

MARY WARD'S OXFORD-TASMANIA CONNECTION
(Delivered at the launch of *Tasmania: Women, History, Books and Places*,
Oxford, 28 September 2010)

'I see dimly another house in wide fields where dwarf lilies grew, and I know that it was a house in Tasmania.' , wrote Mary Ward (Mrs Humphry Ward) in *A Writer's Recollections* (1918).

2010 is the ninetieth anniversary of the novelist and social reformer's death; next year is the 150th anniversary of her birth. While her death took place in England, she was born in Tasmania. On the English side of the family, her pedigree, as is well enough known, was impeccably intellectual: she was the granddaughter of Thomas Arnold of Rugby and the niece of Matthew Arnold; her daughter was to marry the historian George Trevelyan, and her sister was the mother of Julian and Aldous Huxley. What is not so well-known is that Julian was named after Mary's Tasmanian mother Julia Sorell Arnold, and that background is more intriguing.

Mary Ward is part of Oxford's history because, during the early days of her marriage to an Oxford fellow, Thomas Humphry Ward, she was a prime mover in the creation, in 1878, of Somerville Hall, later Somerville College; she was its first secretary, and she was on its council from 1881-98. She was even responsible for its name.

She was passionate about women's education, writing of 1873 ' In those days ... a small group of women of whom I was one, were laying the foundation of the whole system of women's education in Oxford.' Her passion doubtless stemmed from the neglect of her own formal education in spite of her Arnold background. She was pretty well self taught – able to read French, German, Italian, Spanish, Classical Greek and Latin and hold her own with the intellectuals of her day. Ironically both the eldest of her brothers and her younger sister attended Oxford University; her sister, indeed, was at Somerville and got a first in English literature.

In spite of her formal educational disadvantages, Mary Arnold Ward was a successful novelist – best known for *Robert Elsmere* – and social reformer. She had a real talent for organisation, lobbying and fund raising. She founded the Passmore Edwards Settlement in London, initially for the education and welfare of children with disabilities and later spreading to play centres for children – a bit of a contrast to her own childhood. Both ventures were later more widely developed. But today she is notorious as the founding president, in 1908, of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League. She campaigned widely and even incorporated anti-suffrage views into her novels of the period. So hostile was the reaction to her views that, in 1909, Somerville broke its ties with her.

Why she espoused the anti-suffrage cause she does not seem to have explained, but the heroines of her many novels, starting with those in *Robert Elsmere*, are strong women who wield their influence from the home and within their community, which is how her own reformist activity was conducted, whether in Oxford or in London.

But Tasmania is where it all started. Mary Arnold was born in 1851 in Stoke Road, New Town, Hobart. Her great grandmother Elizabeth Kemp was, in 1807, among the first white women in the north of the island. Remnants of Elizabeth's time there are at

the archaeological site of York Town, just north of Launceston on the River Tamar. Elizabeth is very much a founding mother of colonial Tasmania, particularly as she had 16 children. The town of Kempton in the Midlands of the island is named after her husband.

Elisabeth Kemp's best-known daughter, also Elizabeth, married the son of Tasmania's Lieutenant Governor William Sorell. The governor arrived with his partner Louisa Kent – a woman married to someone else – to take up his post in 1817. He was later to marry Louisa but, meanwhile, had a family with her in Tasmania. Anthony Kemp, husband of the first Elizabeth, father of Elizabeth the younger, did his best to make sure that Sorell was recalled on account of his immorality.

Sorell had an earlier marriage and seven children. The elder son, also William, came to Tasmania as his father was recalled, fell for Elizabeth Kemp and married her, a nice irony in view of her father's part in his father's recall. The marriage lasted long enough for the beautiful and tempestuous Elizabeth to have three children which she then took to Europe and dumped on her father-in-law, the erstwhile governor, and Louisa Kent, while she went off to Ceylon with Colonel Deare, with whom she had formed an attachment in Tasmania, and had another family.

One of Elizabeth Kemp Sorell's children was Julia Sorell, Mary Arnold Ward's mother. When in 1850 Julia Sorell married Thomas Arnold the younger, newly-arrived inspector of schools, it was pretty well her last chance at respectability. Her mother's notoriety and, indeed, that of her grandfather, Governor Sorell, had not helped, but her own reputation suffered when she was alleged to have caught the attention of grass-widower governor Eardley Wilmot.

There are two locations for their alleged dalliance, the remains of the early government house complex, the secretary's cottage, which you can still see through the window at the back of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and the governor's retreat of Turriff Lodge in the town of New Norfolk. The relationship may well have been pure gossip but it contributed to Eardley Wilmot's recall.

Thomas Arnold wrote many years later in his memoirs of first seeing Julia in 1850:

I was at a small party ... On a sofa sat a beautiful girl in a black silk dress, with a white lace berthe [large round collar] and red bows in the skirt of the dress. My friend Clarke presently introduced me to her. I remember that as we talked a strange feeling came over me of having met her before – of having always known her.

That quotation is familiar enough, but there are descriptions of Julia which I am not sure have been picked up before in relation to her and her daughter Mary Ward's Tasmanian background. They come from the pen of Annie Baxter, a young army wife who vied with Julia for attention in Tasmanian society.

In 1844, Annie's brother, another William, taking her to the Hobart regatta at Sandy Bay, stopped on the way to pick up Julia and her young sister Augusta. Annie remarked in her diary, 'Neither of them are pretty, altho' both are good looking! Their eyes are small & the eldest have the Vixen depicted in them.' A few days later,

invited to a party at Government House, Annie called Eardley Wilmot ‘a fine, gentlemanly old man, but not as much of the “*Prince*”, as I was given to understand.’ She noted that Julia Sorell was there too, and added: ‘she looked vulgar almost, and springs about in such style!’ At a country party in February given by Eardley Wilmot, Annie described Julia: ‘with her bonnet off, to show her good hair’.

Among the guests at a ball in Hobart in 1846 was Julia who, Annie wrote, ‘is fallen off exceedingly in her appearance, her two front teeth being decayed alters her very much.’ The portrait of Julia by the convict artist Thomas Wainwright in the Tasmanian art gallery dates from that year.

In 1848, Annie’s sister-in-law had just died and Annie tastelessly suggested to her brother that she had heard a rumour that Julia Sorell had set her cap at him. ‘He began to assure me with much gravity’, she observed, ‘... that she was the last person he would ever think of marrying – but as to her being very fascinating & attractive, he allowed she was all this, and more.’

Of Julia’s autumnal marriage in St David’s Cathedral, Hobart, in 1850 Annie Baxter wrote: ‘The Bride and her sisters were dressed in white muslin, Chip & straw bonnets – but looked very cold, having no shawls, or any kind of outdoor covering ... The awful ceremony took place; & they are now “one flesh”. May they be happy.’ Two weeks later she added, ‘Yesterday William drove me out to call on Mrs Arnold, who received me with a kiss! To my thorough amazement. She looks very well; and seems snug in her new domicile.’

The Arnolds settled in Stoke Street for the next three years. Mary was the first of four daughters and four sons who survived. Unfortunately for the well-being of the marriage, Thomas Arnold decided to convert to Roman Catholicism, which he did in 1856. The scientist Sir Julian Huxley, Mary Ward’s nephew and Julia’s grandson, wrote in his *Memories* (1970):

During the ceremony Julia, a staunch Protestant and very angry about his conversion, collected a basket of stones from her yard, walked across to the nearby Chapel where he was being formally received into the ranks of Catholicism, and smashed the windows with this protesting ammunition. Even this failed to change his heart, though his conversion changed his prospects.

It is too simplistic to say that, as a result, the Arnolds were forced to leave Tasmania, but the adverse gossip about his conversion played a major part in his decision.

Julia Sorell Arnold was to have a difficult time in England, well-documented in John Sutherland’s biography of her daughter Mary Ward. She lived for most of the rest of her life in Oxford, though her husband, who came back to the Anglican fold, then re-converted to Catholicism, scuppered his University chances there and lived and worked away from her. She died in Oxford of breast cancer in 1888 six weeks after the publication of Mary’s *Robert Elsmere* - a novel which brought her instant recognition, and which obviously drew on the family’s religious upheavals.

A Tasmanian image of Julia as recounted in her daughter's recollections countermands Annie Baxter's impressions, showing how difficult it is to get to the truth in either biography or history; so much depends on sources. Mary wrote:

Of her personal beauty in youth we children heard much, as we grew up, from her old Tasmanian friends and kinsfolk who would occasionally drift across us, and I see as though I had been there, a scene often described to me – my mother playing Hermione in the 'Winter's Tale', at Government House when Sir William Denison was Governor – a vision lovely and motionless, on her pedestal, till at the words 'Music! Awake her! Strike!' she kindled into life.

Mary Ward's reformist endeavours in London started in Tavistock Place, in a building known today as Mary Ward House, but it is now a privately-run conference and function centre. Instead, the still-expanding work of the original Passmore Edwards Settlement (1897), renamed the Mary Ward Settlement in 1920 following her death, is continued by the Mary Ward Centre and the Mary Ward Legal Central in nearby 42-43 Queen's Square and 26-27 Boswell Street.

In Oxford, the family home of Julia Sorell Arnold and Mary Arnold Ward before her marriage was Laleham House (54 Banbury Road) which, when Thomas Arnold sold it, became part of the religious establishment Wycliffe Hall. Mary's married Oxford home was 5 Bradmore Road (now number 17). No 2 Bradmore Road has a blue plaque on it dedicated to Walter Pater and his sister Clara, described as a 'pioneer of women's education'. But there is no blue plaque on No. 17. In spite of Mary's loss of reputation over her anti-suffrage activities, don't you think she deserves one?

Stop Press November 2011

At their October meeting, the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board approved the application submitted by Susanna Hoe for a blue plaque in honour of Mary Ward to be put on 17 Bradmore Road, Oxford.

Stop Press 29 April 2012

The unveiling of the blue plaque took place yesterday at 17 Bradmore Road, Oxford. Before the unveiling, Mary Ward's life and work was illuminated by Professor Elizabeth Jay (her writing); Dr Alice Prochaska (Somerville College) Ceri Williams (The Mary Ward Centre) and George Trevelyan (the family). The unveiling was followed by a reception given by Caroline and Hector Sants, owners of the house.