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## The cleric and the lady: the affair of Lady Byron and F.W. Robertson

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I thought I knew all the world would ever know about Lady Byron when I heard a rumor while on sabbatical at Oxford University. The rumor was not about her, but about a man who would reveal himself as having been an intimate friend of hers, F.W. Robertson, a once-prominent Victorian cleric. According to the rumor, he, a married man with two children, confessed in his diary, which was supposedly written in secret code, to having "affairs with the women of Brighton." I was conducting my search for this diary when I found a letter penned in 1846, a letter that remains in private hands, a letter that corrects all biographical accounts regarding when Robertson met Lady Byron, he a charismatic public speaker, a man of God, a man who was so handsome that women were known to faint if he so much as smiled at them, (1) a man whom the Dictionary of National Biography describes as follows: "There is perhaps no parallel in English church history to the influence of Robertson's six years' ministry at a small proprietary chapel." The Dictionary account continues: "Robertson, whose character in all parts that were comprehended within the region of morality, was not only stainless but exalted, nevertheless suffered from some minor defects disastrous in his public position--fiery vehemence, exaggerated sensitiveness, and an entire lack of humour." (2)

With regard to the charismatic appeal of Robertson, the local newspaper for Brighton, The Brighton Gazette, carried the following statement in 1926, 73 years after his death: "Miss Anderson [daughter of the proprietor of Robertson's chapel] preserves a vivid impression of Robertson's beautifully clear voice, his dark blue eyes, his thoughtfulness for children and his wonderful truthfulness. She possesses an engraving from a water-colour by an artist of the period picturing his rich brown curly hair, mutton-chop whiskers and clean-shaven mouth and chin" (3)

But there was much more to Robertson than his striking good looks and charisma as is indicated by his funeral, the largest in Brighton's history. A procession of 3,000, whose number included a thousand members of the Mechanics' Institute, which he co-founded, Oxford dons, fellow clergymen, aristocrats, the poor, and members of his parish, followed a cortege of five horse-drawn carriages to the extra-mural cemetery. The Brighton Gazette reported that men of every religious persuasion and none were in the crowd: Jews, Unitarians, Roman Catholics, Quakers, and Churchmen of High, Broad, and Low persuasion. All lined the streets to honor his memory as the procession passed. The whole city closed up shop for the occasion, their shades drawn (4) They followed behind the funeral cortege because they admired Robertson as a promoter of universal education regardless of gender or social class at a time when only the male gender and only those of the upper class were formally educated. He was a Scripture scholar as well as a linguist. He was one of those far-seeing social reformers responsible for preventing in England the kind of violent political revolutions that were going on all over the continent at the time.

But what about his moral character? Given the rumor of a diary, was his moral character "not only stainless but exalted" as the Dictionary proclaims? If the rumor of his extra-marital affairs proved to be true, I was hoping to catch a glimpse of the man alone with himself, recording his inner struggle [if there was one] to be what he had publicly professed to be: a man of God. I also wanted to know if there was more to the friendship between him and Lady Byron than history reports.

After six years of searching, I found not only his diary, which was indeed written in secret code as the rumor suggested, but a briefcase full of papers, including personal correspondence. A letter that contains mention of Lady Byron was sent from Nanders in the Tyrolean Alps on October 4, 1846. Robertson was 30 years old at the time, alone, and depressed. He not only doubted his suitability for a career in the ministry, but even the existence of God. If having a crisis of faith wasn't enough, he doubted his suitability for marriage and parenting. Having left his young wife and infant son at home in Cheltenham, he had also sent her, his wife, a letter that reflects this conflicted state of mind: "How strange with a wife and child whom I so entirely love that I can feel as utterly desolate in life as if there were not a heart that cared for me! Yet I have more true friends and more rich blessings than nine tenths of mankind. [...] The truth is I have no aim in life--great or small--no purpose, plan or calling--for I feel that the thread which ties me to the ministry is all broken except a single strand" (5) To dispel all these demons, he was on a one-year leave of absence from the ministry, trekking through the Tyrolean Alps on horseback and on foot, hunting wild game for food by day and sleeping under the stars at night.

Maybe, he thought, it had been a mistake to enter the ministry in the first place because his wish up until then had been to become a soldier, to serve the British Empire in India. He was well suited for such a career, having been trained for it by his father who was an army captain under the Duke of Wellington during the Napoleonic Wars. People who knew Robertson said he was at home in the saddle and knew how to handle a gun. However, by the time his military commission arrived, he had taken his father's advice and accepted the sponsorship that took him to Oxford University, and a career in the Church. At the time Oxford served as an apprenticeship for only two careers: ministry in the Church of England or diplomacy in the government. (6)

It was while on this journey trekking through the mountains that Robertson met Lady Byron in 1846. The letter in question was sent from Bolzen (a Tyrolean village) to his father in England:

I made a most agreeable acquaintance. A gentleman sat next me exactly in air and dress like a German. However he addressed me in English, and we soon got intimate. He is a cousin of Lord or Lady Byron's, and has given me an introduction to her. He speaks of her as nearer perfection than any he knows of all her sex. He has lived fifteen years in Germany and knows all the best Austrian society. His wife is a Bohemian baroness, very pleasing. I dined with them one day at Gices, a village near Bolzen where he has taken a house for the winter, and if my German had been good, I would have made that my resting place too. By the way, do not mention about Lady Byron in Cheltenham. I have reasons. (7)

If for no other reason, this letter is significant because it corrects the commonly held belief that the two met for the first time in Brighton a year later in 1847. It is also curious that he had "reasons" for wanting his father to keep the matter confidential. What could these reasons have been? Alone, this letter might suggest nothing, but in conjunction with revelations in Robertson's diary, it may provide grist for another chapter in both their biographies, especially because Robertson's diary, as I was to discover, contains the confession of one extra-marital affair and hints of others.

A number of female friends are identified in the diary by their initials, only a few by their full names. But when Robertson is engaged in a romantic encounter, the woman in question is identified only by a symbol for the sun. Consequently, I called her "Sunshine," and wondered: Was she Lady Byron? I considered the possibility based on textual clues. I assumed Sunshine was from a wealthy family because the diary states that the two traveled from Brighton to Dublin by train and then Austen Steamer. On several occasions, including this journey, they read the works of Fichte, a German philosopher, in German. Only an educated woman could have afforded that mode of travel, could have taken a two-month holiday in Ireland, and would have been literate, not only in English but German. Finally, the diary states that they stayed in a family-owned mansion in Black Rock, now a suburb of Dublin. She and Robertson spent many days riding horseback together, he at one point commenting in his diary on her prowess as an equestrian. She was also a member of the shooting party that went on daily expeditions to shoot grouse, hare, and other small game. All these clues pointed to Lady Byron as the woman in question, especially because of the historical evidence that attests to their friendship. For example, in a published biography of Anna Jameson, Lady Byron's best friend for almost twenty years, Jameson is quoted as saying: "There was a great mutual attraction between them." Jameson even predicted that if circumstances had been different they probably would have married. (8) Another contemporary source is *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*. A mutual friend of both Lady Byron and Robertson, Henry Crabb Robinson said that during an evening of conversation with Robertson, the latter said he thought she was "the noblest" woman he had ever met. (9) Colburn-Mayne, an early biographer of Lady Byron, quoted Robertson as saying of Lady Byron that she filled what he called 'that old unhappy sense of loss, or want of something' in himself. Robertson was her first confessor, a man she trusted completely. It was to him that she, after decades of silence, divulged the whole sordid business of her life with Byron, the incest, illegitimacy, infidelity, wife abuse, homosexuality, bisexuality, and deception. She chose to confide in Robertson because in him she recognized a kindred spirit. "I wish you to know more of my past life," she wrote, "not because I think it would affect your opinion of me favorably--for you have given me all the confidence I could desire: but because you would, I trust, have the satisfaction of feeling a perfect identity between the friend you did not know and the friend you do know." (10) Robertson was not too surprised by the story as is reflected in notes from a conversation he had with her in which he said he, Lord Byron, was no doubt incensed when she turned down his initial proposal of marriage because "the cover which he wanted for his incest would not be procured." (11) Knowledge of the suffering she had endured took its toll

on Robertson as well as her. On January 15, 1851, he wrote to her: "I ought to be a wiser and a better man from our conversations, but a sadder one I cannot help being." He said the whole affair was as "startling as a personal grief could have been." Her conduct through it all impressed him as well. "The motives which must have been felt, and the discipline, conscious and unconscious, which you must have gone through all these years, are lessons which force one to think. Forgive me saying that I deeply honor and reverence such a life. I thank God that the best guardian a man has cannot be taken from me now--belief and trust in Womanliness." (12)

When Lady Byron prepared her will, she stipulated in it that, upon her death, it was to be entrusted into Robertson's hands to do with as he saw fit. On January 27, 1851, she wrote: "The box which I sent to you yesterday is intended to hold not only the Book, but all the MSS, which you have most kindly allowed me to entrust to your care. I have added to the notes on Medwin--do not scruple to use your Scissors, if what I have said should appear to you likely to do harm--also prefixed a sheet to the book containing views of my own which I thought likely to produce soft & kind feelings if it should be read after my death,--& I had the recollection of my Grandchildren in my mind--for I own that on that point, the opinion of me does touch me." (13)

She also named Robertson as her literary executor, in charge of all her private papers when she died. "What the World may ever care to know of me," she wrote, "it is welcome to know. What it least understands will be found in these pages and understood by their Reader [Robertson]." (14) Ironically he preceded her in death despite the fact that she was 25 years his senior.

In addition to the personal affinity between them, they also shared the same sense of social justice. Both devoted their lives to good works. In addition to raising her and Lord Byron's daughter as a single mother, Lady Byron spent her life in the cause of education for the working classes. She built schools for them on her property in Leicestershire and Warwickshire. After visiting Johann Pestalozzi, the father of popular education in Switzerland, she leased five acres of land near Ealing Grove, had buildings built at her own expense, and ran what was probably the first industrial school in England. Students studied half of each day and engaged in manual labor for other half to help defray the cost of their education. Their studies included the practical sciences of agriculture and mechanics as well as reading, writing, and other forms of book learning. When the stocking weavers fell on hard times, she fed the children for months using her own money. She also funded Mary Carpenter's Ragged Schools, schools founded for the children of the street and those orphaned when their parents were imprisoned. She was a member of the aristocracy, but she believed that it was the duty of the upper classes to help the lower.

She was also religious, not in the sense that she professed all the doctrines of the Anglican faith, but that she had a deep faith in God and believed, as did Robertson, that Christianity could not be confined to a set of laws or doctrines. In a letter written to her at her home in Esher, Surrey on Tuesday, March 22, 1853, just months before his death, Robertson defined Christianity in terms of a living being rather than a set of dogmas. "Christianity," he wrote, "is not a progress away from Personality: rather, I think, towards it--Not from the centre to the circumference, but from the circumference to a Living Centre." (15) As witness to their shared faith, Lady Byron attended church services at Trinity Chapel in Brighton as long as Robertson was its minister.

The two also devoted their lives to charitable causes. In 1848 he founded the Mechanics' Institute in Brighton, an organization devoted to educating the working classes for the new jobs created by the Industrial Revolution. Both ran schools for girls as well as boys at a time when girls received no formal education. He visited the poor and sick, bringing comfort where he could. In short, he was considered to be a man of impeccable virtue as well as intellectual erudition.

It was Lady Byron herself who probably paid him the most loving tribute after his death. When asked by the local newspaper why she walked in his funeral procession when a woman of her social stature was expected to ride in a carriage, she said she was not worthy to even walk behind his coffin. In fact, women did not generally walk in funeral processions or attend graveside services because their natures were considered to be too delicate to bear such open expressions of grief. Later when friends reported to her that his gravesite was piled high with flowers, and wanted to know why she had not put any there, she composed a poem in his honor. In it she says that her flowers are of another kind:

I may not strew with earth-born flowers the turf  
Where thou art laid,  
But flowers there are which Love may rear, and  
Such as cannot fade ...  
If parted clouds a moment showed the blue  
Depths of thy soul,  
'Twas but to prove them far beyond the  
Skies where thunders roll. (16)

Robertson's children were still young (10 and 4) when he died. Consequently, she gave his widow the equivalent of his annual salary to provide for their education. A group of 175 admirers including Oxford dons, clergymen, literati, and aristocrats commissioned a stained glass window in his memory. Lady Byron's name appears on the list of these subscribers. That window continues to grace the chapel of Brasenose College, Oxford University, Robertson's alma mater. It might even have been Lady Byron who commissioned the death mask of Robertson that still resides in the Bodleian Library.

There is no doubt whatsoever that he and Lady Byron were intimate friends, but were they also lovers? The letter in question and Robertson's diary, both still in private hands, suggest the possibility. Then, too, given how much the two of them allowed the public to know about their friendship, how much did they conceal? It could have been quite a bit if we take into consideration a letter Robertson penned to her from his home on Montpelier Road in Brighton on Holy Saturday, March 26, 1853. The subject was the law and how to avoid putting oneself in jeopardy. He warned her "to leave as little as possible dependent upon the sagacity of the reader. "I believe I could with safety," he wrote, "shew [sic] all the letters I ever received from you, & no one would make out anything in shape & colour." (17)

Because Robertson was so highly respected during his lifetime and considered by many to be among England's greatest public speakers, she, as one of his close friends and admirers, was asked to write his biography. For that task she felt unworthy, but suggested that a book of tributes be published instead. In the end, Stopford Brooke, chaplain to Queen Victoria, was commissioned to do the job. His work reads like a hagiography rather than a biography. It was Lawrence Jacks who noted in his biography of his father-in-law, Brooke, that Brooke had written a letter to his mother stating that he [Brooke] saw Robertson as "a man of great trials and many failures, a man consumed by a morbid self-consciousness at times, a man of much weakness, of no religious calm, to the very end perplexed." (18) The fact that Robertson's family and friends were still living when the Robertson biography was published might explain Brooke's silence regarding the "trials and many failures" of Robertson, the man.

Robertson's diary gives us a glimpse into this dark side of his personality. It was his private confessional for an affair in which he and his lover take advantage of every opportunity to be alone together: together in a carriage, following on horseback behind a carriage, in the dining room after a meal, in her private living quarters, and finally in her bed. He is clearly in love with this woman, clearly unable to extricate himself from the affair, and clearly feeling guilty about it.

Robertson and this mystery woman left Brighton together on Wednesday, August 15, 1849, the second anniversary of his appointment as pastor of Trinity Chapel. In the party was "FP" and others identified only by initials. Unfortunately he missed the train in London and had to catch a later one. He put it as follows: "Mischance at the Euston Station. I was left behind while arranging about the carriage. Feelings on seeing train off!" He met up with the group the next day in Bangor, Wales. He wrote about the reunion with "Sunshine" in his diary: "Long, long kisses in the arbores of the George [Hotel]. Oh, and such a kiss in the carriage riding back to the Bangor station, full of unutterable love, yet how pure and delicate she is." Before crossing by Austen Steamer to Dublin, the two went to the Holyhead Lighthouse where they entered a cave. In code he wrote in his diary: "Heart curdled at seeing dear Sunshine on ledges of rock. What risk." While on the steamer, "she," he wrote, "bent over me while leaning down, and in a whisper that thrilled me to the soul, asked if I could bear to be watched over in illness by her." He had a premonition about dying young. He did, in fact, die almost exactly four years later at the age of 37. Perhaps she had taken that premonition seriously.

Sunday, August 19, Robertson attended a church service but wasn't exactly inspired by it, writing in his diary that day, "Bad, trashy Irish sermon." With regard to "Sunshine," he wrote: "Long, long Kisses. Madness all night after. Misery and gratitude for little she suspects! Yet from my inmost soul I curse that scoundrel should my madness of passion tempt me to injure her. May God grant me in mercy a life of misery rather than that one moment of remorse or self-reproach should come to her through me." Given the context, the "scoundrel" he is referring to is himself.

On Friday, August 24, he wrote in code: "All day in Sunshine's room. Bliss unutterable. I felt on the brink of paradise. How lovely she was!" Another misunderstanding followed. They, he wrote, "sat on the dreamstone and read Tennyson. Her tears of anguish. My own Sunshine, I can do all for you. If I forget to live for you, may God chastise me. With G, Sunshine retired early hurt? I shook hands through the door ajar." At this point I had no idea who "G" might be.

On Saturday, September 1, "Sunshine" received a letter from Helen, Robertson's wife. He wrote in code in his diary: "Helen's letter to dearest Sunshine. Conversation at breakfast; her look of anguish. I can bear anything but that. All day in her room writing key labels. Ecstasy of love. How lovely she was this morning." Robertson had left his pregnant wife home in Brighton. Ida, their only daughter and the second of two children, would be born three months later in December 1849. I wondered what the letter had been about. Did Helen suspect that her husband was having an affair with this woman?

On Sunday, September 2, Robertson preached a sermon on the "Parable of the Rich Man" at a local church. Sunshine's countenance on the way to the church, he wrote, "beamed with tenderness. Can I ever forget that look of heaven in the car?" Later that day they had a "conversation about H [most likely Robertson's wife Helen] Lady H [Henley] and Mrs. O.J. Dearest Sunshine very constrained. Moonlight walk. Love again. We had been driven home by rain."

On Monday, September 3, Robertson realized he had offended Sunshine again, this time by apparently looking with love on another woman. "Sat in Sunshine's dear room. Dreadful love. I can't understand how life holds out. Saw Sunshine, Miss S in the plantation on the hill at a distance. My heart fluttered at the sight of the white dress through the trees. She [Miss S] came to meet us. Gave my hand over a plank bridge. Sunshine estranged all the evening: spoke unnaturally much at dinner."

Their romance reached a crisis on Tuesday, September 4, when Robertson wrote that he sat with Sunshine reading Fichte.

She was cold. He didn't know what was bothering her. She didn't understand him either. "Never will," he wrote. "Would it be better if she could? It is all dark, darker than the grave." It might have been his memory of this episode that prompted the following statement in a sermon Robertson delivered the month after his return from Ireland: "It is a fearful solitary feeling, that lonely truth of life; yet not without a certain strength and grandeur in it. The life that is the deepest and the truest will feel most vividly both its desolation and its majesty. We live and die alone." (19)

The next day, Wednesday, September 5, he was still trying to understand her. He wrote in code: "Walk with my adored in the garden and the long walk by moonlight. Tried to explain my heart and behavior in vain. Meanwhile I only endure life. Still I will be true to myself and her. She shall look back with remorse to one hour with G cost it what it may, she shall know what my love is."

He went shooting with the rest of the party on Wednesday, September 12, but "returned in the rain to be with Sunshine." Two days later he offended "Sunshine" again because he "kissed G." Their relationship reached yet another crisis on Saturday, September 15. He spent the morning with Sunshine trying to decide their future. I think the question was whether they could keep their passion under control in the future or whether it was useless to try and that they would simply have to face the social consequences if the world found out. In code Robertson recorded the dilemma: "Morning spent in considering future plans. Can we keep to the spirit of the 27th or is that past and nothing left but the world sacrificed to love? Sunshine really in love with me. How lovely she looked." Divorce was not a realistic option. The nobility, like the Byrons, could appeal to Parliament if the husband could prove that his wife had been unfaithful. But people of Robertson's status had little recourse. One option, the one the first wife of the poet Shelley seized upon, was to go to Scotland where divorces were less expensive and more readily obtained. Even so, choosing that option was considered scandalous for anyone, much less a clergyman. It simply wasn't done. Two days later Robertson and Sunshine went shooting together. He wrote that he shot one partridge and one hare. There's no mention of her shooting prowess or lack thereof.

The last entry in the diary is dated Monday, October 1, and reads as follows: "FOUR HOURS in bed with Sunshine." Perhaps the affair was ongoing at the time of his death. We may never know because the diary ends with this confession.

In the course of decoding, I discovered one clue that turned out to be invaluable. It was on June 7, the Feast of Corpus Christi, that Robertson wrote in code: "Called there [Sunshine's] in the morning. Read her private book. Saw her age. 34 on August 6, 1847." From that evidence I knew Sunshine had to have been born in 1813. Since he had been born on February 3, 1816, I also knew now that she was 3 years older than he. Two days later Robertson wrote: "Sweet letter from dearest Sunshine. She allowed me to see her secret book, that lovely book."

Because Lady Byron was born in the month of August, again I felt encouraged. The day and year, however, were wrong. Lady Byron was born on August 4, 1792. Sunshine was born on August 6, 1813. So who was she? I consulted the 1851 census report for Brighton. Because the report (still only on microfiche and scarcely legible in many parts) is organized by street name rather than surname and because the population in Brighton for that year was approximately 70,000, the task proved to be not only daunting, but impossible. I hoped it would become easier when I isolated my search to only the wealthy areas of town. In fact, however, I found no one with a birth date of August 6, 1813. The answer did lie, however, within the "society" pages of *The Brighton Gazette*. Robertson was not the only one to leave for Ireland on August 15, 1849. The FitzPatrick family did as well. I sensed I was getting close to discovering Sunshine's identity because the initials FP and AFP fill the diary. A genealogical search revealed the names of the FitzPatrick family members: John Wilson FitzPatrick was Privy Counselor for Ireland. Since the "FP" mentioned in the diary went to a meeting in Dublin while the group was in Black Rock, I was confident I was on the right track. Through the compiler of the FitzPatrick Family Papers preserved in the National Library of Ireland, I learned that he, John Wilson FitzPatrick, had been created Baron Castletown of Upper Ossory, for Queen's County in December 1869 and entered the House of Lords in 1880. He should have inherited the title, 3 Earl of Upper Ossory, instead of Baron Castletown because his father had been the 2nd Earl of Upper Ossory. However, when John FitzPatrick Sr. died in 1818, the title was declared extinct because he had married a Roman Catholic. Lady Augusta FitzPatrick, wife of John Wilson FitzPatrick Jr., was born on August 6, 1812 or 1813, (sources disagree) and assumed the title, Lady Castletown, in 1869. She had seven children, six of them girls. The initials of two of them occur often in the diary: "G" for Gertrude, who according to the genealogical record, was 18 in 1849, and "F" for Florence, who was 15 that year. Augusta FitzPatrick's ancestral home was in Black Rock, her father having been a prominent minister whose surname, Douglas, was passed on to one of Augusta's daughters as a middle name. Augusta's mother was also a woman of title. Confirming my conclusions, the name Douglas appears in Robertson's diary in connection with the family. When Lady Augusta's husband died in 1883 at the age of 76, she inherited 23,143 acres and an annual income of 15,758 [pounds sterling], a fortune at that time. Brooke, Robertson's biographer and an acquaintance of both Robertson and her, described her in a way that explains why Robertson might have been attracted to her:

There never lived a woman who could receive more or with greater sympathy give back what she received. But she had not much to give in return of original thinking or feeling. She reflected men with marvellous [sic] lucidity, and men saw themselves in her fairer than they were, for, of course, they only gave their best. She sent back what they gave in a softer way, with a woman's reflection, with the atmosphere of womanhood added, and they thought it was

herself they saw. That is the woman who pleases the most of men the most; and who makes them do their best. Were it not for her, Robertson would never have been what he has been to the world. (20)

Even though the "Sunshine" of the diary is Lady Augusta FitzPatrick and not Lady Byron, the evidence does prove that he was not above having an affair despite the fact that his wife was pregnant at the time. The evidence even suggests that he might have been romancing Gertrude, Lady Augusta's eighteen-year-old daughter, at the same time he was romancing her. If not, why was Lady Augusta so upset with him for kissing Gertrude? Given this information, it's possible that he had an affair with Lady Byron as well. She was a widow. So there would have been no barrier on her side. Until now, however, Robertson's name in connection with hers is not much more than a footnote in any of the published biographies.

What's important for the historical record is to note that discovery of the correspondence and the diary, both of which remain in private hands, suggests that Robertson was a conflicted man in his private life as well as his public one. He was far from being morally "stainless" and "exalted." The diary and correspondence also reveal that there was more to the friendship between Robertson and Lady Byron than the world has known up until now. Rather than pronounce judgment on him, however, it may be more appropriate from the vantage point of history to try to understand him. It is in the act of sex that one surrenders oneself to another. It is an act of surrendering limitations to achieve transcendence. In that moment when two souls are one, the self is lost and found again in the being of the other. The evidence suggests that for Robertson that moment was a foretaste of heaven, physical surrender as a way to spiritual fulfillment, spiritual fulfillment being the goal of his life.

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