

The Making of Mrs. Whitby

by Mary Trehearne, M.A.

The figure of Mrs. Theresa Whitby dominates the first half of the 19th century in Milford. Her story is well-known to many, especially through Mrs. Diana Coldicott's book on Milford House, but they may wonder how a woman of that time could have gained so much responsibility and influence and at an early age. I hope to be able to give some answers to this question; but first let us look again at the facts of her life.

Although most of her letters seem to have been destroyed by her great-grandson, George Cornwallis-West,¹ he quoted freely from them in his "*Letters of Admiral Cornwallis*" so that this book includes a self-portrait drawn by her own hand as well as that outlined by the author. John Whitby had served with Cornwallis as Flag-Lieutenant and then as Flag-Captain on a cruise for the purpose of surveying the coasts of Siam and Malaya between 1790 and 1794. The Admiral, a shy and reserved man who shunned society and especially that of women, became very attached to the young man and treated him as a son. The disastrous fire at Newlands Manor during the winter of 1802-1803 had destroyed the library wing of the thatched farmhouse it then was, but Whitby brought his newly-married wife to stay there in 1803. She was a striking young woman, "both cultured and beautiful" according to her great-grandson, who added that she spoke three languages and painted exquisitely. The epitaph written later by her daughter was perhaps more explicit when it spoke of her "combining masculine sense with every feminine charm of person".³ From the very first the Admiral became deeply attached to her, impressed by this combination of qualities which he had perhaps never before met in a woman. He

was nearly sixty - forty years older than she and there seems to have been nothing indiscreet in their relationship. He simply treated the young Whitbys as the children he would never have.²

Newlands Manor was being rebuilt as the Strawberry Hill Gothic edifice which now stands, and when Admiral Cornwallis was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet in May 1803 he left Theresa Whitby in charge of the work. She superintended the building, laid out the garden and plantations and managed the entire property single-handed, as her husband had been given command of the *Belleisle* and sent to the Mediterranean to serve under Nelson. Admiral Cornwallis vested her with his power of attorney when she was only 20 and over the next few years, by judicious purchases, she added considerably to the extent and value of the estate. She wrote frequently to the Admiral in letters both affectionate and business-like, telling him every detail of developments at Newlands. Despite the disappointment of losing her first child and her subsequent illness, she threw herself into this stewardship of Newlands. It took up her whole life at this time and she would not even visit her sister-in-law, Lady Portman, at Bryanston, while the planting was going on for the gardens.

It is surprising enough to find a woman of this period with such executive ability, but we also find her using diplomacy to sort out a quarrel which was brewing between her husband and Admiral Cornwallis soon after the birth of her second child. In August 1805 John Whitby had been appointed Flag-Captain to Cornwallis on the *Ville de Paris*, but found the position very difficult. Cornwallis was blockading Brest and feeling the strain on his health after keeping his ship at sea all

through the previous winter of heavy gales. He was a disappointed man because he had not succeeded in winning a great victory, and was becoming suspicious and cantankerous, feeling that a political faction was working against him at home. The main target of his irritation was Captain John Whitby, who wrote in a letter to his wife that his position on board the *Ville de Paris* was no better than "a magistrate's at the Old Bailey" as his main duty was to punish defaulters. "The Admiral is silent and irritable," he told Theresa, "The climax came when he accused me of being of the opposite party - I who well he knows have never been a party man; but his tempers soon melt away and the sun shines again." He also complained that he was only a figure-head on his own ship. As Cornwallis also wrote to Theresa telling her of the difficulties of the situation, she decided to take the risk of intervening. In her next letter she suggested to the Admiral that her husband should change places with the youngest captain in the Fleet, who would thus become Flag-Captain while John Whitby would have his own ship again. Her advice was followed to the letter, and both sides felt grateful that she had found this way out of the dilemma. Cornwallis wrote to her, "My dear Theresa, yours is a wise head on young shoulders," and her husband wrote in an equally grateful vein.

But Mrs. Whitby had no time for complacency over her efforts. In March 1806 John Whitby was brought back to Newlands, worn out and desperately ill. He died on April 6th in the prime of his life. Widowed at the age of 22, Theresa left Newlands for a year to comply with convention. Then she returned with her little daughter, Theresa, and her sister Juliana as chaperone and continued to keep house for the Admiral as before. This she went on doing even after Juliana left Newlands despite criticism from her

late husband's family. As the Admiral got older she gradually resumed her function as estate manager, looking after his affairs and nursing him after his stroke in 1816 until his death in 1819. He left £10,000 to little Theresa and the interest on £30,000 to Mrs. Whitby. She only finally inherited the capital sum after the death of his nephew, Charles, who had failed to have a son. In this year, 1823, Theresa came finally into her fortune, much to the fury of the Cornwallis family.

She had proved herself an energetic and capable manager and until the time of her death in 1850 she was active in acquiring land. In general she showed shrewd business sense but it is possible that the excitement of her early land purchases for Cornwallis brought out an acquisitive streak, as in later life she would purchase squatter's rights or buy up houses like Milford House and Aubrey House when they came on the market even though they then proved difficult to let.

Throughout her life she showed a genuine and practical interest in agriculture and horticulture with the growing of vegetables and flowers at Newlands. After observing silk production silkworms in Italy during travels there in 1835, she arranged to import 100 standard mulberry trees and 1,000 small plants from Turin. These she had planted in furrows with rows of potatoes, Indian corn and turnips between to pay for the cultivations. She bred her silkworms scientifically in a loft with great attention to cleanliness. The only difficulty encountered was in winding the silk, but this she overcame by arranging for a French expert to come to Newlands for a week to train her own staff. The wound silk was sent to Manchester to be processed into a length of beautiful red and gold brocade of the highest quality which was presented to Queen Victoria. Silk production

only ceased in Milford at the time of her death. She gave a lecture on the breeding of silkworms to the Royal Agricultural Society, and corresponded with Charles Darwin,⁶ providing him with new information on heredity in caterpillars. Later she published a little book "*A Manual for Rearing Silkworms in England*," which may be found in the British Library. This was her only publication and it does tell us something about her – of her interest in this "extraordinary and useful little animal"; of her practical approach and unpretentious style (she writes in the introduction that she will "throw upon paper a few hints on the management of the silkworm" and then proceeds to outline the method in minute detail). She continues that "it merely asks that attention required by everything worth the knowing or worth the doing and may be profitable to the agriculturist; affording at the same time employment to the wives and families of our poorer brethren, and (what is of great interest to the patriot) a field for improving the resources of the British Dominions and of rendering them in time independent of the Continent in that material branch of commerce – silk".⁷

The reference to the wives and families of the poor gives us direct evidence that Mrs. Whitby was concerned for the distressed condition of the labouring poor at that time and did what she could to encourage them to self-help. Her epitaph speaks of her as a "benefactress of the poor" and a study of her account at Hoares Bank shows that she did give regular donations to charity (Salisbury Infirmary and the Deaf and Dumb for example), but more practical schemes were dear to her heart. Cottagers' wives were employed to look after the silkworms and to help wind the silk. Doubtless she was concerned with other projects for their betterment, since as early as 1804 she was writing to Cornwallis that she was encouraging the girls towards making

straw bonnets instead of "running wild in the fields" and that she had ordered one herself to give the industry a good start. Again Mrs. West mentions in her Memoir that in 1809 Cornwallis set up "the second school for the young villagers ever known in England." This may have been the same school that a Mrs. Doyley was running in 1804 for "The Ladies' Society for the Education and Employment of the Female Poor," and it seems likely that Theresa was active in this Society with educational aims, however limited.⁹

This many-sided woman was also a competent watercolour painter, as we may see from the album in the possession of the Milford-on-Sea Historical Record Society. During tours in Italy with her daughter in 1822 and 1823 she studied and sketched the antiquities of Florence, Venice, Lucca and Pola. Then in 1830 she concerned herself locally with the demolition of Hordle old church by recording some of the decoration before it should disappear. On her sketch of a pattern over the arch in the north transept we have this fragment of a letter of hers to an unknown recipient:-

"Did you see that? I think there will be nothing left tomorrow. Over the arch of the north transept – as the plaster came off this disclosed itself. One of the men told me it went all round the arches, and down the walls as they peeled it I could see the pattern springing – But think what Barbarians to whitewash such a wall!"

The sketch in pen and ink shows the interwoven floral pattern painted round the arch, a typical mediaeval wall decoration.

Now let us stand back a little from my portrait of this remarkable woman – thoroughly competent in the management of Newlands Manor Estate in farming and horticulture; having a keen eye for commercial enterprise, for social work and for the appreciation and practice of the arts;

withal showing "every feminine charm of person" and to her close friends expressing herself, as her few surviving letters indicate, in a warm, affectionate, sometimes playful manner. There was nothing unwomanly about her it seems.

What were the factors, hereditary and environmental, that produced such qualities in a woman of the early nineteenth century, at a time when the usual feminine function in the middle and upper classes was domestic and decorative, when most ladies were apparently satisfied with their role of ingenue, wife, mother or mistress? Certainly it seems probable from Jane Austen's novels that women were less restricted and protected by convention than they were later on in Victorian times. Elizabeth Bennet was able to take solitary walks or even to stroll unchaperoned in the company of Mr. D'Arcy, while she spoke her mind freely on all subjects. She even liked running, but we must remember that the clothes of this period were comparatively free and loose. However, Jane Austen also points out that education for women in the 1790s and early nineteenth century was deemed not only unnecessary but even undesirable, except for schooling in the social accomplishments of singing, playing the piano and painting in watercolours. Only very determined women of unusual intellectual ability, like Miss Austen herself and perhaps Mrs. Whitby, were able to overcome these limitations and social strictures.

To understand Theresa Whitby we must know her family. She was born a Symonds. Her family came from near Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk and had long been remarkable in two directions - for breeding distinguished naval officers and producing learned divines. There were brains in the family. Her grandfather had married Mary Spring, a textile heiress, who produced two sons and two daughters. The eldest son, John, became Dr. John Symonds,

Professor of Modern History at St. John's College, Cambridge, and when his parents both died within a short space of time the whole of his father's estate and the family mansion were left to him as the rightful heir. The younger son, Thomas, was adjoined "not to hang onto his brother's coat-tails". We are told this in his son, William's biography by James A. Sharp, published in 1858, which relates how at the age of 12 Thomas left the family home with his clothes tied in a bundle and trudged off to Harwich where he joined a man-of-war. He did not return until he had reached the rank of Post-Captain.¹⁰ His abilities seem mainly to have been of a practical kind and certainly never made him rich, but by his second wife, Elizabeth Malet, he fathered two Admirals, one of whom, William Symonds, became the Surveyor of the Navy who revolutionised the design of the contemporary man-of-war, enabling it to sail closer to the wind.

Theresa, or Mary Ann Theresa, as she was christened, was the third in this family of seven children. We know little of her schooling, but her impecunious parents moved around to various rented houses, mostly in the West country when she was young and it is probable that she attended one or more of those academies for young ladies which were to be found at the time. What is certain is that she made the most of these meagre opportunities and of the stimulating companionship of the two clever elder brothers so close to her in age.

Then Theresa was the eldest girl of the family and as they were not well off she would have been expected to help her mother in caring for the younger children, in moving about the country and in making each successive rented house into a home. This sort of early experience was a better training in practical ability than many fine young ladies in well-to-do families would have had. She also learned the value of good financial management and the

economical use of resources, but above all she learned, perhaps from her mother, to do all that she did as well as possible and with great attention to detail. It was this attention to detail that gave her success in management of the Newlands estate, while her own lack of a settled and substantial family home in childhood lent the solidity of the big house and estate increased attraction for her. She undoubtedly had much satisfaction in making a family centre there around which her brothers and sister, Thomas, William, Juliana and Sophia Symonds came to settle. When Captain Thomas Symonds brought the Touzi twins back from San Domingo where he had rescued them from the Spanish siege, contracting a romantic attachment for 12 year old Lucinde, he sent them ashore at Keyhaven in one of H.M.S. *Tweed's* boats. It was Mrs. Whitby with her sister who went down to the quay to meet the attractive orphans for the sake of her brother, gave them shelter at Newlands and found a school for them at Lymington. Perhaps she thought that this was the best way of dealing with an indiscreet infatuation, but time proved that Lucinde had aroused a lasting passion. The gallant Captain (later Admiral Thomas Symonds) made the girl a declaration when she was 15 and married her at 17. Theresa probably considered this a mesalliance, as the marriage took place in Devonshire and the young couple made their home at Beaulieu.

Later the whole family were reconciled, for it was to Theresa Whitby that Thomas, William and Juliana turned for small monetary loans when they were in difficulties. In the year 1824 for instance her account at Hoare's Bank shows that she laid out £487 to these members of her family, presumably for certain specific emergencies. Over £200 went to Juliana. For over fifteen years she had looked after Admiral Cornwallis in his declining years. Her ability, strengthened by his need of

her, was further fortified by the demands of her own family.

Her marriage to Captain John Whitby in 1802 encouraged her development in a different way. Nelson had written to Admiral Cornwallis in 1803 that he esteemed his protegee most highly "not only as an officer but as a gentleman." It was Captain Whitby who was chosen to break the news of Lord Nelson's death to Lady Hamilton in 1805. He must have been a man of tact and delicacy, and Hoppner's portrait painted at about this time does indeed show us a sensitive face. The four years of their marriage before John Whitby's death in 1806 seem to have been happy years of mutual devotion fostered by the affectionate and humorous letters they wrote to each other while he was away at sea. Sadly we only have the quotations from these letters given to us by George Cornwallis-West in his "*Letters of Admiral Cornwallis.*" A sample is from Whitby's account of the naval engagement off Brest when he was serving as Flag-Captain in the *Ville de Paris*. "I think the sight of the little *rencontre* we had the other day was the most beautiful I ever beheld, and as I have often said, the Admiral when he sees the enemy, rises up like the sun from behind the clouds - dull and inky vapours vanish. This was in my opinion the most officer-like manoeuvre possible." Or again, after Theresa's intervention to extract him from his difficult position as Flag-Captain, he wrote "My darling wife, it takes a clever woman to solve a difficulty as you have done so."

It seems that Whitby appreciated Theresa's brains and ability and was prepared to take her advice on occasion, thus increasing the young woman's self-confidence. And then, tragically widowed at 22, she was left with only one surviving child. Here is another key to her achievements at Newlands. So many women of her century wore themselves out with

constantly bearing and often burying children. Theresa, while a devoted mother to her daughter was able, by avoiding remarriage, to give all her time to her other duties and enter fully into her role of enterprising landowner and benevolent squire.

Mrs. Whitby is often described as "formidable" and may indeed have become overbearing in later years. Throughout her life she showed energy and determination in all that she did. A glimpse of her in the pages of Colonel Hawker's Diary is typical. In November a severe gale had breached the sea wall, then simply a bank, so that seawater swirled around and into all the houses in Keyhaven. A south wind was threatening more floods but Colonel Hawker hurried up to Newlands in the postman's letter cart and appealed to "Mrs. Whitby, who acted (like Buonaparte) in one minute. She instantly ordered all her men with teams to strike from their work, and to begin digging and drawing down six loads of marl preparative to tomorrow, and by four o'clock two loads had arrived, previously to which she came down herself followed by her bailiff." A woman of action, as always, she lived fully up to the time of her sudden death on August 5th, 1850 of which the circumstances are described in her obituary in *The Hampshire Independent* as follows:-

"The solemn and affecting truth that 'in the midst of life we are in death', was never more strikingly verified than on the morning of Monday last, in the sudden and unexpected death of Mrs. Whitby, for many years the much and deservedly-esteemed possessor of the splendid demesne of Newlands, near this town - an event which created a great sensation in Lymington. It appears that the lady not making her appearance at the breakfast table at her usual early hour an alarm was excited, and on her apartments being entered to ascertain the cause, the lifeless body of the late-lamented lady was found in her dressing-room, the cold hand of

death having evidently fallen upon her while engaged in the duties of the toilet. . . . She had on the previous day complained of a headache, but was otherwise in the enjoyment of her customary good state of health."

A full life and a sudden death at the ripe age of 66 - that is surely what Theresa Whitby would have wished.

REFERENCES:

- ¹ See Eileen Quelch: Perfect Darling (Woolfe 1972).
- ² See G. Cornwallis-West: Life and Letters of Admiral Cornwallis. (Holden 1927), also for other information on the Admiral.
- ³ Epitaph in Milford Church, written by her daughter.
- ⁴ G. Cornwallis-West: Life and Letters of Admiral Cornwallis.
- ⁵ Will of Admiral Sir William Cornwallis 1819. Prob. 11/1618 f. 315.
- ⁶ Ralph Colp Jr: Charles Darwin and Mrs. Whitby (Bulletin of New York Academy of Medicine. Vol. 48, No. 6, July 1972).
- ⁷ Mrs. Whitby: A Manual for Rearing Silkworms in England with a Brief Notice on the Cultivation of the Mulberry Tree.
- ⁸ Mrs. Whitby's Account with Hoare's Bank, 1824-1831.
- ⁹ This may have been the same school that Mrs. Doyley was running in 1804 for "The Ladies' Society for the Education and Employment of the Female Poor" (Elizabeth Merson: The Village School. Paul Cave Publication Ltd.). It paid no rates which indicated that it was on Newlands property.
- ¹⁰ Biography of Admiral William Symonds by James A. Sharp, 1858.
- ¹¹ Transcription from Documents in Hordle Parish Church made by Mrs. P. James in Oct. 1979.
- ¹² James A. Sharp: Biography of Sir William Symonds, 1858, Longman, Brown & Green.
- ¹³ Lucinde Touzi: Les Jumelles, pub. 1826.
- ¹⁴ See 8.
- ¹⁵ G. Cornwallis-West: Life and Letters of Admiral Cornwallis (Holden 1927).
- ¹⁶ Colonel Peter Hawker: The Diary of Peter Hawker, 1859.
- ¹⁷ The Hampshire Independent for Sat. Aug. 10th, 1850.