

## Caroline Southwood Hill

There is a saying – ‘Educate a girl and you educate a family’ and nothing could be truer in the case of Caroline Southwood-Hill. The opening paragraphs of her book on Education makes just this point – “God has given to women a very high and noble share of this world’s work to do for Him. That share is education. Women are largely the educators of the world. The first years of life are the most important, and these are almost wholly in their care. The task requires knowledge. No education of a girl should be considered complete which does not include instruction in the art and science of education. In some relation or another the task is pretty sure to fall to her.” This is a fascinating story of how women could make their mark in what we tend to think of as ‘a man’s world’ in Victorian England.

Caroline was born in Martock in Somerset on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1809 the daughter of Thomas Southwood-Smith, a Unitarian Minister in training, and Ann Read of Bristol. Thomas had been brought up in a strongly Baptist family but fell out with them when he became interested in Unitarian philosophy. He had been to study in Bristol intending to become a Baptist minister but changed his views. He lived in Bristol with the Read family and fell in love with Ann. Thomas and Ann had a second daughter Emily and then, sadly, Ann died when Caroline was barely three years old, leaving Thomas with two small girls and an uncertain financial future. The Reads offered to look after the girls in Bristol while Thomas went to Edinburgh to study medicine.

This worked well for a while but Thomas missed his girls so much that he fetched Caroline to live with him in Scotland, while Emily stayed in Bristol. Caroline vividly recalled the terrifying journey by boat in a thunderstorm and remembered the feel of her father’s arms about her. Their time in Edinburgh forged an extra-ordinary close link between father and daughter that was to last all their lives and greatly influence the whole family in due course.

Caroline was taught by her father and also taught herself, having a lively and enquiring mind. Once qualified, Thomas and Caroline moved to Yeovil where Thomas was both Unitarian minister and doctor. He re-married, so Caroline and Emily now had a step-mother and, eventually, three step siblings, though none of them survived beyond teenage years. Then the family decamped to London where Thomas was a doctor in the area just by Tower Bridge. He busied himself in sanitary reform and became convinced of the need for poor people to have access to fresh air and adequate housing – but that is another fascinating story!! Mary and Thomas later divorced and Mary went to live abroad. But this period must have given Caroline a useful insight into how she would be viewed by her own step-children.

Thomas knew Charles Dickens, Hans Christian Andersen, Robert Browning, Leigh Hunt and others, so Caroline was moving in London society with the forward thinkers -social reformers of the day. She found work teaching in Wimbledon and started to read articles by radicals like Pestalozzi. She wrote several articles in the *Monthly Repository* expounding his theories for an English audience. If she had not written these articles, many think that education in England as a whole would have taken a very different course and, certainly, her children would not have achieved all they did.

Meantime, in Wisbech, James Hill was facing a future with seven children (two boys and five girls) by two wives (sisters) who had both died. He needed a governess for them!! He read Caroline’s articles and liked the sound of the theories being expounded; learning by hands, head and heart (doing, thinking, believing) nurtured with lots of outdoor activity. He liked the sound of an ‘education based on free action and personal responsibility rather than one relying on outward authority’. And he liked the strong Protestant Christian ethos.

James journeyed to London in 1832, where Caroline was living with her father, sought her out and persuaded her to come with him to Wisbech to look after his children. She must quickly get to know these seven little strangers and put her teaching theories into practise. Within three years James and Caroline are married and have a daughter, Miranda. Then Gertrude (James Cash’s great grandmother, buried in the churchyard at Crockham Hill) is born, then Octavia (tenth child, eighth daughter) then Emily and finally Florence. (Gertrude, incidentally, is the heroine of one of Pestalozzi’s books)

James and Caroline work hard to make life in Wisbech better for all. They are both interested in the theories of Robert Owen and James has her backing when he tries to set up a utopian colony at Manea. James publishes a newspaper 'The Star in the East' and they build an infant school which will also serve as a 'hall for the people' – now The Angels Theatre. We know how Octavia and Miranda later build halls for working people to meet in and hold classes and enjoy art and music.

James does not seem to have been a diplomatic man and rubbed many of his fellow townspeople the wrong way! One wonders how much 'smoothing over' Caroline had to do?! Her 'people skills' seem to have been highly developed and this is something she certainly passed on to her daughters. Also her meticulous attention to detail and record keeping. She was responsible for making sure that all James' creditors were paid what was due. Her book-keeping skills she certainly passed on to Octavia, along with the idea of writing a record of events for future use/interest.

Life in Wisbech came to an abrupt end when James went bankrupt for the second time. They moved to various places as James tried to rebuild his business but James finally left the family, too mentally stressed to cope. The older step children had gone to their Jecks grandparents and went on to make their mark, Arthur becoming mayor of Reading. The girls who survived ran a school in Boston (Lincs) and two made good marriages – no doubt helped by the wise upbringing they had enjoyed under Caroline's watchful eye.

So Caroline was left to look after five little girls under 11 years old. They moved to London to be near her father, who took Gertrude under his wing. They lived in a cottage in Finchley – then a small village in the country where the children could play all day. Octavia had especially fond memories of this period of their lives. It also brought the girls into contact with their grandfather's companion Margaret Gillies who was an exceptional artist. Octavia in particular benefitted from this. But this happy time was not to last sadly.

Thomas wanted to retire and devote his time to writing and campaigning and so their source of support was limited. Caroline needed an income and that was not easy for a woman, especially a lone woman with children. However, her contacts in London and her interest in Christian Socialism procured her the job of managing the Ladies Cooperative Guild and the older girls were engaged in teaching poor girls practical skills, as well as reading, writing, geography and maths, so that they could earn a living. They made dolls house furniture and painted glass. But it meant that the family had to move into London, to Marylebone. It was a great shock to them all to see the squalor and have nowhere to run about and play. Caroline must have found it very hard to keep her own spirits up as she tried to help the family adjust to their new circumstances. But she apparently succeeded in making a happy home and encouraged the girls to take responsibility for their own work. Octavia was also encouraged by her mother to get to know the poor girls socially and learn what their lives were really like. This was something that Thomas had done as he researched the lives of the children and women working in the mines and as he looked for the causes of the terrible health problems in east London. Caroline was dismissed from The Ladies Guild for opposing the benefactors in their wish to stop The Bible being read while the girls worked.

Caroline leaves London for a while and indulges her love of writing. She produced some delightful children's stories – eg Skyrack, Roundling and other fairy stories, and a book about wild flowers for children, as well as 'Notes on Education' and 'Morning lessons on the Gospels'. After a brief spell, Caroline returned to teaching full time and set up various schools at which her girls also taught.

She was always very supportive of her children's ideas and plans, both large and small, though she counselled caution when necessary. She did not approve of the relationship between Octavia and Sophia Jex-Blake and gave Octavia the choice – family or Sophia; family won of course and Sophia left the house – to go on to fight to become one of the first women doctors!

Caroline's influence was such that each child distinguished herself in one or more forms of humane and philanthropic work. Robert Browning said of the family – Those are wonderful children. You can talk to them about anything'

Caroline encouraged Gertrude to write the biography of Thomas Southwood-Smith. In a letter that still exists, written in 1896 when she was nearly 90, Caroline writes of the value of such a book and says 'I will devote all my time and strength to work under you in this if you will take the matter up.' She finishes the letter by writing 'You and I have been parted since you were four years old. Let us be together in drawing from obscurity the noble life to which we both owe our being. Your ever loving Mother' The whole letter is very moving.

As well as founding the Kyrle Society and working closely with Octavia in her endeavours, Miranda wrote the delightful story of 'The Fairy Spinner' which encapsulates all her mother's teachings in the way the heroine, Princess Ethelsiega, chooses her husband – he must be very learned, brave, physically fit and have empathy with nature, so that he 'knows what the snail under the strawberry leaf is thinking'!

Emily won a scholarship to Queens College, Harley Street (now an independent school), trained as a teacher and then helped her husband, Edmund Maurice, in the Peace Movement before going on to edit Octavia's letters.

Having spent much of her young life travelling around Europe, encouraging the development of the Unitarian church, Florence went on to found the Postal Mission in England, a system of sending literature and personal letters to those who doubted or even denied their Christian faith and sought help and guidance. Started in America, this required 'meticulous care as to its numerous details' – something she, along with all her sisters, learnt from her mother. The Postal Mission of the Unitarian Church spread across the British Empire and had an enormous influence on religious thought. She wrote to Emily 'How much we owe to Mama, How intense her desire was for the wellbeing and moral and religious uplift of the world, particularly women and children, and that we, her children, should help in this'.

Octavia writes that the written word can never convey 'the impression of holiness and wisdom which her living presence gave to her own children.'

As an old lady, Caroline discussed the writing of Tolstoy with Sydney Cockerell. While she said she agreed with much of what he wrote, 'I doubt if the remedy he proposes is the right one.' Rather than going back to 'a primitive state of society' we should use advances in science and share its products equally. 'Why should a man plough if steam can plough better?' she asks.

So we see a woman of great intellect and vitality and tremendous faith, leading a large family through significant upheavals and enabling them all to make a contribution to the betterment of society, whether that be the great works of Octavia and Miranda, or the religious instruction of Florence or the writings of Gertrude and Emily. All made their mark on the world.

After such an influential life where she overcame enormous adversity, Caroline died in 1902 aged 94. Octavia and the family organised a memorial bench overlooking Crockham Hill. The inscription, taken from an Ode written by the American poet James Russell Lowell, reads 'For never shall their aureoled presence lack' - a fitting tribute to a quite remarkable lady.