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978-0-521-11800-2 - The Travel Diaries of Thomas Robert Malthus

Edited By Patricia James

Excerpt

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## MALTHUS

Dr McCleary had a whole chapter in his book devoted to ‘Mistakes about Malthus’,<sup>1</sup> and a complete collection would certainly fill several volumes. It is unlikely that the present writer will escape.

The mistakes, as far as we are concerned, begin with his memorial tablet in Bath Abbey, where Thomas Robert Malthus is said to have been born on 14 February 1766. He was indeed baptised on that day, ‘at the Rookery’ at Wotton in Surrey, but the Parish Register is quite clear that he was ‘born 13th’.<sup>2</sup>

When Robert was born (‘Thomas’ was never used) his parents, Daniel and Henrietta Malthus, already had five children: Sydenham who was 12 and Henrietta Sarah (Harriet) who was 9, then Eliza Maria aged 4½, Anne Catherine Lucy aged 3½, and Mary Catherine Charlotte who was only 19 months.<sup>3</sup> A fifth daughter, Mary Anne Catherine, was born in 1771; she married Edward Bray, a lawyer, when she was 19, and it is from the unpublished recollections of her daughter, Louisa, who was born in 1801, that we get some insight into Malthus’s unusual childhood. Louisa Bray’s reminiscences are muddled, and she is not always accurate, but her account of Daniel Malthus has the authenticity of family tradition.

‘My Grandfather Malthus’, wrote Miss Bray, ‘was a great admirer of Rousseau and his works, which no doubt contributed to his eccentricities. He would not allow his wife to wear her wedding ring. My grandmother would not have been supposed a happy woman by those who knew her, yet towards the close of her life, she said she would willingly pass it over again.’ Daniel Malthus, so Mrs Bray told her daughter, was ‘a person

<sup>1</sup> G. F. McCleary, *The Malthusian Population Theory* (London, 1953), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Wotton is some 3½ miles west of Dorking. The church is well worth a visit.

<sup>3</sup> See the family tree at the end of this book.

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whose will was imperative, and to whom everything gave way'. 'With a highly cultivated mind and very fascinating manners, he was cold and reserved in his own family, except towards his eldest daughter of whom he was very fond, and his youngest son, whose talents probably early attracted his attention.'

Mrs Daniel Malthus, *née* Henrietta Catherine Graham, was 'a most affectionate and indulgent Mother, and all her children loved her in the tenderest manner. She was likewise a devoted wife. They all took after her rather than Mr Malthus, for never was there a set of more amiable and unselfish beings than my uncles and aunts.' Mrs Malthus must indeed have had a hard time of it with her difficult husband, and without even the usual solace of home and neighbours; her grandchild wrote: 'I have heard my Mother say she did not know where she was born, for my grandfather after building the Rookery, and making it a delightful place according to his own excellent taste, left it and wandered about for some years before finally settling in Albury.' Strictly speaking, Daniel Malthus did not build the Rookery, but converted a farm-house into a gentleman's seat, round about 1760. He re-named it very aptly, for the rooks are calling there still; it has been once more converted, into flats this time, but there is still a terrace reminiscent of a former, rather grandiose, elegance.

We have no idea where 'home' was when Robert Malthus was a little child, or when he returned, for the holidays, from school—probably to a number of different places. All we know from Louisa Bray is that his eldest sister Harriet, 'among her other accomplishments, was very musical, and when they lived at Cookham on the Thames, they often went on the river, and she would sing the beautiful airs from the Messiah with only the accompaniment of a flute or guitar'.

There is a memorial tablet over the south door of the church at Harrow to HENRIET. MALTHUS VIX. AN. XXVIII DAN. ET HENRIET. MALTHUS FILLAE [*sic*] DULCISSIMAE. The bottom half of the tablet has been left quite blank. Near it is a memorial to her maternal grandfather Daniel Graham, who was buried there on 17 March 1778, and is described in the register as 'of Pall Mall, London'. His son-in-law, Thomas Ryves, Malthus's maternal uncle by marriage, was also buried at Harrow, on 1 August 1788, and is described as being 'of Easher'. There

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seems to be no particular reason why this church was chosen by the family, and we are left little the wiser by the entry relating to Harriet among those 'Buryed 1785': it runs, 'July 14. Henrietta Sarah Daugh<sup>t</sup> of Daniel Mothus of Maidenhead Berks.'. Malthus would have been 19 then, and had just finished his first year at Jesus College, Cambridge.

This is not the place to quote again the family letters relating to Malthus's school and university days, from which extracts can be found in the works of Otter, Bonar, and Keynes,<sup>1</sup> but whose present whereabouts are unknown. From 1776 to 1782 'Don Roberto', as his master affectionately called him, was a pupil of Richard Graves, then in his sixties, the rector of Claverton, near Bath, and author of *The Spiritual Quixote*, described in the *D.N.B.* as 'a coarse satire upon the Methodists'. According to local tradition there were some forty little boys at Mr Graves's school in Malthus's time, and as there was not room for them all at the Rectory, he rented Claverton Manor and housed them there. Before he went up to Cambridge, Malthus was coached by the Unitarian, Wakefield, at Warrington, so that he could hardly have failed to think seriously about religion.

The evidence we have from the family letters of Malthus's life at Cambridge shows that, as at school, he worked hard and enjoyed himself at cricket, swimming and skating, just as at home in the country he enjoyed a day's shooting. Otter describes his 'taste for humour', which was 'often a source of infinite delight and pleasantry to his companions', and 'wont to set the table in a roar'.<sup>2</sup> Louisa Bray wrote that Uncle Robert 'must have been a very handsome young man'; she continues, 'and I have heard that when at Cambridge he let his fair hair, which curled naturally, hang in ringlets on his neck, which in those days of powder and pigtails must have looked singular'.

Malthus took Orders as soon as he left Cambridge, as 9th Wrangler, in 1788. He had written to his father on 19 April 1786 of an interview with the Master of Jesus, Dr Beadon: 'He seemed at first rather to advise against orders, upon the

<sup>1</sup> William Otter, *Memoir of Robert Malthus*, printed as an anonymous introduction to the *Principles of Political Economy* (London, 1836); James Bonar, *Malthus and His Work* (London, 1924); J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Biography* (London, 1951), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Otter, *Memoir of Robert Malthus*, pp. xxx–xxxii.

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idea that the defect in my speech would be an obstacle to my rising in the Church, and he thought it a pity that a young man of some abilities should enter a profession without at least some hope of being at the top of it. When, however, I afterwards told him that the utmost of my wishes was a retired living in the country, he said he did not imagine that my speech would be much objection in that case, that, for his own part, when I read or declaimed in chapel he scarcely ever lost a single word.<sup>1</sup>

As far as I know, Harriet Martineau is our only written authority for stating categorically that Malthus had a hare-lip,<sup>2</sup> though this is visible in the Linnell portrait. She was nervous of meeting him (in 1832) because of her deafness, and ‘his hare-lip which must prevent my offering him my tube’, but to her relief the ear-trumpet was unnecessary. ‘Of all people in the world, Malthus was the one whom I heard quite easily without it;—Malthus, whose speech was hopelessly imperfect, from defect in the palate.’

Malthus did get his quiet country living, but its exact whereabouts have not hitherto been known. Bonar, both in an article on Malthus in Palgrave’s *Dictionary of Political Economy* and in *Malthus and His Work*,<sup>3</sup> had assumed that he held a curacy at Albury. This proved not to be the case; the actual church is some eight miles as the crow flies from Albury, where the family seems finally to have settled in 1787.<sup>4</sup> Two marriages linked the family closely with this pleasant country, where descendants of Daniel Malthus live to this day: on 10 August 1789, at Albury, Anne Catherine Lucy Malthus, who was then 27, married Samuel Godschall; on 28 September 1790, Mary Anne Catherine Malthus, who was 19, married Edward Bray at Shere. The Godschalls were childless, but the Brays had twelve children, including our Louisa.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bonar, *Malthus and his Work* (London, 1924), pp. 409–10.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, I, 327.

<sup>3</sup> *Malthus and His Work*, p. 413. <sup>4</sup> Otter, *Memoir of Robert Malthus*, p. xxv.

<sup>5</sup> Both fathers-in-law kept diaries in which there is much to interest Malthus’s biographer. These diaries (unpublished) are in Guildford Museum, references William Bray 85/1/1–76 and William Man Godschall 52/1/2. William Bray, the Surrey historian, was an extremely busy lawyer; William Man Godschall was a landowning justice. Both were well-informed, active and conscientious. Malthus visited them both and it is clear that he learned much from them about the day-to-day working of what we now call ‘the establishment’, and particularly of the Poor Law.

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Samuel Godschall acted as curate at Albury in the summer of 1789 and the autumn of 1790, and it is perhaps because he was married to a Malthus and because there were so many Malthuses in the district that Malthus appears in the *D.N.B.* and elsewhere as curate of Albury. He never was. According to Louisa Bray her Uncle Sam Godschall (who became rector of Ockham), although gifted in many ways, 'had neither religious nor moral principles, and a temper over which he had no control'. Perhaps that is why William Polhill, who was rector of Albury from 1780 to 1822, gave up the idea of keeping a curate altogether, until old age forced him to have one in 1814; Louisa Bray's description of him is worth giving here, partly because he is such a contrast to the poor Norwegian pastor so cruelly patronised by Mr Anker,<sup>1</sup> and partly because his habit of taking an annual holiday in the autumn, from 1785 to 1795, provided the essential clue which led to the discovery of the truth about Malthus's curacy.

'Mr Polhill, Rector of Albury, was a good specimen of the old fashioned race of clergy, now nearly extinct. He and his wife were perfect pictures in their neat and pretty parsonage, and when on Sundays, he descended from his respectable Chariot, in his full bottomed powdered wig, Dingle hat, and flowing silk gown, and walked up the Churchyard with his lady by his side dressed in white with black silk cloak, he made a most imposing figure to my mind. Yet his teaching was not such as I should value now, and he did not scruple in his younger days to join the Hunt on his sleek steed, which was used for farm work and riding in the week, and with its companion drew the couple to Church on Sundays.<sup>2</sup> They were thoroughly respected. Mr and Mrs Duncombe of Shere, were of the same class, but a step lower, though he was descended from an old and respectable family, to whom the Advowson of Shere had belonged for some generations. They were connected with the Brays by marriage.'

It was through an event at Albury, nonetheless, that it became possible to trace the whereabouts of Malthus's curacy. It hap-

<sup>1</sup> See p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> This church, which now stands within the grounds of Albury Park, is closed; near it are two cottages, once an inn, which are all that remains of the centre of the village of Albury as Malthus knew it.

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pened that William Lowick, who came of a large Albury family, and his future wife Hannah Noyes, described as also of Albury, wished to be married on Thursday, 3 October 1793, while Mr Polhill was away; for some reason Mr Duncombe could not take Mr Polhill's place, as he had done on the occasion of October and November weddings in previous years; there must have been nothing for it but to send for Mr Robert Malthus.

One can but hope that the marriage service was not as confused as the entry in the register: Mr Polhill's clerk was obviously not used to managing on his own without the rector, and Malthus was not used to marrying people at all, as his chapel was not licensed for marriages; he wrote 'by me Robert Malthus' where he should have written 'by banns', and had to cross it out and write again in the proper place, 'Robert Malthus, Curate of Okewood Chapel' (see Plate 11).

But for the marriage of Mr and Mrs William Lowick, we might never have known that it was to Okewood that Otter referred when he said that Malthus 'undertook the care of a small parish in Surrey'.<sup>1</sup> He was not strictly accurate, as Okewood was then only a chapel of ease at the southern extremity of the strip-like parish of Wotton; people also came to the little church from Rudgwick, Ockley and Abinger—in fact, according to the eighteenth-century register, 'Abinger Parish claims the Privilege of burying for the same fee as Wootton'. Congregations cannot have been large, for the 1801 census shows that the whole parish of Wotton only contained 441 inhabitants, Abinger 632, and Ockley 592.

I have not been able to find out when Malthus became curate of Okewood. It was not then an ecclesiastical parish,<sup>2</sup> and the officiating Clergyman was not inducted or instituted, but merely appointed, probably by the rector, in consultation with the Evelyn family who were the patrons. Nor do we know with any certainty when Malthus ceased to serve Okewood: the entries in the register are usually in the hand of the clerk rather than the curate, so that the negative evidence is inconclusive. Malthus's modesty does not make matters easier for us; unlike many of his predecessors and successors, he did not sign his name at the foot of each page of the register. The four entries in Malthus's

<sup>1</sup> Otter, *Memoir of Robert Malthus*, p. xxxv.

<sup>2</sup> It became one in 1853.

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handwriting are baptismal entries in July, September and October 1792, and in November 1794, but the absence of entries in his hand after that date does not necessarily mean that Malthus did not serve as curate for some years after 1794.<sup>1</sup>

The little thirteenth-century church stands on a knoll so completely surrounded by trees that it appears, when one comes upon it, like a discovery in a fairy-tale (see Plate 10). The graveyard gives the impression of being an almost perfectly circular clearing in the wood, somehow more pagan than Christian, and it seems quite natural that there should be a local tradition of druids and Roman temples; it is very large for so small a church, and it is not surprising to read an indignant entry in the register, 'The grass in the Yard belonging to the Chappel is worth Ten Shillings per Year at least, though now let for but five.' That must have been but one of Malthus's practical problems. At the same time it is impossible not to believe that he loved the place, and found it 'picturesque'—a word he was not at all afraid of using in his journals.

But there is one fact about Okewood more important than any other, a fact which has been noticed by a number of vicars who knew nothing whatever about Malthus: Okewood was truly remarkable, throughout the eighteenth century, for its enormous number of baptisms and its small number of burials. To take but the three calendar years 1792–4, there were at Okewood fifty-one christenings and only twelve funerals; during the same period at Wotton Malthus's rector, Mr Taylor, had twenty-four christenings and thirty-four funerals. Statistically, of course, as Malthus himself would have known, these figures are of no importance, but who can deny their emotional impact on the curate?

It is possible, by comparing the baptisms with the burials, to deduce that Malthus himself buried three of the babies he christened in these three years. To ascertain exactly how many elder brothers and sisters stood round the font while Malthus baptised each new arrival might be a rewarding piece of research; even a cursory glance at the entries shows that, in

<sup>1</sup> In his *History of Surrey* (Dorking, 1841–8) E. W. Brayley says that Thomas Robert Malthus, A.M., was appointed curate of Okewood on 5 April 1824 (v, 48). This is obviously nonsense, but it would be interesting to know what lies behind it.

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these three calendar years alone, no fewer than seven couples came twice with infants to be baptised; the record is held by James and Sarah Pellet who, in 1794, brought Sarah to be christened on 19 January and Mary on 28 December.

There is no need to stress the importance of all this to the man who was to make the principle of population a public issue for the first time. It is worth noting, however, that at Okewood Malthus must also have seen for himself the unreality of much that was said and written about 'the children of the poor'. 'Indeed,' he wrote, 'it seems difficult to suppose that a labourer's wife who has six children, and who is sometimes in absolute want of bread, should be able always to give them the food and attention necessary to support life. The sons and daughters of peasants will not be found such rosy cherubs in real life, as they are described to be in romances. It cannot fail to be remarked by those who live much in the country, that the sons of labourers are very apt to be stunted in their growth, and are a long while arriving at maturity. Boys that you would guess to be fourteen or fifteen, are upon inquiry, frequently found to be eighteen or nineteen.'<sup>1</sup> One of the most endearing characteristics of the *Scandinavian Journal* is the light it throws on Malthus's interest in the care of children, and his knowledge of the condition of the cottagers of his own country.

On 10 June 1793 Malthus had been appointed to a Fellowship at Jesus College, Cambridge—the college where he seems to have been so happy as an undergraduate. He held the Fellowship until he forfeited it by marriage in 1804, but it would appear that he did not actually reside in Cambridge for much of the time. The Conclusion Book of the College, which records the decisions of the Master and Fellows, contains Malthus's signature on a number of occasions—as a rule, once in each academic year—and in most years he is given leave of absence at the meeting at which he signs the book, usually in December or January. There are a few exceptions to this pattern: in April 1801 he attended two important meetings at which the Society gave its consent to several inclosures, and at the first of these Malthus signed next after the Master; on 20 November 1799, he was given leave of absence without signing the book, which suggests that he was not yet back from Russia, the final stage of the Scandi-

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), pp. 72, 73.



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navian tour; there are also no signatures when he was granted his leave of absence in December 1802 and December 1803.<sup>1</sup>

Thus it would seem that Otter is right in saying that Malthus was only ‘occasionally residing in Cambridge upon his fellowship, for the purpose of pursuing with more advantage that course of study to which he was attached’.<sup>2</sup> Malthus himself tells us that the 1798 version of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* ‘was written on the impulse of the occasion, and from the few materials which were then within my reach in a country situation’,<sup>3</sup> so Otter probably means the further study needed for the second, more inductive, edition, which had been completed by June 1803, while Malthus was still a fellow. Although we have no definite knowledge of where Malthus was living between 1794 and 1804—an important decade—I feel certain that he stayed mostly with his family in Albury; his parents died early in 1800,<sup>4</sup> but Albury was to remain the home of Malthus’s elder brother Sydenham (and of Sydenham’s son and grandson) as well as of his two unmarried sisters. This is borne out by the fact that when he married, in the spring of 1804, he is described as ‘The revd Robert Malthus of the Parish of Aldbury [*sic*] in the County of Surrey’.

At this time Malthus was rector of Walesby, near Market Rasen, in Lincolnshire; he held the living from 1803 until his death in 1834. He solemnised three marriages there, on 21 and 22 May 1804, and 1 July 1805, but otherwise the parish was served by curates.<sup>5</sup> In justice to Malthus, it should be pointed out that at this period a non-resident incumbent was not considered as anything out of the ordinary, any more than was the non-resident fellow of a college; livings and fellowships, although they could be corruptly bestowed, were generally regarded as a means of providing scholars with a livelihood, and also as rewards for literary merit.

We know that late in 1800 Malthus paid a visit to the Eckersall

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted for this information to Dr Brittain, of Jesus College, Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoir of Robert Malthus*, p. xxxv.

<sup>3</sup> The second sentence of the *Author’s Preface to the Second Edition* of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* (London, 1803).

<sup>4</sup> Their graves may still be found in Wotton churchyard, bowered in ivy; Louisa Bray might have some comment to make on the way Daniel Malthus’s headstone has sunk into the earth, so that it now seems but half the height of his wife’s.

<sup>5</sup> This information was kindly supplied by the Rev. F. M. Massey, rector of Walesby. See also J. M. Keynes, *Essays in Biography* (London, 1951), p. 96.

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family. His cousin, John Eckersall, had sold Burford Lodge, near Dorking, in 1791, and moved to Claverton Manor, where Malthus had been at school; Richard Graves, then 87, was still rector, and still walking up Bathwick Hill, but he no longer took pupils. The close relationship between the Malthuses and the Eckersalls is best studied from the family tree at the end of this book. John Eckersall and his wife Catherine were both first cousins to Malthus and to each other, their mothers both being sisters of Daniel Malthus, with the additional complication that their grandmothers were also sisters, Anne and Jane Dalton, who, early in the eighteenth century, had married respectively Sydenham Malthus and James Eckersall.

No anxiety about consanguinity seems to have troubled Malthus, who wrote to a friend, 'Your letter was sent to me to Bath, where I have been on a visit to a family of pretty cousins and could not therefore look down long enough to write a letter.'<sup>1</sup> Two of the pretty first cousins once removed, Anne Eliza and Clara, would have been still in the schoolroom; and the baby of the family, Charles, was only three: he was later to become a clergyman; the only other boy, George, was 18: after two years in the army, preceded by an even briefer career at Jesus College, Cambridge, he seems to have settled down to doing nothing at all. Kitty Eckersall had married, four years before, the Rev. Henry Wynne, rector of Killucan in Westmeath, but Harriet, Lucy and Fanny, aged 23, 20 and 19 respectively, were presumably all at home.<sup>2</sup>

In 1802, following the Peace of Amiens, a party of Malthuses and Eckersalls set out, like so many other English people, on a tour of France and Switzerland. We know from Harriet Eckersall's diary that the tour lasted from Sunday 2 May, when the party crossed from Dover to Calais, until Wednesday 13 October, when they reached London in time for dinner;<sup>3</sup> we can guess that she already had an understanding with 'Mr M.'. Her account of an amusing episode which Malthus used in the 1803 edition of the *Essay on Population* is given as Appendix 2 of this book (see Plate 8).

Some ten months after the publication of the second version

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bonar, *Malthus and His Work*, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> Burke's *Landed Gentry* (1952). See under Wood of Hollin Hall.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished. The property of Mr Robert Malthus.