Tennyson Studies: Some Materials Relating to Emily Sellwood and Charles and Louisa Turner

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The Tennyson biographer often has cause to lament the paucity of documentary materials and especially those from the years prior to Alfred's marriage to Emily Sellwood in 1850. Many family papers were destroyed by Hallam in the 1890s once he had selected the letters he wished to edit for inclusion in his Alfred, Lord Tennyson. A Memoir (1897). The vast collection of Tennyson d'Eyncourt letters at the Lincolnshire Archives Office, a rich source of family correspondence for the period up to the mid 1850s and much quarried by Tennysonian, provides often only fragmentary glimpses of the Somersby family once they had left Lincolnshire for London in 1837. In this article, prepared in a year which marks the centenary of Emily Tennyson's death, I will be printing a hitherto unrecorded poem addressed to Emily by Alfred's elder brother Charles Tennyson Turner, but first I want to draw attention to material contained in several collections at Lincoln, which reveal something of the difficult years of the late 1830s and the 1840s, when both Alfred's engagement to Emily Sellwood and Charles's marriage to her sister Louisa were under strain.

The records of the Horncastle firm of solicitors Tweed and Peacock and deposited at the Lincolnshire Archives Office in 1967 contain the correspondence R. A. Cracroft (1783-1862) of Hackthorn Hall addressed to his agent Henry Sellwood (1782-1867) of Horncastle, during the period 1838 to c.1848. Although principally concerned with the management of his estates and his financial affairs, Cracroft does make occasional brief reference to the Sellwood household, and it is these observations and comments which are of interest here.

Cracroft and Sellwood were related by marriage, the connection arising through the Franklin family of Spilsby. Henry Sellwood married Sarah daughter of William Franklin at Mavis Enderby on 15 September 1812; Sarah was to die four years later on 30 September 1816 leaving her widowed husband three infant daughters to raise: Emily Sarah (b.1813), Anne (b.1814) and Louisa (b.1816). Thomas Cracroft, a cousin to R. A. Cracroft, married Isabella a younger daughter of William Franklin at Mavis Enderby on 13 October 1814.

Another member of the Franklin family, John Franklin's first wife, Eleanor Anne Porden, visiting her new in-laws at Keal in October 1823 was to write of her (and Sellwood's) brother-in-law:

Mr [Thomas] Cracroft I thought vulgar at first from his shooting dress and Lincolnshire dialect, but I have since corrected my opinion and find him intelligent and well informed. He is a farmer on a great scale, and a great sportsman.

Tom Cracroft died, on returning from a visit to Lincoln, on 11 July 1824 at Henry Sellwood's house in Horncastle. He had acted as agent to R. A. Cracroft's estate; on his death Sellwood became Cracroft's agent. Cracroft seems to have taken a concerned interest in Tom Cracroft's four young children as is evident in a letter he wrote to Sellwood on 22 August 1839:

I am sorry to think that the time for my little fair cousin's return to you is approaching. We find her a most amiable inmate and much regret that she should be so rheumatic at her age.

Would it be convenient for you to send her patient for her to Wagby on Thursday the 29th inst. at 12 o'clock - will you excuse my assuring you if you would let Miss Belle Inglis come in your carriage and your brother will bring her from Keal by half past 10 o'clock.

Cracroft's next paragraph contains the first indication in his letters that there were problems in the Sellwood household, 'I was glad to hear from Emma that your daughter Mrs Turner was quite, or nearly recovered the severe shock she had.' Louisa had by then left her husband of only three years, Charles Turner, vicar of Grasby. On 1 December 1839, Cracroft was to conclude another business letter to Sellwood, 'I regret to hear the sad report of your family and hope all will end to your satisfaction.'

None of Sellwood's letters to Cracroft appear to be extant, but the fortunate survival of five of his letters from this period to another brother-in-law, John Booth (1779-1854) of Ingoldmells (he had married Hannah Franklin in 1805) provide a vivid, if perhaps, one sided, view of the events only briefly alluded to by Cracroft. It must be stressed that Sellwood's letters were no doubt kept by Booth because they dealt with significant family legal and financial concerns - he was then staying for the winter with his daughter Mary, the second wife of Dr (later Sir) John Richardson, physician to the Royal Hospital at Haslar, Gosport. Rather than introduce each letter, it seems best here to present this important material as a series of dated extracts:

_I heard a few days ago from Emily who considers Louisa quite well in her mind but it seems she is very anxious to rejoin her husband either at Grasby or to travel abroad. The latter I should think she has a great preference for but I have written to say that she ought not by any means to go without a female companion. It seems she would like to spend the winter in Paris or some other place._[4 November 1839]

_I have now got Emily & Louisa home again but I was obliged to go to London & fetch them on account of the extraordinary conduct of Mr Turner. He is in fact quite demoted by his opinion & yet poor Louisa insists upon rejoining him unless he were absolutely to say that he would not take her in. Except this I consider her mind quite restored. Emily's health is rather worse than before and she had when in London a rather sharp attack of illness but I do not understand the nature of it._[29 November 1839]

_I am happy to say that Emily has been gradually getting better since her return home. Louisa also is in tolerable health and in very good spirits. I have applied to Huddesley (Mr Turner's friend and attorney) to try to arrange a separation from which (if it can be done) Louisa is by no means averse but nothing is settled as yet._[4 December 1839]

_Nothing is yet finally arranged as to Louisa who is still with us & really tolerably well in every respect. The worst symptom is that she is anxious to leave us & live alone if she does not rejoin her husband which I think she will not. Emily is better._[12 December 1839]

I am extremely obliged by the kind interest you at All at Haslar take in poor Louisy. She went back to her husband yesterday & she has been in most excellent spirits ever since her return was determined on. She has not raised her expectations of domestic comfort very high & has promised if she should find matters worse than she expects [to] return to us again or to go and reside with the Cookes [sic] at Bridg. Mr Cotterell has the School there which you remember well. Mr Turner would never say that he would consent to a separation & in fact I think he feels his utter inability to take care of himself. I really think he has no evil dispositions except his great vice which nullifies most of his inherent good qualities.

P.S. It is fully understood that Louisa is not to reside permanently at Grasby. [13 January 1840]

At the end of the month Charles was petitioning bishop Kaye for non-residence from Grasby. His submission was supported by a letter from the Brigge surgeon R. H. Paterson who wrote of 'the peculiar state of health (mental) of Mrs Turner'; Paterson concluded his note: 'I deem change of abode, imperative, as an essential step towards her recovery.'
Louisa remained separated from Charles for nearly a decade. In the census of 1841 (taken in early June) she is recorded living at Wraysby with the Rev. Charles Cotterill, headmaster of Brigg School, and his family. In 1842 she signed the Horncastle marriage register respectively as witness to the weddings at Horncastle of her sister Anne to Charles Weld (25 January) and of her cousin Catherine Ann Franklin to R. D. B. Rawsley (15 September). Thereafter she disappears from the records until 1849.

Perhaps Charles’s most telling letter from this period, one of a number sent to bishop Kaye in the 1840s, was written from the Tennysons home at Bokley Hall near Maidstone on 24 April [71843]. He described his ‘situation’ as being ‘in great part, if not wholly; – a widower – virtually, – as it is not thought safe for my wife and myself to live together’. He continued:

I cannot but say that distressful circumstances have made Grasby a lonely place for me & my wife resides with her father & at times, being on a visit in the neighbourhood, (for it is deemed right & serviceable for her not to continue too long a period together even in her father’s house) comes even nearer to me viz. within a very few miles – this sad proximity I much rejoice to dispense with by a change of residence. Even if, eventually, (a case perhaps not at all probable) she could return to me, the loneliness and want of neighbourhood of Grasby would throw it quite out of the line of my advice’s suggestions: Her malady is I believe, considered of that kind which, from its mildness unchangeable character of monotonia offers but little hope of amelioration: Her religious views, with which I could not concur or sympathize, seem to keep her heart at a distance from me & therefore of course, no motion is made or is likely to be made on the part of her friends to reunite us.

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As Sellwood’s letters to John Booth make clear, problems were not confined solely to Louisa. Cracroft was to conclude a letter of 27 November 1839 (asking Sellwood to prepare the Rev. J. T. Maine’s lecture of Harrington Hall), with an exceptionally intriguing fragment germane to Emily’s medical problems:

I met Dr Medley [sic] in Horncastle on Monday, from whom I was sorry to hear that you had been in London on account of the health of your eldest daughter and I hope you are satisfied with the opinion of Sir Charles Clerk and that his opinion has been favourable.

Sir Charles Mansfield Clarke, Bt (1782-1857), was a leading ‘accoucheur’. He published in two parts in 1814 and 1821 Observations on those Discharges of Females which are Attended by Discharges (2nd edn 1821-1826; 3rd edn 1831). Although there is the possibility of Cracroft’s misunderstanding Madeley’s comment (and that Sellwood would have not been open about the state of his daughter’s health), the date of the events alluded to is of considerable interest; this was the period of the breakdown of Alfred’s engagement with Emily.

Whether Emily’s physical state in November was contributory to, or an effect of, the breakdown of her engagement to Alfred, is, of course, a matter of some conjecture. It must be remembered, to judge from the evidence of a comment Cecilia Tennyson made in a letter to Susan Haddelsey of 23 March 1839, ‘Mrs Neville… is in a very weak state of health, indeed almost any I think quite as weak as Emily Sellwood’, that Emily’s health had already been in a poor way for some months (and it would not have been helped by later anxiety about her sister). The new evidence presented by this letter does raise the possibility that considerations of Emily’s health, as much as Alfred’s parochial financial affairs (the explanation offered in Hallam’s Memoir), lay behind the decision to break off the engagement.

The remaining comments in Cracroft’s letters are exceptionally fragmentary, but are of interest as they indicate Emily to have remained in ill-health for a number of years. On 17 July [71841] he enquired, ‘How are all your invalids?’ (presumably Louisa was then resident at Horncastle). Over two years later, on 1 October 1843, Cracroft wrote to Sellwood:

‘You were engaged yesterday as I passed through Horncastle – I had the pleasure of a chat with Miss Sellwood for ten minutes who I was glad to find reported herself better in health.’ On 26 August 1844, he concluded a business letter, ‘Hope you are all the better for your Lincolnshire German Ocean. I found you went to Trusthorpe when I called on you last week in Horncastle.’ As late as 7 December 1845 Cracroft was writing, ‘I hope your daughter is better but Sophy Cracroft did not give a very good account of her.’

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On 21 September 1846 Cracroft wrote in generous, if also sensitive, terms to Sellwood:

The worst piece of news you give me is your retiring from your profession of which you have so long been an honor to, and I fear you will leave the county. Be that as it may the friendship existing between us will not be broken & which I due from the connection with poor Tom Cracroft. This part of the subject I will not longer dwell upon but spare your feelings which must naturally arise on recurring back to a good many years which have rapidly passed away.

The events which were to lead to Alfred and Emily’s marriage in June 1850 were slowly unfolding. Contacts between Emily and Alfred were gradually re-established; once Charles and Louisa were re-united in 1849 the final barrier to the marriage was removed. It is appropriate to look back not to 24 May 1836 when Charles and Louisa were married at Horncastle – and when, according to family tradition, Alfred and Emily fell in love – but to 12 September 1835. On this day, at Horncastle, the newly engaged Charles Turner, composed this lyric:

To E. S. S.
Sister of her! to whom my soul is wed!
My soul hath thanks for thee,
Which shall be own’d nor evermore gain said,
Ah no! they cannot be.

My heart with strange solicitude repines
With ill-dissembled fears,
And with a mingled thought no word defines,
A thought o’ercome with tears.

Three are we now – thy bridal or thy grave
May tear us wide apart,
May God – the Arbiter of both – enslave
In other bonds thy heart!

Stay near us, Emily, in good and ill,
Aias! thou canst not guide
Thy lot – but may’st thou further Heaven’s own will
In keeping at our side.\(^{15}\)

Emily, indeed, remained faithful to the Tennysons ‘in good and ill’. Despite her almost legendary fragility (which is even hinted at in Charles’s poem), she outlived Charles, Louisa (who died a month after her husband’s death in 1879) and, by almost four years, her beloved Alfred, dying at Aldworth on 10 August 1896.\(^{15}\)

Notes
3. Lincolnshire Archives Office (hereafter: L.A.O.) 3 T.P.T. Box 9. At present the papers are only roughly sorted. All subsequent quotations from Cracroft’s correspondence are from letters in this box. I have used

4. The Hon. Mrs E. M. Geil, John Franklin’s Bride: Eleanor Anne Porden (1930), p. 240. Cracroft was moving to another house (p. 244), presumably Harrington Hall.


7. For Richardson, who features prominently in the story of Sir John Franklin, see the D.N.B.

8. L.A.O. N.R.L. 4/46. Patterson was, of course, referring to Charles’s removal from Grasby being essential to Louisa’s recovery.


12. In her ‘Recollections of my early life’, p. 7, Emily recalled: ‘During my ten years’ separation from your father the doctors believed I was going into a consumption, and the Lincolnshire climate was pronounced to be too cold for me; and we moved to London, to look for a house in the south of England.’

13. Sellwood, however, did not finally sell his interest to Samuel Skercley until 1848, L.A.O. T.P. 2/3/2. Cf. also the previous note.

14. Copied by Hallam Tennyson in 1886 into an 1884 edition of Charles’s Collected Sonnets Old and New (now in a private collection). I have described the poem more fully in an article written jointly with Valerie Purton, ‘“Stay near us, Emily”: the influence of Emily Sellwood upon the Tennyson family in the 1830s’, Tennyson Research Bulletin (forthcoming).

15. This article draws on some of my unpublished research, generously acknowledged by Ann Thwattte in her authoritative Emily Tennyson: The Poet’s Wife (1996). Roger Evans, Secret Rooms: The Life and Work of Charles Tennyson Turner (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hull, 1993) is indispensable for the lives of both Charles and Louisa; it is to be hoped this will soon be published as a book.