How much Susan knew of William's family at this point is debatable. But his family was every bit as extraordinary as hers, and as unconventional. Who knows what Susan might have wanted from a relationship, in addition to the abiding things? There is evidence, both from George Meredith's letters and from her involvement in Mary's social projects, that she had wide cultural interests and a taste for radical politics. However, it would be surprising if the complete unravelling of her childhood assumptions had not created a yearning for solidity and respectability.

William offered both. He was a solid Ulster merchant of strong Unitarian faith. Yet he was politically involved as a radical, already mixing in abolitionist and feminist circles. He had cultivated the friendship of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Washington Irving, and Nathaniel Parker Willis in America.⁸³ No doubt there were huge adjustments to be made by two people who had known each other for less than two months, but there were huge compatibilities as well. Both of them would find their impetuosity rewarded.

The unanswered questions

Considering that most of the information in this piece was unknown until the discovery of Meredith's letters in my parents' attic, it has been possible to uncover a remarkable amount. But much remains (and will probably continue to remain) unknown. What was Susan's relationship with Peacock? Did she see him again after she left his protection at Lower Halliford in 1852/1854? Did she attend his funeral? Did she tell William that he was her father?

⁸² Neill family letters and papers, WMN to SMA, 12 October 1858 and 11 December 1859

⁸³ A. Hilén, ed., *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966–82), Vol. 3, p. 459; Neill family letters and papers, *passim*

And did she distance herself from Mary Ellen, her half-sister, despite having formed a close relationship with her? Professor Joukovsky suggests that she might not have done: 'I suspect that Susan continued to correspond with Mary Ellen after her separation from Meredith, and she may well have visited her when she was dying in August-October 1861.'⁸⁴ However, to judge from her later correspondence with George Meredith, Susan took his side after Meredith's separation from Mary Ellen. Why?

Answers can only be tentative, and the most likely one will sound absurd to modern ears. But, at the time, it was barely conceivable that a respectable wife would leave her husband for another man, live with him and have a child by him. When Mary Ellen did that, eloping with the painter Henry Wallis, it was a scandal. Many of Mary Ellen's friends cut her. Wallis's career never fully recovered. George Meredith was forever regarded as the injured party, however little he deserved to be.

Susan would appear to have been a woman of strong religious convictions. It seems possible that she could not forgive Mary Ellen for her behaviour. In which case, she must have found it hard to forgive Peacock for what he had done to her mother, despite his subsequent kindness to her. In one sense, Susan and George Meredith were in analagous situations, which may have strengthened the bond between them.

George Meredith certainly meant something to Susan. She would not otherwise have kept those letters (and no others, and no Peacock mementos, as far as is known), despite their potential for future embarrassment. But for that affection, her brief entanglement with Thomas Love Peacock and his family, not to mention his paternity of her, would have remained unknown.



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(Susie Pye, née Abbott)

Jim Powell, 14 March 2022

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⁸⁴ N. Joukovsky to the author