CHAPTER 1

Family and Education

Nora Crook

Percy Bysshe Shelley, son of Timothy and Elizabeth Shelley, was born into the landed gentry on 4 August 1792 at his parental home, Field Place, Horsham, Sussex. His birth room looked out beyond parkland to pastures, arable land, hayfields, and ponds. By a family settlement he was sole heir and 'Tenant in Tail Male'[1] to a large estate, built up for generations, spectacularly through two advantageous marriages made by his grandfather. As far as is known, Shelley's direct family had no interests in mining, manufacturing, commerce, or slave plantations, except indirectly through investments in 3 per cent government bonds.[2] His great-grandfather had attempted to be an American merchant in the 1720s and 1730s, but the family wealth had been amassed through landownership in the Sussex Weald.

Shelley was educated by his environment. Field Place Estate abutted the ancient St Leonard's Forest, abode of a dragon and a headless horseman. The barns, some of them medieval, were (and are) unusually close to the mansion. Timothy Shelley, a benignly paternalistic landlord, was respected locally as a 'practical agriculturist'.[3] The mansion consisted (and, since restoration in the late 1980s, still consists) of 'large classically proportioned rooms' and a partly converted medieval wing where the adolescent Shelley had his bedroom. This chimeric architecture was to mirror the heterogeneities in Shelley's own writings, in which the Age of Reason and the Gothic meet and mingle, and in which science, imagination, practicality, vision, harmony, and wildness are held in tension.[4] A watercolour by Shelley's eldest sister Elizabeth depicts a modern drawing room of around 1815, elegant and airy, with huge windows and semi-private nooks, fitted up with bookcases, a piano, and chaises longues.[5] But in the garret there dwelt 'an Alchemist, old and grey, with a long beard' – or so Shelley persuaded his sisters. Shelley poked the walls in Field Place to find secret passages and attempted to cure his sister Hellen's chilblains with electric shocks.[6]

Shelley never lost the perspective instilled by his rural upbringing. He always had an eye for a well-kept farm. In 1818, travelling through the Veneto at harvest time, he observed 'teams of milkwhite or dove-coloured oxen of immense size & exquisite beauty' and 'sixty three of these lovely oxen tied to their stalls in excellent condition' (*Letters* II, 45). The startlingly down-to-earth simile in *The Witch of Atlas* (1820) whereby 'odours' caged in an aviary of dew-beams beat their wings like 'bats at the wired window of a dairy' (*MW*, 491, ll. 169–73) was written by someone acquainted with well-appointed Georgian dairies, which had open lattices covered with wire gauze, keeping flies out (and, evidently, roosting bats *in*) but admitting air.[7] *Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820) reveals a first-hand knowledge of pig rearing. Like any young squire-in-waiting, Shelley had a gun and was taught to fish and shoot (*Letters* I, 2–3).[8] Bysshe Shelley, his grandfather, kept hounds; hunting and hare coursing were pursued on the estate (White I: 45),[9] but there is no record of Shelley's participation in these; he was later to write with horror of the cruelty of field sports, including those in which he had excelled. The proper distribution and right use of land, so that all tenants of earth (including animals) might have a fair share of its bounty, became and remained central to his idea of political justice.

Family Relationships

The Shelley family was connected to nobility through the Sidneys of Penshurst and aspired to rise higher. In 1806, Bysshe Shelley was raised to a baronetcy, the lowest ranking hereditary title in British honours, to which Timothy succeeded (1815) and which Shelley would have inherited. Relatives included other Sussex landowners, but some were in trade (one had been a haberdasher's apprentice) or the professions; his cousins included a surgeon, a clergyman, an army officer, and country solicitors. His maternal great uncle by marriage, another baronet, bred racehorses; his maternal grandfather had been apprenticed as a butcher. The extended family, ostensibly respectable and clannish, was fissured by quarrels and scandals. His paternal great-great uncle was a certified 'lunatic'. His headstrong maternal grandmother had run away three times from home by the age of nineteen. Bysshe Shelley himself was eccentric, ribald, the father of fourteen children (four of them illegitimate) and an energetic builder of turnpike roads. Upon the wedding day of his son and heir Timothy, the sexagenarian Bysshe wagered that he would father a child before he did.[10] Timothy (who narrowly won that particular competition), the first of the family to go to Oxford, had been an indifferent scholar. A well-meaning

but insecure man, emotional and cold by turns, he took over Field Place in 1790 after an undistinguished career in the army. He had himself fathered an illegitimate son before marriage, said to be his favourite, but known only as 'Captain Shelley' (Bieri, 14–15). Whether Shelley was aware of this elder half-brother, let alone his father's alleged preference, is not known.

Yet Shelley's childhood domestic environment was predominantly female. One biographer has called his early experience 'multiple mothering' (Bieri, 28); being the elder brother of four sisters undoubtedly left its impress on his personality and poetry. Biographers recognise the importance of Shelley's mother in the formation of his character, but they have been forced to speculate, having very little solid information. The little that is known of her suggests a strong personality, liberal views, and a talent for lively letter writing.[11] She would have been Shelley's first tutor.

Manners, Religion, and Politics

Shelley impressed most who met him as a model of gentlemanly courtesy, though Keats, from a lower-middle-class background, found him condescending, while his letters to tradesmen show hauteur.[12] Children born into the 'polite classes' were to have a 'respectful and deferential manner at all times towards their superiors, whether in rank or in age, an affable and unaffected manner towards their equals, a mild, kind and condescending manner towards their Servants and inferiors, and a humane and charitable feeling and manner towards the poor and distressed'. Such was the attestation of the guardians chosen by the Chancery Court in 1818 to educate Shelley's own children by his first wife (Medwin, 'Appendix', 484–85). This blueprint can be discerned in Shelley's own behaviour despite his flagrant deviations from it. Like his father, he was actively benevolent in relieving the needy, pending the day when the reformation of society would eliminate poverty altogether. Notwithstanding his later contempt for custom and forms, he always punctiliously addressed Byron as 'My dear Lord Byron' in letters, never 'Dear Byron'. That would have been ill-bred.

Shelley was, of course, brought up and confirmed in the Church of England. The language of the Bible and of the Book of Common Prayer was instilled by the services of worship held daily at school. Their influence on his writings was profound, and he had a true admiration for the poetry of the Old Testament. Much of his bible reading between 1809 and 1811, however, was directed towards exposing the Old Testament as a tissue of absurdities and bad morality.[13] Shelley's cousin, Thomas Medwin, saw the seeds of his irreligion in Timothy's cynical disregard for all but

outward observance (making his servants attend Sunday worship regularly while only occasionally attending himself). The most damaging anecdotes about Timothy's hypocrisy, however, come from a hostile quarter, namely Shelley, who told Medwin that his father once addressed the chaplain of Horsham Gaol, just come from offering 'the last consolations of religion' to a criminal before execution, with a loud laugh: 'Well, old soul-saver! how did you turn the rascal off?' (Medwin, 13).

In addition to a gaol, Horsham, a thriving town, had a circuit court and a barracks – constant reminders of the war with France and of England's brutal 'bloody code' of legal penalties. Horsham was one of the last places in England to exact pressing to death, the *peine forte et dure* (1735), and public burning at the stake after execution (1776), events occurring within living memory (*CP* II, 570–71). It was a notorious rotten borough. Yet the political alignments of Shelley's family were inclined towards the progressive. Timothy was the member for New Shoreham, West Sussex, aligned with the 'Whig Aristocrats',[14] a splinter group within the Foxites, the liberal wing of the Whig party. His patron, the Duke of Norfolk, the largest landowner in Sussex, was active in the causes of Catholic Emancipation and the abolition of the slave trade. These laudable aims did not stop Timothy and his agent T. C. Medwin from getting their hands dirty in Sussex elections. In 1807, Timothy threw money and campaigning energies against a wealthy slave owner, John Fuller, successfully bribing the voters of Horsham (Fuller won nevertheless). Although Shelley was at Eton during these corrupt shenanigans, it is altogether likely that he knew of and was disgusted by them. They, too, were part of his political education. He became a supporter of parliamentary reform, his hero being in 1810 the patrician radical Francis Burnett, to whom he dedicated his first long poem, *The Wandering Jew*, and whom he praised in his first major political poem, *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things* (1811).

Formal Schooling versus Independent Learning

Shelley, aged six, started taking Latin lessons at the home of the Reverend Evan Edwards, the only master that he remembered with respect.[15] (Just when and where he started Greek is not known for certain.) His parents encouraged their precocious child to learn poetry by heart and to declaim, basic training for school debates and a parliamentary career. His sister remembered: 'Even as a little child, Gray's lines on the Cat and the Gold Fish were repeated, word for word, after once reading; a fact I have frequently heard from my mother. […] He used, at my father's bidding, to

repeat long Latin quotations, probably from some drama' (Hogg I: 9). In 1802, he was sent to board at Syon House Academy at Brentford, Middlesex. The curriculum included reading, writing, and arithmetic (the traditional 'three R's'), Latin, French, geography, and astronomy. Shelley, already ahead of the other pupils, spent classes idly sketching pine and cedar trees, according to Medwin, then his schoolfellow. The school for him was a 'perfect hell'. He was bullied; he was remembered as being 'like a girl in boy's clothes, fighting with open hands and rolling on the floor' at the indignity of being flogged.[16] But a charismatic peripatetic lecturer, Dr Adam Walker, 'opened to Shelley a new universe of speculations', firing him with the wonders of modern science, and exciting him to experiment with electricity, gunpowder, and chemicals (White I: 19–23; Medwin, 20, 28–29). It may have been at Syon House or Eton that he made a vow to be 'just, and free, and mild' and war against 'The selfish and the strong'. He refers to this event four times in his poetry. The most specific account (1817) locates it near a schoolroom (*Laon and Cythna*, 'Dedication', 4. 25, 31–36). The experience is mythicised, but the point is that Shelley represents school bullying, whether by masters or boys, as foundational to his wider understanding of tyrannic power.

In 1804, Shelley enrolled at Eton College. His contemporaries were to remember him as eccentric, much bullied, a games-hating prankster, but amiable (White I: 36–45). The curriculum was ossified. The only subjects officially taught were the classics, with a 'smattering of divinity and geography'. Shelley would have read around 70,000 lines of Greek and Latin prose and poetry during his Eton years. But boys could take 'extras' and there was ample time to read independently (White I: 34–36). He taught himself some German, possibly stimulated by W. R. Spencer's translation of Burger's ballad *Lenore*, which he read in an illustrated bilingual edition with the German in Fraktur (blackletter) type (Medwin, 34, 45). From Hogg's description of his later acquisition of Italian, it seems that he used intuitive methods, gaining first a reading knowledge by reading, then supplementing this by grammars and dictionaries (Hogg II: 377). It was at Eton, too, that his reading started to become definitely heterodox: Lucretius and 'De Deo' in Pliny's *Natural History* (Medwin, 50). He might have begun reading 'jacobin' literature such as Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. In 1810, probably in the summer vacation or on arrival at Oxford, he read William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793). It arguably influenced his political views more than any other single work (*Letters* I, 227 n. 2).

The Shelley who went up to Oxford in the Michaelmas (autumn) term of 1810 had published two volumes, *Zastrozzi*, a Monk-Lewisy romance,

and *Original Poems*, a collaboration with his sister. He was about to publish two more. He was already a republican and about to move from Deism to self-proclaimed atheism. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, the chief witness for Shelley's Oxford period, portrays the University in 1810 as intellectually stagnant, and Shelley jibbing at having to read Euclid and Aristotle's *Ethics*. (A fragment of translation from the latter, possibly a vacation exercise, nevertheless survives (*SC* II, 659–67).) Shelley complained when a mineralogy lecture turned out to be about 'stones, stones, stones, nothing but stones!', no doubt hoping for an exposition of competing theories concerning the history of the earth. But he quickly mastered Henry Aldrich's *Compendium of Logic*, remembered later in a mock syllogism in *Peter Bell the Third* (Oxford was a bastion of scholastic logic, and Aldrich its standard textbook) and supplied Hogg with the stimulation absent from lectures: he was 'a whole University in himself'.[17] He and Hogg studied together Hume, Locke, French *philosophes* and Plato in a French translation; it might have been at Oxford that he first encountered Spinoza (Hogg I: 58, 72, 97–103). His period at Oxford ended spectacularly (25 March 1811) with his expulsion for refusing to deny authorship of the pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*. There, his formal or, as he called it, 'artificial' education ended. The uncomprehending Timothy wrote to the family lawyer: '[F]rom six years of age he has never been kept *one day* from School when he ought to be there, and in his Holydays I read the Classics and other Books with him in the full hopes of making him a good and Gentlemanly Scholar. Now in what manner he has got all this Heterodoxy in a place fam'd for Piety and Learning I am at a loss to guess.'[18]

Shelley's self-education was to continue for the rest of his life. Although he argued briefly with Godwin against the value of a classical education, while still valuing Latin grammar as 'the key to the European languages' (*Letters* I, 317–18), in years that followed he extended his reading not only of Classics, but of political and intellectual history, philosophy, science; he also acquired Italian and Spanish (*JMS* I, *passim*). What can be deduced about his views on pedagogy and education suggests the strong influence of Rousseau's *Émile*, modified by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; he believed that the young should be allowed to be enthusiastic readers, not steered by adults towards becoming prematurely hypercritical ones; that girls should be allowed to read what they liked and think for themselves, like their brothers (*Letters* I, 206; II, 426). Yet for the mature Shelley, no education, however self-directed, could restore something that he believed all partook of: a childhood apprehension, lost in adulthood, but occasionally glimpsed in states of reverie, that one's 'being'

is part of the objects of thought, and imperfectly distinguishable from them. His essay 'On Life' (1819) discourses on how custom leads us into mistaking words for things, enforcing a sense of separation of self from the universe of phenomena. Grammatical forms like *I*, *you*, and *they* entrap us into supposing that the self is a real entity, not a construction of the human mind (*SPP*, 507–8). An escape from this condition, Shelley proposed, lies in recognising that 'nothing exists but as it is perceived' and that our entire life is 'an education of error'.

Notes

1. T. C. Medwin to PBS, 18 June 1813; Horsham Museum MSS Cat. No. 437.10; see Susan C. Djabri, with Annabelle F. Hughes and Jeremy Knight, *The Shelleys of Field Place* (Horsham: Horsham Museum, 2000), pp. 116–18.
2. Inferred from legacies left by Sir Bysshe Shelley; see Djabri et al., *Shelleys of Field Place*, pp. 7–8.
3. Obituary, *Gentleman's Magazine* (1844); Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), I: 14.
4. Kenneth Pritchard Jones, 'The Influence of Field Place and Its Surroundings upon Percy Bysshe Shelley', *Keats-Shelley Review* 8 (1993), 132–60.
5. In Keats-Shelley House, Rome.
6. T. J. Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), I: 9.
7. John Martin Robinson, *Georgian Model Farms: A Study of Decorative and Model Farm Buildings in the Age of Improvement, 1700–1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 98.
8. Thomas Medwin, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley: A New Edition […]*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman (London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), p. 68; *Letters* I: 205.
9. Susan C. Djabri and Jeremy Knight, *The Letters of Bysshe and Timothy Shelley and Other Documents* (Horsham: Horsham Museum, 2000), p. 18.
10. James Bieri, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 3–22; Djabri et al., *Shelleys of Field Place*, 78–81.
11. Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 3–4; Bieri, 19–29.
12. John Worthen, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Critical Biography* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), pp. 9–10.
13. Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
14. Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries, with Recollections of the Author's Life and of His Visit to Italy*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), I: 178.

15. Thomas Love Peacock, 'Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley', *Fraser's Magazine* 57 (June 1858), 656.
16. White, I: 20.
17. *SPP*, 341; *Peter Bell the Third,* 'Prologue' l. 10; Hogg, I: 98.
18. Letter of 18 April 1811; see Roger Ingpen, *Shelley in England: New Facts and Letters from The Shelley-Whitton Papers* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1917), p. 242.

CHAPTER 2

Women and Children

Daisy Hay

The story of Shelley's life is inextricably linked with the stories of the women who shaped his work, and of the children for whom he was responsible. The poet who gave us the solitary traveller of *Alastor* lived for almost all his adult life as part of a blended family, that shifted in its formation and location as dictated by the circumstances facing particular individuals or groupings. Shelley sometimes bent his desires according to the needs or whims of those in his household; at other moments his own wishes imposed enormous disruption on the lives of the women and children around him. This superficially least-domestic of men produced a body of work shaped in fundamental ways by his relationships with the women and children in his family, as well as by those with a small number of other women who existed beyond its boundaries.

Why not Shelley and men? asks Nora Crook in her 2013 essay on 'Shelley and Women'. Because, she continues, Shelley 'casts women as agents in his works to a greater degree than any of his male contemporaries. His most important literary collaboration was with a woman. His works testify to the influence of remarkable women. And whether he is one of the most pro-feminist of male writers or the subtlest of self-deceiving male dominators is a debate that emerged early and continues to be perpetually reconfigured.'[1] A further answer to this question might lie in the extent to which Shelley's biography was moulded by the relationships he forged and broke with women, and by the fate of the children who were born as a result – whether direct or not – of those relationships. This chapter will outline the story of the women and children in Shelley's life, highlighting those individuals who are refracted in his poetry in particularly striking ways.

In 1811, in the isolated, rootless period following his expulsion from Oxford, Shelley was drawn into the orbit of a merchant called John Westbrook, whose daughters were at school with Shelley's sisters. In August that year, he eloped to Edinburgh with sixteen-year-old Harriet,

the younger of Westbrook's daughters. The couple were married the day after their arrival in Scotland, but in spite of its speed and drama, their romance evolved in tandem with an intense correspondence between Shelley and a Sussex acquaintance called Elizabeth Hitchener: an affair of the head, conducted entirely on paper, that mirrored the affair of the heart and body conducted with Harriet. In a pattern that would be repeated throughout Shelley's life, the two women served contrasting but complementary purposes. The correspondence with Hitchener allowed him to work through a series of arguments about politics, religion, and atheism just at the point that his own beliefs had placed him beyond the pale of university and family life. The affair with Harriet provided the opportunity – in another pattern that would recur throughout Shelley's life – to enact a daring rescue of virtue from tyranny. 'In consequence of my advice *she* has thrown herself upon *my* protection!' he wrote to his chief confidante, Thomas Jefferson Hogg (*Letters* I, 103). In spite of the drama of the moment, however, Shelley expressed a degree of ambivalence about the step he had taken with Harriet. 'We shall have 200 £ a year', he continued in his letter to Hogg. 'When we find it run short we must live I suppose upon love. Gratitude & admiration all demand that I should love her *forever*' (*Letters*, ibid.). The contingency of Shelley's phrasing is notable here. He knew the emotions required of his role as runaway lover, but even in the first heady throes of elopement, he represented those emotions as an ideal to be aspired to, rather than a reflection of his own feelings.

Harriet Shelley bore two children by Shelley: a daughter, Eliza Ianthe, born in June 1813, and a son, Charles, born in November 1814. By the time of Charles's birth, Harriet and Shelley had separated following Shelley's elopement, in July 1814, with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. When Shelley first met Mary Godwin at her father's house in early summer 1814, his marriage to Harriet was already crumbling, but the advent of Mary Godwin in his life threw what he perceived as Harriet's failures of intellect and understanding into sharp relief. Mary Godwin represented an ideal, as the daughter of two thinkers whose work Shelley deeply admired, but she was also an extremely striking individual in her own right: widely read, independent, and with a degree of self-possession that marked her out from any other woman Shelley knew. A rapid affair produced a plan to run away together in the company of Mary Godwin's stepsister, Claire. This second elopement was arguably the most significant event in Shelley's life, because it thrust him into an intense and highly unconventional family unit that placed all its inhabitants beyond the pale of social acceptability.