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Review of Such Silver Currents: The Story of William and Lucy Clifford

M. Chisholm

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**M. Chisholm, *Such Silver Currents: The Story of William and Lucy Clifford 1845-1929* (The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, 2002).
pp. 198. £17.50 (paperback). ISBN 0 7188 30172**

This is the first biography to record the shared and separate lives of an unusual couple, a mathematical genius called William Clifford and his literary wife, Lucy. Their biographer, M. Chisholm, has had to confront the problem of different lives and interests since the Cliffords shared only four years of marriage, but she has arranged a considerable amount of research sensibly, showing where their concerns diverged and coincided. During their time in London (1875-9) the Cliffords were at the centre of a fascinating group of celebrities, literary and scientific, who were drawn to their Sunday afternoon salons. We are likely to warm to the account of their friendship with George Eliot and Lewes, and to appreciate both William Clifford's favourable review of Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* and his generous recommendation of *Daniel Deronda* to Lucy ('One feels that one is looking at things with a large-minded sympathetic companion'). Lucy's memories of her first visit as a young wife to the Priory are attractively detailed: despite breathless awe, her responses are lively, observant, natural. Lewes reminds her of 'a rather small, active, very intelligent dog'. She is intensely moved by George Eliot, especially by 'the kindly expression on her wonderful face. Wonderful? Yes, and like a horse's ... a strange variety of horse that was full of knowledge, and beauty of thought, and mysteries of which the ordinary human being had no conception'. Interestingly, she notices that 'the talk was a little sententious, a little too good ... so that it seldom had an air of spontaneity ... the best things were generally said by George Eliot herself'. In 1879, when her husband died at 33, Lucy was comforted by a letter from George Eliot linking her loss with her own loss of Lewes four months earlier: 'I understand it all'.

The early years of Lucy's long widowhood were difficult when she had to care for her children, establish herself as a writer, and organize her salon, but for nearly fifty years she was sustained by her many friendships with the famous. The list of writers is extraordinary, including among others, William and Henry James, Leslie Stephen, Thomas Huxley, Kipling, Rhoda Broughton, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr, James Russell Lowell, Olive Schreiner and Hardy. Even Ezra Pound appeared at one of her Sunday tea-parties. She once upset Kipling and more than once exasperated Virginia Woolf, but on the whole she inspired affection ('I love you so very, very much', wrote Henry James). She was loyal to her friends, faithful in correspondence, generous by nature, and eager to help other writers. One friend maintained that she always had 'some mute inglorious Milton up her sleeve'.

Monty Chisholm has drawn from a rich source of unpublished material, about 1000 letters which form the Valhouse Collection. Her superlatives on William Clifford's brilliance are understandable when his mathematical findings are traced with such scrupulous care. In a final chapter written jointly with her husband, Professor Chisholm, Clifford is revealed as forty years ahead of Einstein in proposing the concept of curved space. The growing significance of Clifford Algebra in mathematics, physics and engineering is clearly described, and an Afterword by Sir Roger Penrose gives detail. It is ironic that whereas Clifford's discoveries are now celebrated more than ever, Lucy's reputation has seriously declined. Chisholm quotes

Henry James's pertinent comment that some of her fiction was 'loose' and needed 'squeezing' and admits that much of her work has dated, but still argues that her best writing is of interest today. Although never a suffragette, Lucy Clifford wanted personal freedom for her female characters, 'the right to exist, to feel, to think ... and, if they wished, to marry without having to surrender such rights'. Also of modern interest are two psychologically startling tales. *The New Mother* and *Wooden Tony* (both recently republished). Chisholm discusses the disturbing Mrs Keith's Crime which demonstrates 'her ability to step aside from conventional themes and techniques', and her unusual *Aunt Anne* in which her 'manipulative and manipulated, ageing heroine' not only 'found her way into the hearts of a wide range of readers' but also influenced Arnold Bennett's choice of subject in *The Old Wives' Tale*. Chisholm concedes that Lucy Clifford's writings were 'never first rank', but makes enough interesting comments to persuade this reviewer at least to sample them and wish more were readily available. Literary friendships may cast long shadows: just as the occasional echo of Henry James can be heard in Lucy Clifford's work, so the influence of George Eliot, whom she also admired, may have lingered in her mind, helping to inspire her values, deepen her compassion, and make her fiction more memorable than it might otherwise have been.

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