The Life and Novels of Isabella St John

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The Regency Revisited

By

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Frontispiece. Lady Isabella St John 1861. Archives of Lydiard House Museum LYD 1994-120-1.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1834, some curious, comic verses appeared in an anthology edited by Lady Blessington, that included contributions by Lord Castlereagh, Harrison Ainsworth, Thomas Moore, Benjamin Disraeli, Mary Shelley and the editor herself. It was entitled "The Beggar's Petition":

> YE rich and ye wise, ye that dote on mince-pies,
> I pray ye, this question digest:
> In what way can such fare as the pure open air
> Be most nicely and temptingly drest?
>
> In the cookery books I have cast anxious looks,
> But, alas! they've been ever in vain;
> E'en mendicity broth, though call'd flumm'ry and froth,
> Is neither of air nor of rain.
>
> Tell me, then, if you can, how this diet of man
> Should be cooked—whether boiled or roast?
> Foul or fair, is it best? – from the north or the west?
> When it rushes from inland, or coast?
>
> As digestible food, in vapour is't good?
> Is it better when dry, or when moist?
> When heavy, or light?-- in the day, or the night?
> In thunder, in lightning, or frost?
>
> Oh, *bons vivans* so wise, let me hear your replies,
> I am dying your nostrums to follow!
> For my hunger to stay, the air raw ev'ry day,
> Howe'er nauseous, my doom is to swallow.
>
> And I blush to avow, what I needs must allow,
> Raw things my aversion create;
> Whatever is crude—thoughts, youths, girls, or food –
> Excites my most rancorous hate![1]

It was prompted by an article published in another magazine that advised people who could not afford to eat to take a brisk walk in the fresh air, which would allay their pangs. The verses are rough and ready, but make their

point, reacting with sharp sarcasm to the article's advice, by asking how fresh air is to be cooked, and what sort of weather serves best to allay the appetites of hungry paupers. "Mendicity broth" or "Mendicity soup" was the meagre gruel served up at workhouses for inmates and sometimes also for local beggars, consisting of a vast cauldron of water in which a few vegetables and an even smaller quantity of meat were cooked and doled out in wooden bowls.[2] The poem is a reproof of the smug, complacent rich who give such callous advice to the poor and starving.[3]

The poem was not written by an inmate of a workhouse, nor by one of the Spencean Philanthropists, Chartists, Owenites, or any other radical movement active at this time. It was written by Lady Isabella St. John, a duke's daughter. She had published two books although she had not actually put her name on the title page of either, and she would go on to publish more. The verses give a glimpse of her strong personality and opinions. It might be assumed that she had no experience of hardship or poverty. In fact she was not always rich, nor was she always wise.

Five years earlier, at the age of thirty-seven, she had dismayed all her relations and defied her father, by marrying a man seven years her junior, who had neither rank nor money. The reaction of her social circle was a mixture of shock, disapproval and pity. Only five people were present at the wedding at St George's Hanover Square in August 1829 – the bride and groom, the clergyman who married them and two witnesses. None of her close family, the Fitzroys, or her husband's, the St. Johns, attended.

In the years that followed she published a string of books that are all very concerned about the status of women in marriage, and the laws that applied if wives became estranged, separated, or divorced from their husbands. What happened to the children, the property, and to the wife's reputation? Views on this were very gradually changing. In the Regency period the case that had aroused the most intense public interest had been that of Queen Caroline, the wife of George IV who, in 1820, with boundless hypocrisy, tried to divorce her for adultery. St. John writes in *The St Clairs*:

> In the days of the trial alluded to, Vice, under the plea of decorum, stalked barefaced. Half the world burnt their newspapers ere they were read, the other half bound theirs when carefully perused; and the government of the country, in its ultra-virtue, countenanced by their support one of the most immoral proceedings that ever was witnessed in England, or perhaps in any other civilized country in the world.[4]

St John did not let her social background dictate her view of life. She tells us of one character that "though a fine lady [she] was not at all ill-informed as to that society which extended itself beyond the exclusive circle

within which some of her friends intrenched themselves. Mrs Cleveland knew that the Fauxbourg St Germain is not Paris, – nor Grosvenor Square, London! This knowledge she had contrived to pick up in her earlier years, with some other matters of a similar nature." [5]

Most of St John's books were written in the 1830s, around the time of the Great Reform Bill. The stories are usually set in or just after the Regency period, the period when George IV was Regent and then King; it was the period of the Napoleonic wars and the joyful exodus abroad for British people that followed. Even her later books hark back to this period in retrospect. We are told of one MP that he "trod the ground of St Stephen's" meaning the old House of Commons before it burnt down. Her picture of this epoch does not deny it glamour and elegance, but it also reveals a lot of what lies beneath. In fact what emerges is that Lady Isabella was notably disaffected with her class and background. A character in one of her books says that his views on politics are what is known as "that sort of liberalism called in England radicalism," and this sounds like a description of her own. She exclaims in one of her novels, "When will the gifts of fortune be more equally balanced in our fair isle? – or would it be advantageous that they should be so? The legislator says all would then be poor, the philosopher that contentment would balance the evil, the moralist that what is just is right, unjust wrong".[6]

Staying in Florence in 1830, when the rumblings of the July Revolution in France had reached Italy, and there was a distinct possibility of the same ideas spreading there, she wrote that such a revolution against absolute rule was "very much wanted" and she only regretted that it was likely to be violent.[7] In one of her novels, the hero asks his brother how he can consider taking an official post from the British government, "a government you despise" and there is a very strong implication that they both share this view, as does the heroine. [8]

Her first book had the very ironic title *Wedded Life in the Upper Ranks.* It was published in 1831, only thirteen years after Susan Ferrier published her celebrated novel, *Marriage,* but there is a world of difference. Whereas Ferrier is heavily didactic, showing us a heroine whose hasty elopement leads to misery and whose daughter learns from those errors, St John's book takes as its heroine a woman who falls in love with her husband's best friend. It is a daring and provocative choice, just crying out to be denounced as immoral. While most of her books have happy endings, or at any event avoid tragic ones, they are often concerned with forbidden passions, filled with improper ideas and observations, and they chafe at the limited role society permits to women.

We need not look far in any of St. John's books to find feminist ideas – using the term to mean questioning restrictive conventions of behaviour for women and laws that kept them dependent. When one of her heroines is walking along the sea shore with a man, he compares life to an ocean with strong and dangerous waves.

> "To a man," answered Geraldine, "such may be life, but not to woman."
>
> "Do you envy or pity our troubled existence?"
>
> "Envy. You know you exist; rising on the wild waves, you feel it; guiding your powerful steeds, you *live*. But to a woman, who treads the same ground year after year, to whom language is hardly necessary to express the few ideas she is obliged to utter, to whom the gift of mind is almost a torment, talents superfluous, and her daily food mockery to sustain so useless and unprofitable a life, to such a one the storms of life would be enjoyment." [9]

A heroine who chafes at the narrow, inactive existence she is expected to endure on account of her sex, who demands why she cannot be allowed to "gain her livelihood by her talents", who is prepared to take the risks of foreign travel and society's accusations of impropriety to change her condition and do something worthwhile, and prefers to work as a nurse or a governess rather than to marry a man she does not love, is a heroine who is a century ahead of her time. [10]

Several reviewers decried St. John's writing for being ungrammatical. Occasionally it is. Here and there one can find wrongly connected subordinate clauses – what I call "insubordinate clauses" – or a plural verb following a collective noun. She has the habit of dropping French and more rarely Italian phrases and quotations into her writing, a mannerism prevalent in her time. It was an expected way of proving that you were an educated person. Such things do not matter greatly as she has powers of expression, and often writes with felicity, subtlety and wit. She makes sophisticated use of narrative devices, and her stories are original and unconventional. They probe into the characters' inner thoughts and feelings and challenge hasty or simplistic moral judgements. Moreover they give a drily sarcastic picture of the English upper class, all the more effective for being written by someone who has insider knowledge.

St. John was not always sheltered and privileged; she experienced ups and downs of fortune and in the period when most of her novels were written she was the breadwinner for her family; this enabled her to write with insight and authenticity about such matters, and the injustice of certain

laws particularly those applying to women. She once complained in a letter that "in the eye of the law I am nobody as a married woman". [11]

In a collection named *The Keepsake for 1835*, St. John published a story with the title "Worldly Wisdom". [12] Looking at the list of other contributors to the same volume helps to situate St. John in a map of the novel in her time. They included Julia Lockwood, whom she knew personally; Caroline Norton, the campaigner for women's rights, with whom she had many friends and relations, as well as interests, in common; and Mary Shelley, to whom she was related by marriage. The last contributed a story set in Italy called "The Trial of Love". [13]

St. John's story *Mrs Cleveland* is a heartfelt protest against the law that gave a husband control of his wife's property and income, whether earned or inherited. It is not the only story in which she draws attention to this issue. Other feminists, including Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Craven, had protested about it before, and they had not been listened to. St. John uses fiction as a vehicle to raise public awareness and highlight the plight of wives who might be innocent, devoted and deserving, yet could do nothing to prevent a husband frittering away the money on which their own and their children's very existence depended.

St. John more than once satirizes the electoral system, a grave impertinence coming from a writer who was not allowed to vote. Her account of a parliamentary election in *Mrs Cleveland* was published in January 1836, not long after the Reform Act, when such matters were very topical. Six months later in August that year, Dickens' satirical account of an election appeared in *The Pickwick Papers*. The Eatanswill election in *Pickwick* is frantic, farcical, noisy, and very much like a grand gala occasion. The writing builds up excitement, action, bustle and commotion almost to a turmoil, in a somewhat long-winded way. There is confession of outrageous practices such as drugging voters, and there are broad hints about bribery. The agent on Mr Pickwick's side boasts he has got their supporters drunk and locked up so that no opposition lobbyists can influence them. There is a woman, Mrs Pott, complaining that she cannot bear to hear about politics and prefers to play cards. The Tory candidate, the Honourable Samuel Slumkey, of Slumkey Hall, kisses a lot of babies before he is duly elected.

In 1834 another novel *A Year at Hartlebury or The Election,* attributed to Benjamin and Sarah Disraeli, featured a parliamentary election in the imaginary town of Fanchester. The name is an allusion to Manchester, a town newly-enfranchised in 1832. The proceedings are described in a way that is fiercely polemical and heavily partisan against the Whigs, whose policies the narrator tells us are bound to bring everything to ruin; they are denounced as "political swindlers", religious hypocrites, avaricious landlords,

obsessed with giving rights to black slaves, and vulgarly prejudiced against the aristocracy, who are always better mannered and better dressed. It suggests that the Whigs have a secret aim of destroying the established church, monarchy and the very nation itself. In short, they are crudely demonized. [14]

Caroline Norton also included a detailed account of a parliamentary election in her novel *The Woman's Reward,* published in 1835. Her account focuses entirely on what goes on behind the scenes. In this way it is the opposite of Dickens. Though unsympathetic to the Tories, it is not violently partisan, nor does it allege outright bribery. She portrays voters as swayed by petty favours and business interest, and she describes how the supporters of one candidate set out to nobble the other rather than argue any point of policy. The women characters are extremely influential, with a crystal clear understanding of what is going on, and indeed their influence and exertions are decisive. The victor owes his success to his sister.[15]

St. John's satire of the Ashbridge election (which includes a disclaimer in a footnote saying it was written before the Reform Act) is in many ways the best of the four, by virtue of its subtle wit, irony and penetration. With the interplay between the supposedly naive candidate and his anxious, fretting, agent, it is a sophisticated piece of writing. She does not fulminate against any party or any candidate. She does, however, include this speech, made by one of the voters to a prospective MP:

> "Whatever may be your political opinions, I must inform you that ours of the town of Ashbridge are liberal. We are against king, lords and church, we do not much fancy the House of Commons, we abominate the army, are averse to the navy, the new police, taxation, tithes, poor rates and unpaid magistrates; in short sir, we of the town of Ashbridge are for the abolition of abuses, for which end we are for universal suffrage and vote by ballot, you understand me, sir, we are for radical reform in its most comprehensive and extended meaning, by which alone honest men may obtain their rights and get their own...As to the slave trade we are indifferent. You may vote as you like in that respect." [16]

When we consider St John's background, it is not surprising that she knew quite a lot about elections. Her novel *The St Clairs* is a satirical work that depicts, in a very unflattering light, a great noble family rather like her own. And *Geraldine Hamilton,* St. John's longest novel, published in 1833, should have established her long ago as a significant writer of this period. It ought to be of particular interest to feminists.

St John never seems to have lost her religious faith, nevertheless her Christianity is very far from the precious high-churchiness of Charlotte M. Yonge. It is all about benevolence and social good. In one of her books she describes an Anglican church where the local landowning family, the St. Aubins, have their own pew, as was then the custom, and notes that it was elevated "two feet above those of the less worthy and untitled".[17]

Throughout the 19th century the reading public lapped up stories about the aristocracy, many written in an uncritical and obsequious fashion. They were called "Fashionable Novels" or "Silver Fork" fiction. Nothing would sell a book better than titles and descriptions of grandeur. This is how Disraeli, in *Lothair,* describes a ducal family with several daughters:

> After seventeen years of a delicious home they [the daughters] were presented [at court], and immediately married; and all to personages of high consideration. After the first conquest, this fate seemed as regular as the order of Nature."[18]

Rather than being the order of nature, it has a strong resemblance to one of the conveyor belts in production lines that were proliferating with the Industrial Revolution. The female moves along it to a fixed, ineluctable fate and falls into a box for packaging. High society is a factory, wives are a product and marriage an automated process. In the novels of Isabella St. John we find something very different.

A recent critic, Professor Janine Barchas, has pointed out the existence of a surviving copy of the first edition of *Mansfield Park*, with Lady Isabella St. John's name and various notes written inside. This was definitely her property and, assuming the observations are by her, St. John should be recognized as the first Jane Austen scholar. (It is true that the book must have had other owners, but the handwriting looks like hers). Some of the notes may have been made when she was only twenty-two, her age when the first edition of *Mansfield Park* was published. Others may have been made later, as she inscribes her address as Hampton Court, which she did not move into until after her marriage. Nevertheless the comments she makes about Austen's book – and she finds only a few flaws in what she calls "this otherwise perfect novel" – include some very astute points. It is indeed very unlikely, in fact totally incredible, that Henry Crawford would have fallen in love with Fanny Price unless she were extremely pretty; and somewhat unfair that Maria Bertram is not allowed to marry again. The punishment of Maria has been acknowledged by generations of critics to be harsh and excessive. She is cast out in disgrace for her crime of adultery, while her parents, who own a plantation run on slave-labour, get away with a slap on the wrist. St John's attitude to marriage and divorce was somewhat

different and may have had something to do with the fact that her grandmother was divorced, under circumstances that few people today would consider fair or equitable. [19]

St John had read Austen with admiration and learned a lot from her. Having done so, she set out to write something different. To read her books is to re-visit the Regency with a different tour guide. She certainly has her recurrent themes and many of her plots centre on people who are coerced into marriage by their family; alongside this we find an equal number of people who have been prevented from marrying as they wished. Upper class society is a world of pretence and venality where everybody is at the mercy of hasty and unjust public opinion, and happy endings can be somewhat belated if they arrive at all. Nevertheless there are some people who feel and act generously, carrying out benevolent schemes often *incognito*. Love in St. John's books is very tenacious and often persists long after the parties concerned have married somebody else. Lord St Aubin marries Lady Alicia, yet cannot eradicate the memory of Miss Gordon, his first love, from his mind. Delamore in *The Wife and Friends* is a similar case.

St. John does not, like Austen, shun all mention of impropriety in a way that can seem excessively prim. We are told that one of her heroes has had an affair with an actress before he was married. Unlike Austen, St. John sometimes tells us what men do when no women are around, and she does not hesitate to write at length from the point of view of male narrators. She is confident that she can understand what goes on in their minds and in their world. In fact she is rather fond of using male narrators. While St. John does not condone infidelity, a divorced woman in one of her novels is allowed to go to live with a perfectly amiable unmarried friend, and we are told that her husband "found a new wife to weary". What St. John regards as a crime is the use of soldiers to put down bread riots.

Barchas points out a belligerent contemporary review of one of St. John's novels, that called her work a "deleterious fungus" and a "poisonous mushroom of the toadstool variety". It is a great mistake to take this review as a substitute for reading her books and forming our own opinions. Barchas's mistake in this respect has already been copied into Wikipedia, the amplification machine for all errors, inaccuracies and shoddy pseudo-scholarship, which also gets her address at Hampton Court wrong. Yet it would be easy to find critics abusing the works of Jane Austen, and these critics are celebrated authors, not just some pompous ass hiding behind anonymity in a periodical. Austen has been called "commonplace, confined", "vulgar in tone, sterile in artistic invention, imprisoned in the wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit, or knowledge of the world...pinched and narrow", an "old maid...bad, mean, snobbish", and

"*vulgaire*". Mark Twain wrote "Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin bone!" Would it be a good idea to accept these opinions as "definitive" without actually reading her books? [20]

St John got some good reviews, and she was not of course the only author who received negative ones. Another who did was Sydney Morgan. One absolutely vicious review in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1833 called Morgan's *Dramatic Scenes*, "anile twaddle". ("Anile" means appertaining to an old woman and Morgan was fifty-two.) Perhaps it was the same critic, and in both instances, we should suspect that the sex of the author and her political opinions were a factor in any hostile review. [21] In 1833, a particularly pompous reviewer in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* classified St. John along with a lot of other titled authors of "fashionable novels", calling their books "trash" and labelling them as "advocates of the defamed aristocracy". [22] To call Isabella St. John an "advocate of the defamed aristocracy" is nonsense. It is like putting Harrison Ainsworth's *Windsor Castle* into the tourist guidebook section of a bookshop – something I have also seen.

Barchas points out that names occur in *Mrs Cleveland &c* that can be found in Austen. True, and Austen used names she found in her favourite authors too. Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* is named after the rake Sir Clement Willoughby in *Evelina,* and Fanny Price is named after a modest maiden in one of Cowper's poems. It is true that St. John has no particular talent for inventing names for her characters. In this respect she does not excel. In others she does. I am going to disregard the severe aspersions Barchas casts on St. John's books, and I suggest that other readers do likewise. It is a pity that she did not scrutinize *Mrs Cleveland, and the St Clairs &c* carefully enough to notice that it is not one novel but two novellas and one more story of moderate length issued in a 3-volume format.[23]

Barchas comments that St. John presumes to know something about Austen's life. [24] Quite possibly she did, long before any memoirs were published, because she was acquainted with the Craven family. Her family and the Cravens became related by marriage in 1812. In the summer of 1827, she went to stay with Lord and Lady Craven at Coombe Abbey in Warwickshire, and this was probably not the first time, because she remarked on the changes being made there. Lord Craven was a cousin of Cassandra Austen's fiancé, Tom Fowle, whom he had employed as his chaplain; and he was the patron of Tom's brother Rev. Fulwar Fowle, husband of Jane Austen's close friend Eliza Lloyd. Louisa, Lady Craven, a former actress, was an admirer of Jane Austen and had written the authoress a complimentary letter about *Emma*. St John also knew Lord Craven's sister Georgiana Craven, who might have provided further information. [25]

St John was an avid and opinionated reader. In *Geraldine Hamilton*, she writes a defence of the town versus the country, as a riposte to fashionable, romantic, rural ideals. It starts by quoting a line from a poem by Cowper, "*God made the country and man made the town".*

> Beautiful as the line is, and universally believed as admired, its claim to truth, like many other trite quotations, admits of question. For if, by that, we acknowledge that the hand of God is only to be seen in the productions of nature, most assuredly we are mistaken, because to a philosophic and truly Christian mind his power may be viewed in crowded cities as well as in silent groves; and heard in the hum of men as well as in that of birds and bees; and in walking the streets, with an eye that feeling gives, the wonders of art may be traced to the Almighty Giver, who in his bounty has bestowed such power on man. Painting and music are chiefly to be appreciated in cities. While Geraldine feasted her eyes on the beauties of a gallery of paintings, and regaled her ears with the charms of music, in which the perfections of every style and every clime were equally displayed, in both arts was she less grateful, less of a Christian, than in the retirement of Newtown Hamilton? Far, far otherwise. [26]

Clearly she had read his poem with pleasure, and was nevertheless as ready to challenge him on some points as she was to challenge Austen. In a similar way she sometimes mocks, sometimes quotes Mme de Staël, revealing how engaged she is with the text. True appreciation does not have to be uncritical.

Hannah More is another author whom St. John presumed to criticize. In one of her later books she includes a chapter called "The Character of Florio" describing a perfect man of the world, cynical, materialistic, polished and dissipated. The title is harking back to More's poem, "Florio, a Tale for Fine Gentlemen and Fine Ladies", in which such a man is reformed and reclaimed by marriage to a pious girl named Celia. Under her influence he becomes a devout Christian and perfect, domesticated husband. In St. John's story no such transformation occurs. A woman who marries a Florio has a bitter disappointment and it turns out to be a harrowing experience. St. John is questioning whether women exist to be saviours of men, and wondering whether it is worth the risk. She has no hesitation in disagreeing with the writer who was considered the *doyenne* of the Bluestockings of her day.[27]

Three of St. John's books have recently been re-published without any author's name. *Wedded Life* has been re-printed three times, *Geraldine Hamilton* and *Mrs. Cleveland, and the St. Clairs,* at least once each. Some, but not all, of her works are listed on the website of the Women's Print

History Project. This is a very welcome sign of renewed interest. It is to be hoped that future editions will give credit by naming this much neglected author, and editing out the misprints that persist in the texts. [28]

In this book I have reproduced many quotations with the original spelling and punctuation, but in the text have used the modern spelling Fitzroy, rather than the original spelling FitzRoy, simply in order to be consistent.

CHAPTER ONE

A DISADVANTAGEOUS ALLIANCE

It is a curious fact that Lady Isabella St. John had Horace Walpole for her godfather. Her books would not have been much to his taste, nor would her behaviour. "Rancorous hate" would have sounded to his ears most unladylike. Fortunately he was saved from any knowledge of them, as he died when she was aged six. Long afterwards, when she was an old woman, she remembered being taken to see him, and that he was wearing a dressing-gown. It was the sort of thing that stuck in the memory of a small child. [29]

She was born Isabella Frances Fitzroy in May 1792, the year when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her father was George Fitzroy, fourth Duke of Grafton, known at that date as the Earl of Euston as his father, the third Duke, was still alive. The Fitzroy family was senior Whig nobility, which was perhaps odd, since they were descended from the Stuarts.

The 1st Duke had been the illegitimate son of King Charles II and Barbara Castlemaine; his royal father conferred several estates on him and he found a wealthy wife. The second Duke was a friend of Robert Walpole, and adopted a Whig line from which his descendants never swerved. He was at one time Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. His eldest son, who never became duke, treated his wife so abominably that he was blamed for her early death. The third Duke, Isabella's grandfather, was an astute, far-sighted statesman, at one time Prime Minister, who opposed the Stamp Act, pointed out the futility of endless war to try to stop American independence and warned that the oppression of Ireland might lead to it being annexed by revolutionary France. [30]

Isabella had a good lesson in the respective power of the sexes from her Grafton grandparents who had divorced with even more scandal than was usual in such cases. While married to the Hon. Anne Liddell, daughter and heiress of Lord Ravensworth, the third duke was keeping a mistress, Nancy Parsons, and in 1764 it was reported that they had been somewhat intimate in an opera box. His estranged wife, Anne, left him for the Duke of Portland, which enabled Grafton to divorce her in 1769, while he was Prime

Minister. All the social obloquy fell on her, and none on him. Grafton re-married and had nine more children. After Anne's hope of becoming Portland's wife was disappointed, she was introduced by Horace Walpole to his friend the Earl of Upper Ossory, who married her, yet she was never again received in society. Even after her death the newspapers referred to her as "the repudiated Duchess of Grafton". [31]

Because of this divorce, it is very unlikely that Isabella ever met her paternal grandmother, who lived mostly at Ampthill in Bedfordshire until her death in 1804. Lady Ossory must have been intelligent, cultivated and endowed with a sense of humour as Walpole wrote her many of his most witty and entertaining letters over a period of thirty years. She has even been called Walpole's Muse. Most of her own letters are lost, but those written by Walpole make it clear that he was discussing all manner of things with her, including politics, on a very equal basis. Her grandmother's fate may have given Isabella matter for thought. In several of her books, her heroines face situations where their reputations are lost, or are in danger. The situation is never simple.[32]

Since it was usual for peers' heirs, as well as younger sons and cousins, to occupy seats in the House of Commons, there could be a dozen Fitzroys in Parliament at any time. Her father had become MP for Cambridge when barely of age, along with his close friend William Pitt the Younger. Among Isabella's uncles were found a General Fitzroy and an Admiral Fitzroy. There was more than one peerage in the Fitzroy family, the younger brother of the third Duke having been made Baron Southampton; he was enriched by his project of building Fitzroy Square, to designs by Robert Adam, and his eldest son married one of the duke's daughters, a pattern of cousin marriage that was repeated in several generations.

Isabella's mother, Charlotte Maria Waldegrave, Countess of Euston, was the daughter of Maria Walpole, a grand-daughter, albeit illegitimate, of Robert Walpole, making her Horace's niece. Maria married Lord Waldegrave, a Privy Councillor who was briefly Lord of the Treasury in 1757; they had three daughters, who were painted by Reynolds, a trio all dressed in white. After Lord Waldegrave's death, his widow secretly married the Duke of Gloucester, a brother of George III, the marriage only being revealed when she gave birth to a child in 1773. The King was not pleased about this unequal union and for many years the couple were banished abroad, where a second child, a son, was born. Eventually they were allowed to return and George recognized their marriage as legal; so Isabella Fitzroy had an uncle and aunt who were members of the royal family.

Charlotte, the second of the three Waldegrave sisters, was described by Horace Walpole as his "favourite niece". At the time of her marriage he wrote about her, "I am persuaded, I do not know so perfect a young woman; she has all her father's sense and temper, and the utmost discretion. They who spread absurd stories about her had not one of the three. I know some of them; they are hags of high rank..." Walpole was writing this to Lord Euston's mother, the Countess of Upper Ossory, former Duchess of Grafton, who never saw her son and was not going to be introduced to his new wife. He added, "It does please me to recollect that I have often talked to you, when I could not have the most glimmering idea of such an event, of the uncommon understanding of Lady Euston…" [33]

After their marriage the couple had a country home at Southill in Bedfordshire, where Isabella was born, and another in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. Isabella had three sisters, all older than herself – Maria, Laura and Elizabeth – and seven brothers, of whom three lived to grow up – Henry, Charles and James.[34] The birth of each son was announced in the newspapers, though not that of the daughters. Charlotte's elder sister married their cousin, the next Lord Waldegrave, and her younger sister, Anne Horatia, married Lord Hugh Seymour, whose mother had been a daughter of the 2nd Duke of Grafton. This meant that the Fitzroys and the Waldegraves were doubly related.

The Duchess of Gloucester and her eldest daughter, Lady Waldegrave, moved in Bluestocking circles and were friends of Hannah More, who tried to convert all the Waldegrave ladies to Evangelical beliefs. Lady Euston was not inclined to these views, preferring Unitarian convictions. [35] She was evidently a reader, and subscribed to many books, including some by women, such as *Lectures on Natural Philosophy* by Margaret Bryan and the poems of Emily Clark.[36] She subscribed to Joseph Wildman's anti-Jacobin novel *The Force of Prejudice (1800)* and to a patriotic work *The British Flag Triumphant* in 1806. [37]

She also subscribed to new music and one volume of sermons. [38] The most usual adjective applied to Charlotte was that of "amiable". One newspaper called her "the attractive Grace of the Fine Arts". [39]

Around the time of Isabella's birth in 1792, Lady Euston wrote a 41-page monograph "Thoughts on the late Revolution in France". [40] It is a very capable, coherent and well-informed account of why she thought that Britain was in no danger from a revolution such as had recently taken place across the Channel. She explains the many differences between the French and British constitution and laws, the former being a "despotic" absolute monarchy while the latter is a constitutional monarchy in which all three estates are represented. "Every individual feels the blessings attending the

equal distribution of power, and the happy establishment of King, Lords and commons is a security to the people and they feel the benefit of that happy combination which enables the three estates to assist, support or repel each other…" She observes that some estates are less well represented than others, and that further reform is both necessary and desirable; and she describes some of the injustices suffered by the poor in England – for example as a result of the Malt Tax – sympathetically, while remaining confident that such grievances can be addressed and reformed within the existing system. We can recognize in her work such theories as "trickle-down economics" as when she argues that British nobles, unlike the French, spend at least half the year on their estates, or rent them out, so that the occupants provide business and employment to the local population. She praises the social mobility she says exists in England. Her daughter would adopt very different views and sentiments, but Charlotte had set an example by making it clear that women could, and did, understand politics. [41]

Such a serious and thoughtful woman must surely have taken a close interest in the education of her daughters. Undoubtedly the four girls would have had a governess; not only were they taught the usual accomplishments of music and modern languages but thanks to their mother they were brought up surrounded by books, in an environment where it was normal for women to write as well as to read. Like her mother, Isabella had a keen taste for music. One of her heroines refers to "that flutter of spirits that a full orchestra produces, or that keener delight which the violins in a London ballroom create," and any music-lover will know exactly what she means.[42]

When Isabella was fifteen, in February 1808, her mother died, the cause being cited as a liver complaint.[43] The fact that she had given birth eleven times during her marriage had probably not helped. The eulogies written after her death seem to be something more than conventional. One ran "Lady Euston was an example of everything amiable in woman," and a poem written in her memory called her an "Unequalled Mother, Sister, Wife". [44]

There was nothing unusual about being motherless. Charlotte's younger sister, Lady Anne Horatia Seymour, was already dead, as was her husband, Vice-Admiral Lord Hugh Seymour, who had been sent to the West Indies in 1799; he died of yellow fever the following year, leaving six children. Isabella was not a child, but she was severely affected by the loss of her mother and later she would frequently write about girls in a similar situation.

Her eldest brother Henry, the heir, was sent to Trinity College, Cambridge then into the army as his father had been before him, becoming

a cornet of dragoons in 1809, and a lieutenant the following year. The next brother, Charles, was also enrolled in the army, and both went to fight in the Peninsular War. The youngest brother, James, was only four when his mother died, and seems to have had a tutor at home. This could have been significant for Isabella.

In 1809, Isabella's sister Laura (who had been christened Georgiana Laura at her birth in 1787, but always preferred to use her second name) formed an attachment to Lord Forbes, son of the Earl of Granard. Their prospective engagement was even talked of in the newspapers, but the marriage never took place. Her father requested a full account of Lord Forbes' financial position and when he had seen it replied that the young couple were at liberty to marry, but he did not see how they could afford to do so. Although the Earl of Granard had been a diplomat and had been created a peer of England, as well as of Ireland, he had a paltry income and his son only had his army pay. Neither Laura's father nor her grandfather the 3rd Duke offered her any settlement to make her marriage possible. [45]

Laura accepted her father's decision and so it seems did Lord Forbes, who finally married somebody else in 1833. Two of the four Fitzroy sisters married wealthy Whig MPs and these marriages strengthened the political power-structure. In 1810 Lady Maria Fitzroy, aged twenty-five, married Sir William Oglander, a baronet aged forty, with two estates, one in Dorset and another on the Isle of Wight. In 1814 Lady Elizabeth Fitzroy married their cousin, John Henry Smyth, a widower aged thirty-four, heir to Heath Hall in Yorkshire.

When Isabella's grandfather died in 1811, and her father became the 4th Duke of Grafton, he inherited Euston Hall in Suffolk, a house then more than twice the size it is now, dating from Restoration times. It was hung with portraits by Van Dyke and Lely of the Fitzroys' royal Stuart and Nassau ancestors, alongside others of their equine prize-winners. There was a thriving racing-stud on the estate and an avenue of lime trees connected the house with the race-course at Newmarket, twenty miles away. The view had been much improved by clearing away an entire village in 1750. He also inherited the Fitzroy family's extensive Grafton Regis estate in Northamptonshire, with a manor house surrounded by 26,000 acres, and became hereditary Ranger of Whittlebury and Salcey, ancient royal hunting forests. The Duke enjoyed the right to all game found there and the use of many residences including Wakefield Lodge which, despite its modest name, was an elegant Palladian mansion, with a landscaped park. The Wakefield estate alone brought in an income of £10,600 per annum.[46]

As well as the income from these properties, the Duke of Grafton enjoyed several state pensions, bestowed by Charles II in perpetuity. The

revenue was derived from excise, the post office, a court butlerage and a legal sinecure, and their annual total was estimated to be £24,000. Taken all in all, with the profits of his racing-stud at Euston, his income could not have been less than fifty thousand a year. During the war years, there was an income tax of 10%, but this was abolished in 1816 and even the window tax on his numerous residences was not going to reduce him to penury. [47]

In 1812, Isabella's elder brother Henry, now Earl of Euston, who was on leave from the Peninsular War, became engaged to Mary Caroline Berkeley, youngest daughter of Admiral Sir George Cranfield Berkeley, who had been playing a leading role in the naval campaign. By this date, the mood of the country was optimistic as Britain and her allies had definitely got the upper hand in the war. Admiral Berkeley was appointed Governor of Lisbon, and it was there that the wedding took place on June 20th, 1812, in the Protestant chapel of the embassy. The bride and groom were taken there on a royal naval vessel, and there is a strong likelihood that his sisters attended the wedding. St. John would write detailed descriptions of parts of the city and its environs in one of her books.

We do not know if Isabella was taught to draw but we know that she did so, as some of her sketch-books survive. One, dating from around 1821, contains several vivid drawings of her younger brother James. In one he is sprawling, with one leg over the back of a chair; in others he is writing at a table, or hunched over a sketchbook, drawing a horse. She has observed the slightly awkward and ungainly postures of an adolescent very keenly. Other pictures show her sister-in-law Mary, evidently a handsome woman; her cousin Frances; and a back view of Mrs Fitzroy (the wife of one of the Generals). There is a sketch of a view of the countryside near Warwick Castle, showing the tall tower of the church of St. Mary's, Warwick, in the middle distance and one of the outlying towers of Warwick Castle on the left. [48] A sketch of sunrise over the Isle of Wight must have been done on a visit to her sister Maria Oglander. One page of the book notes down the title of a piano arrangement of Mozart's opera *Così Fan Tutte.* Such arrangements were available from 1802 onwards. If Isabella was capable of playing this, then she was an excellent pianist. [49] The book was later used for accounts, and one page contains a lengthy calculation in pencil of figures in pounds, shillings and pence, totalling £304. [50]

There is only one surviving picture of Lady Isabella, a photograph taken when she was in her late sixties. Her head is in three-quarter view, and despite her age, we can see that her features are regular, the face oval, the bone structure delicate, the forehead high and the lips pleasingly shaped and curved. So her appearance can never have been a great handicap. [51]

In the summer of 1814, everybody thought the Napoleonic wars were over. The next year, of course, there was Waterloo. Isabella's brother Lord Charles Fitzroy, now a Captain in the First Foot Guards, was among the troops hastily dispatched over the Channel to fight in the battle, where he acquitted himself very creditably. Several of her cousins were there too: Captain Horace Seymour was an aide-de-camp to Wellington; George, Lord Waldegrave was Lieut-Colonel of the 54th Foot; and Charles Smyth fell serving in the 95th Foot.[52]

A letter from her eldest brother written in 1815 describes life at Wakefield Lodge. He writes "Laura and Isabella are very well. I wish the former would be always as I found her yesterday, good-humoured and condescending, I wish she knew how much better it became her than ever being Queen of the House in her own way." So it seems that Laura stepped into her mother's shoes and adopted the rôle of quasi-duchess, even to the extent of being somewhat bossy and overbearing. Perhaps this consoled her for being unable to marry the man of her choice.[53]

In the years after Waterloo, the Fitzroy family followed a fairly regular seasonal pattern of life. The Spring of each year was spent in London, (the original reason for this being the sittings of Parliament). The Duke and his two unmarried daughters would arrive at their London address at 47, Clarges Street in March or April, and put in the expected appearances at the Drawing-Room of Queen Charlotte at St. James's Palace. In 1817 Laura and Isabella were both there, dressed in white crêpe, with the obligatory trains, and ostrich feathers in their hair. [54]

For several months they would immerse themselves in the social season of calls, balls, dinners, supper-parties, card-parties, routs and carriage drives in the park. Their father, who was much occupied in the House of Lords, never seemed to object to any of the expense all this entailed. When the season was over, in August they would depart for Northamptonshire, or one of the fashionable spa towns, usually Leamington or Cheltenham, where the Duke went for his health. The Dowager Duchess of Grafton, their step-grandmother, would sometimes accompany them to town and chaperone them to social events. [55] In 1817 and again in 1820 the family went on a tour when the London season was over. In 1818 the Duke was in Paris and his daughters may have been with him. [56]

During October they were often in Suffolk. The Duke kept a close eye on the local parliamentary constituencies of Thetford and Bury St Edmunds, in each of which he was, by a long-standing agreement with the local corporation, entitled to nominate one of their two MPs. They elected Isabella's brothers Henry and Charles to these seats in 1818, and again in

1820 and 1826. The other seat was contested, and Isabella was able to observe all the canvassing for the elections, listen to the public speeches and the private discussions, and take note of the costs of each campaign. In Bury St Edmunds, the Graftons had rivals for power in the Earls of Bristol, who owned the Ickworth Park estate. This probably explains why every year faithfully a contingent of Fitzroys turned up to the ball at the Bury Fair, a great local event, where they could make themselves agreeable. Isabella and Laura were there in October of 1815, 1818 and 1819, in the company of her brother Lord Euston and his wife, and a bevy of their Walpole cousins. [57]

In 1819, there was an additional family duty for the Fitzroys, when their uncle William, who had succeeded as Duke of Gloucester, visited the Spa at Thetford.[58] Laura and Isabella joined their father, their brother Henry and his wife in a deputation sent to welcome the royal visitor. [59]

Family duties included taking an interest in charity. In 1819 (the year of Peterloo) there were two day schools and a Sunday School in Sapiston, in Suffolk, supported at the expense of the Fitzroy ladies. One, taught by women, consisted of about twenty-six children, while the Sunday school instructed "twelve poor girls in reading and the principles of the Christian religion." [60]

For year after year this pattern of life continued. Isabella and her sister Laura went to events attended by Wellington, Prince Leopold, Earl Grey, Canning, Castlereagh, and foreign ambassadors. They went with their father to the races at Newmarket, where he held another hereditary position as Ranger, and had a small house for convenience in the village. They regularly went to Almack's, where the exclusive and carefully vetted assemblies operated as the marriage market of the *bon ton,* and Isabella was on very friendly terms with Sarah, Lady Jersey, one of its patronesses. [61] [62] Lady Jersey was a political hostess and influential campaigner. In May 1828, when Lord Ellenborough joined the government, he was glad to learn from Lady Jersey that "Lord Grey was only afraid the Government might assume a Tory character and make it impossible for him to support it as he really wished." With friends like this, it is no wonder that Isabella was aware of what went on in the political sphere.[63]

There can be no doubt that Isabella read extensively in her youth. She read the accepted classics – Shakespeare, Dryden and Pope – as well as modern poetry and novels. She liked Gray, Cowper, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Elizabeth Carter and Samuel Rogers. She learned a lot from Hume's *History of England*, and the letters of Arbuthnot, Swift and Mme de Sévigné. [64] We know that she read the novels of Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Morgan, Mary Shelley and Mme de Staël. Ann Radcliffe too she read, with

pleasure and sometimes amusement. She ends one of her stories with a quotation from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a book she says she had much enjoyed, and elsewhere she alludes indulgently to Radcliffe's fondness for letting breezes waft aside the veils of her heroines, giving a glimpse of faces of startling beauty.[65] She undoubtedly read Byron, whose works she loved. She quotes him often, and calls him "the best of poets", enjoying him for his wit and vigour, and one of her heroes goes off to fight for Greek independence, following in Byron's footsteps. She read of course the poems of Tom Moore. Her reading was not closely restricted, and it seems to have included *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Laclos's novel of seduction and intrigue, as in one of her books she gives the name of Mme de Valmont to an extremely sophisticated and worldly woman, which cannot be a coincidence. She also read the newspapers. That is very evident.

Their father had more serious things to worry about than two of his daughters becoming old maids. In 1822 their brother Charles lost a fortune when his horse Swase failed to win the St. Leger at Doncaster. He fled abroad to escape creditors, and spent the next two and a half years travelling on the continent. The Duke was furious, though he could not deny having encouraged such interests as he owned one of the country's biggest and most successful racing studs, at Euston Hall. Money was raised by selling property such as the remaining lease of the house in Brooke Street where her parents had lived when Isabella was a child. The convenient death of the dowager duchess who had been making use of it facilitated this economy. In July 1824 the duke relented, and allowed Charles home. By 1825, Charles was able to marry Lady Anne Cavendish and was permitted to use Sholebrooke Lodge, on the Salcey estate, as his marital home. [66]

Isabella's younger brother James, a captain in the 10th Royal Hussars, was cast in the same mould. In 1826-7 there was legal action on account of his debts, an embarrassment for the whole family. As for Lord Charles, he was not reformed by his experience of exile. By 1827 his gambling debts were worse than ever, amounting to £38,000. His father and his father-in-law only agreed to underwrite his debts if he made over all his income to them and accepted an army post in Ireland, where he would be far away from any race courses or gaming tables. [67]

While externally her life appeared to be privileged and enviable, there are many hints in her novels that Isabella's inner, emotional life was troubled; she writes about "unsuitable attachments", thwarted love and disappointed love, and we know that she came into friction with her family. [68] A letter written by her brother Charles in the early 1820s alludes to Isabella behaving in an eccentric manner. While at Wakefield Lodge, she