

Jemima Lucy Lefroy

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Jemima Lucy Lefroy was the oldest child and only daughter of the Rev. George Lefroy, Rector of Ashe in Hampshire, and of his wife Anne;¹ Anne Lefroy, it will be remembered, was the much admired friend of Jane Austen. Mrs. Lefroy was a woman, by all accounts, of remarkable charm and brilliance, who was never happier than when surrounded by a company of friends and family. She was a lively and intelligent conversationalist, and the social life at the elegant rectory at Ashe must have been a benefit to the family at Steventon, providing intellectual stimulation not very common in that remote rural neighbourhood. Jane described her as “a perfect model of grace and goodness,” and her influence on the novelist in her formative years was probably considerable.

Lucy was born in 1779, and thus was only four years younger than Jane Austen; she was a member of the Austen social circle, but it is evident that Jane found her mother a more stimulating companion. She wrote to Cassandra at Godmersham – “I expect a very stupid Ball, there will be nobody worth dancing with, and nobody worth talking to but Catherine [Bigg]; for I believe Mrs. Lefroy will not be there. Lucy is to go with Mrs. Russell –.”² Either Mrs. Russell was expected to monopolise the society of Lucy, or nothing very amusing could be expected from her in the way of conversation. At a later date, however, Jane Austen referred to a “Miss Bendish, – whose gracious manners, ready wit, and solid remarks put me somewhat in mind of my old acquaintance Lucy Lefroy,”³ and this might suggest recollections of a lively and engaging personality.

Lucy was to acquire two links with the Austen family apart from the neighbourly one; in 1814 her youngest brother Benjamin became the husband of Jane’s niece Anna Austen, and in 1819 her husband’s younger brother, Edward Royds Rice, married another of Jane’s nieces, Elizabeth Knight. In 1801 Lucy had married the Rev. Henry Rice, the older surviving son of the formidable Madame Sarah Rice of Bramling in Kent. Mrs. Rice, like the Lefroys themselves, was a Huguenot, born Sarah Samson, and a banker and business woman in her own right.⁴ The Austens were acquainted with her, and Jane, with a shrewd observant eye and a good deal of youthful prejudice, condemned her as a disagreeable and hard-hearted woman.

The early years of the married life of Henry Rice and Lucy were spent at Deane, where he had been offered the curacy; Deane had been in the gift of Francis Austen of Sevenoaks, uncle of George Austen,⁵ and old Mr. Austen was in possession of it at that time. Deane is a very short distance from Ashe, and from Steventon, where James Austen, curate at Overton, was acting as Rector in place of his father, who had lately retired to Bath. Letters of Anne Lefroy written between 1801 and 1804* suggest a very happy and tranquil period, with constant visits between the two families. At Deane Lucy’s first two children were born, in 1802 and 1804. Henry Rice was cheerful, lively

and amusing; he was very active in raising Volunteers in the neighbourhood to defend the country against possible invasion by Bonaparte. Whereas his brother-in-law George Lefroy took a commission in an infantry company, Henry joined a mounted troop, "Rice is to be a Sergeant, and will mount himself and his man Robert upon very fine chargers—." By the time Mrs. Lefroy had penned her last letters to her son Edward in the Isle of Wight—the last a few days before her fatal accident—she was recording a growing restlessness in the family at Deane, particularly in Henry; Deane of course could never be anything but a stop-gap occupancy. But he was wishing for a move and casting round with ideas more or less suitable. In March 1804 Mrs. Lefroy reported: "—the Rices still talk of leaving Deane in the autumn, but—they have not found any new situation—,"⁶ and in April, just before the birth of their second child, Henry was toying with the idea of buying the presentation of Deane, pulling the house down, and building another in a different location. His later history was to prove him inclined to grandiose notions beyond his means to accomplish them. It is not clear when the family left Deane, but by 1807 they were living at Cholderton, near Salisbury, and by that time Henry's mother was negotiating for the purchase for him of the advowson of Great Holland in Essex, which Henry himself reported would produce an income of over £600 per annum.⁷ It is hard not to feel, judging from some surviving letters of Lucy's in later years, that her experiences as a married woman drained away most of her wit and a good deal of her liveliness. With all his charm, Henry was extravagant and improvident to the highest degree, and according to family tradition an incorrigible gambler; in the handling of his financial affairs he seems to have been totally incompetent, not to say dishonourable. The letters of Lucy Rice,⁸ which provide much of the material for this article, were written to her brother the Rev. George Lefroy, who had succeeded his father as Rector of Ashe, and to her mother-in-law Sarah Rice. Lucy's epistolary style gives no evidence of wit or originality of mind, and her grammar and punctuation leave something to be desired; but the subject-matter of these particular letters is distressing and Lucy's situation wretched and perplexing, hardly circumstances which are conducive to literary brilliance.

Lucy and Henry Rice had three children, a son also called Henry, and two daughters, Anne and Sarah. It is evident from letters between Henry Rice and his mother that financial problems developed early, and many bills were settled by Mrs. Sarah Rice, including very much overdue college bills from his student days at Christ's College Cambridge, which were settled in 1804. By 1819 the Rices were living at Maxton, a small parish just outside Dover, and from there, in July, Lucy wrote to her brother. She confirmed that they had formed the intention of going abroad, to Ghent or Brussels, in order to economise—maybe too, to escape from the importunities of their creditors—and she commented that "—no doubt Rice's bankers have received what you sent them but you will be surprised to hear he has never mentioned the subject to me since he wrote to you from here before he went to town this is to me very odd after all the *anxiety* and *vexation* I went through." This is the only critical comment she passed about her husband in these letters, which

perhaps says more for her loyalty than her judgement. Her applications to her brother and later to her mother-in-law for assistance were made, she insisted, without the knowledge of her husband, for she knew that as far as her own family was concerned, Henry's credit had run out, and their periodic gifts of money were only made to her, to ease her household problems. As early as 1812 there is a record that the Lefroy brothers had had to take legal proceedings to obtain repayment of a bond, for which, as always, Henry had applied to his mother for the necessary money.

Lucy's next letter to her brother was still from Maxton, but Henry and his son had found a house in Dunkirk, and they were about to leave England. After this information, Lucy lapsed into rather touching incoherence which always heralded an embarrassed appeal for help, "—my dear brother,—I hardly know how to make the request—and am perhaps *unreasonable* for doing so and therefore *beg* if it is inconvenient to you you will not grant it but *if not* and you would have the kindness to send me £10 or £15 it would be of the *greatest use* to me and would make me leave this much more comfortable *believe me* my dear brother it is not to squander away or I would not ask for it and as I am convinced we shall live there much cheaper I *promise* I shall put by something every week and hope by that means I shall be able to return it to you when we come back again I *assure* you this is for myself I am asking Rice knows nothing about it nor do I wish him to know it therefore whatever fault there is is mine I know you will let me know when you receive this whether you can or cannot grant my request and also I hope that you are not angry with me for having made it."

Help was forthcoming in this case, as it always was from that quarter for Lucy, if not for Henry; the more prosperous members of the Lefroy family seem to have been supportive of their less fortunate relations. The second brother was Christopher Edward, he who pleased Jane Austen in 1816 by "thinking of the French as one could wish, disappointed in everything"! He was a lawyer, and took an appointment as a Commissary Judge in Surinam for some years. He never married, though his own reminiscences testify to a very susceptible heart. Both his older brother George and his younger brother Ben (the husband of Anna Austen) died prematurely, leaving very large young families, and he evidently provided for them much needed support and financial aid. Lucy wrote to her brother George regularly from Dunkirk, enquiring after family news and reporting their own (early in 1820 she commiserated with George on the death of a close friend—"I fear you will miss poor Austen [i.e., James] very much as I know you were very intimate and had a very high opinion of him where does Mrs. Austen mean to live—"). Dunkirk was not as unpleasant as she had expected; the house was comfortable—it had carpets in most of the rooms, an uncommon feature in French houses, and there were good—and cheap—masters for the girls' tuition; and "tho' not a great deal there is some very pleasant society here."

Their sojourn extended itself beyond the six or eight months they had hoped would suffice; they did not return to England for about two years, in the course of which Lucy was compelled again to apply to her brother for

help from time to time. Ill luck, extravagance, and the spiral of injudicious entanglements had their inevitable consequences.

Continued financial distress was a minor catastrophe in comparison with the greater grief that overwhelmed the family at this time; in the spring of 1820 they had sent their son Henry to a Professor Schwartz at Heidelberg either as a pupil or more probably as a teaching assistant, and there a year later he fell ill and died.

In course of time the family returned to England, but never, it seems, to the comfort and tranquillity of financial security. Henry was in possession of a not inconsiderable living at Great Holland in Essex, and in receipt of an income of £420 per annum from his father's estate. But correspondence reveals a perpetual state of debt, and complex financial entanglements, largely due, it seems, to Henry's habit of raising money at exorbitant rates of interest from money-lenders or by the provision of annuities, as a means of raising ready money. The hapless Lucy was the innocent victim of this situation, caught between the improvident, not to say dishonourable, activities of her husband and the enraged response of Madame Sarah, battered by his insatiable demands and implausible explanations. Lucy was driven from time to time to take up a timid pen in order to beg assistance from her mother-in-law; her descriptions of their financial situation reveal, probably unconsciously, her husband's desperate stratagems of solving one problem by creating several worse ones.

Old Mrs. Rice, aging and increasingly alienated from her son, always eventually saved them from total disaster. She died in 1841, and there are no further reports of insolvency.

We hear of them settled peacefully at Norton Court in Devon, exchanging visits with Henry's brother Edward and his wife Elizabeth née Knight and their large family. Their own family was again reduced by the early death of their daughter Anne; Sarah was married to a clergyman called Douglas Hodgson, and had three children before she died in 1842. One of her two sons was a Commander in the Royal Navy, and drew admiring comments from a cousin, Walter Rice, son of Edward and Elizabeth of Dane Court, Kent, when they met in Malta in 1864.

In spite of the sorrow of surviving all her children, one hopes that the latter part of Lucy's life was more tranquil and prosperous than the earlier years; she seems to have been a woman of loyal and affectionate disposition who required only a reasonable degree of financial security and some "pleasant society" to be happy. She died in 1862, surviving her husband less than a year.

NOTES

¹ Mrs. Lefroy had been Anne Brydges of Wootton Court in Kent, her brother was the eccentric Sir Egerton Brydges, author of several novels including *Arthur Fitz-albini* which was assessed rather unfavourably by Jane Austen, (*Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1952), p. 32). Mrs. Lefroy died as a result of a fall from her horse in December 1804, on Jane Austen's twenty-ninth birthday. Four years later, Jane Austen wrote a set of memorial verses to her, expressing her abiding devotion and admiration.

- ² *Letters*, p. 40. Mrs. Russell was probably the daughter-in-law of the Rev. Dr. Russell, who was Rector of Ashe 1720-83.
- ³ *Letters*, p. 155.
- ⁴ For particulars of Mrs. Sarah Rice and Jane Austen's comments upon her, see the *Report of the Jane Austen Society for 1986*, pp. 16-22, "Mrs. Henry Rice" by M. C. Hammond.
- ⁵ Francis Austen had purchased the gift of both Deane and Ashe at the time of the marriage of George and Cassandra Austen (the parents of Jane Austen) in 1764, with a view to present whichever first fell vacant to his nephew; Deane fell vacant in 1773, when George Austen added it to his incumbency of Steventon. Francis Austen sold the gift of Ashe in about 1783 to Benjamin Langlois, uncle to George Lefroy, for similar benevolent purposes.
- ⁶ Letters from Anne Lefroy to her son Christopher Edward 1801-04, Lefroy Family Papers. Previous two references (indicated by asterisks) are from this source.
- ⁷ Henry Rice to his mother Sarah Rice 1807, Rice Family Papers.
- ⁸ Letters from Jemima Lucy Rice to the Rev. George Lefroy, 1819-21, Lefroy Family Papers; also letters from Lucy to her mother-in-law Mrs. Sarah Rice, Rice Family Papers.
- ⁹ The Rev. George Lefroy was the oldest son of George and Anne Lefroy, and became Rector of Ashe on the death of his father in 1806. He inherited the Ewshot estate, near Farnham, from his uncle Henry Maxwell; he married Sophia Cottrell in 1806.