

Return migration: the 'nabobs' of British India

Correspondence between Sir Henry Russell (1783-1852), Major Robert Pitman and Mary Wilson:

1: Robert Pitman to Henry Russell, 20 April 1834:

This is Robert Pitman's report to Henry Russell of Mary Wilson's progress at Miss Mathison's school for girls in Clapham, raising the question of Mary's future prospects and employment:

'Miss Mathison thinking her fit to undertake the situation of a Governess, I begged her to be on the look out and to inform me of any eligible opportunity of placing her that might offer. By the enclosed letter you will perceive she has succeeded and if you approve Mary can enter into her new employment at midsummer.I shall also request Miss M to let me know the estimated expense of renewing Mary's wardrobe, which hitherto has I think been very economically furnished. I was in hopes when last in London of having some chat with you as to your future plans regarding her and if you have the intention of giving her an annual allowance, perhaps the present would be a fitting occasion to fix it and to let her know what she has to depend on.'

2: Henry Russell's reply to Pitman's letter (1), 7 April 1834:

'She [Mary Wilson] is entitled, on every account, to all the assistance that I can give her...and therefore I should wish her to have lessons in singing between this time and midsummer. On this point I will beg you to write to Miss Mathison, and to request, at the same time, that Mary may be provided with a suitable wardrobe. I should wish her to have a sufficient and creditable outfit....For her immediate expences, I should think her salary would be sufficient; but I should like her to have an accumulating fund to meet accidental emergencies, as well as to serve for an ultimate resource. Tell me what you think on this point, and whether anything has ever been suggested to you by Miss Mathison. I should think it desirable that she [Mary] should be able to lay by something every year; as well to encourage habits of providence, as to secure something to lean on hereafter.'

3: Robert Pitman's response to letter 2, 12 May 1834:

'With respect to Mary, I think with you, it is very desirable she should be able to lay by something every year, both to encourage habits of economy and to secure to her something hereafter. Being always careful to avoid discussions that might lead to enquiries about her parents or expectations, I have never talked to Miss Mathison on the subject, but as far as I can myself judge, I think your views would be fully accomplished were you to allow her during your life about the average amount expended on her hitherto, say £60 a year. This, with savings from her earnings, might form a sufficient fund to meet incidental

emergencies, as well as serve for an ultimate reserve....She has had good economical notions instilled into her by precepts and the example of the Miss Mathisons, who from affluence having been reduced to depend on their own industry, are patterns of everything that could be desired in this respect. It has been an object with me to impress on them as well as Mary that she would have to work for her livelihood and that her success in life must depend upon her own exertions, and from all I have seen and heard of her, there is every reason to believe she is prepared to act entirely in these views.'

4: Mary Wilson to Robert Pitman, from Devonshire, 9 July 1834:

Mary Wilson was sent to work as a governess in Devonshire, in the house of the wealthy Mrs Eleanora Savile. Having no known family in Britain and knowing no one in Devonshire, she was intensely lonely. Still only a teenager herself, she found responsibility for four young children very demanding. This letter was written to Pitman very soon after her arrival at Mrs Savile's home:

'As you so kindly wished me to write to you soon after I reached this, being now quite alone I cannot employ my time better than in your service. I arrived here yesterday....Thank God I am quite well and hope soon to be reconciled to my situation but it is hard to be separated from those we love. It is God's will that it should be so therefore I must not murmur. Mrs Savile is very kind. She is exceedingly tall and is a most elegant woman [who] looks very young to be the mother of twelve [children]I wish I was nearer Clapham there is no one near here who I know which makes me feel very uncomfortable. I hope you will write to me soon for that is the only pleasure I have receiving letters from friends.'

5: Robert Pitman to Henry Russell, 14 April 1838:

Mary found the four young children over whom she had charge as a governess too much to manage, and suffered a breakdown in 1837. Pitman arranged for her to return to the Mathisons' school in Clapham to recover. In this letter, he updates Henry on the situation, and notes that Mary is also desperate to know her identity:

'Independently of my desire to hear from you about yourself I have been several times very anxious to consult regarding poor dear Mary Wilson who from over exertion became so seriously ill that in Sept last she was obliged to leave Mrs Savile & go for comfort & medical aid to Miss Mathisons at Clapham, without any expectation of being again able to resume her duties in Devonshire. [She has now recovered and Mrs Savile has kept her job for her and also employed an under-governess to assist her. Her total expenses during her illness have been £24 for clothes and lessons and £25 for board with Miss Mathison.]Besides the fatigue of her situation the dear child's mind for some time back has been much agitated on the subject of her birth, of which I have avoided giving her any explanation till I can talk the matter over with you. Her enquiries during the two last years have been frequent and to quiet her as far as possible I felt myself obliged to say that whenever circumstances rendered it desirable for her, I should no longer keep her in ignorance. She

has vivid recollections of the house in which she passed her early days [the British Residency in Hyderabad, India], the library to which she was occasionally taken and from her description I think also of her father and mother. At her age it is natural she should think deeply on a subject so interesting to her and I hope when you come to England you will agree with me in some means of setting her mind at rest regarding it. It will be satisfactory to you to hear that she has turned out as well as the fondest parent could desire and is in every respect deserving of every possible kindness and consideration that can be shewn to her.'

6: Henry Russell's reply to Pitman, from Rome, 1 May 1838:

'Your account of her conduct & disposition only confirm the promise of her infancy: she was always a placid amiable child, but I regret to see that the delicate structure of her health is liable to be impaired by what seems to be almost a morbid sensibility of mind. With respect to communicating with her the circumstances of her birth, as in all matters, I wish, as I am bound, to do that which may be substantially the best for her. We will talk the subject over when we meet, which I hope we may in the course of next winter, but although it seems unkind to deny her information on a topic on which she is naturally so solicitous, there are many difficulties in the other course which must be maturely weighed before we encounter them.'

7: Henry Russell to Pitman, from Swallowfield, 29 November 1838:

In autumn 1838, Mr William Coxhead, a local Devonshire curate (a junior clergyman in the Anglican church) proposed marriage to Mary Wilson, and she accepted his proposal. This was a much more humble marriage partner than Russell expected for his legitimate daughters, but a much more respectable prospect than he had expected for Mary as a 'mixed-race' illegitimate daughter trained as a governess. This proposal however raised many issues. Wealthy men such as Henry Russell were expected to 'settle' substantial sums on their daughters at marriage, giving them dowries that would contribute to their new households and protect them from misbehaviour from their husbands. ('Settlements' placed these funds in trust for wives, limiting husbands' access to this money). How much (if any) of his Indian fortune should Henry settle on his illegitimate daughter? What name should she write in the marriage register when asked to state her father's name? Was this perhaps the time to tell her who she was?

'I will not allow a single post to go by without answering your letter of yesterday. In the peculiar situation in which Mary stands, and in which, in some degree, she must always continue, it is of the greatest moment to her happiness that she should be married to a respectable man, capable and willing to take care of her. What she says of Mr Coxhead, (and the opinion I have formed of her character leads me to believe that both her judgment and sincerity are to be relied upon) is as favorable [sic] to him as we could desire; and his situation in life is superior to any expectations I was warranted in forming for her. Under this impression, I cheerfully give my consent. I am not justified in expecting to be able to

assist Mr Coxhead in his preferment [that is, to obtaining a senior appointment, called a 'living', in a parish church]; if the occasion ever did offer itself, it would be as cordially my wish, as it would be my duty, to avail myself of it; but I will do at once what I think I can do prudently for Mary, to enable her to contribute something towards the support of their little establishment. I propose therefore to give her £1000, but that sum I should insist on seeing settled upon her and her children, in the usual way, instead of being sunk, as you justly observe, upon a living....The next point to be considered is when the marriage shall take place. It is important to avoid any delay, by which the prospect of so desirable an establishment might eventually be frustrated; and yet Mr Coxhead, before he marries, should have provided the means of sheltering and maintaining his Wife.'

'On the other topic, which has often been the subject of correspondence between us, namely the telling Mary whose daughter she is, natural as it may be that she should wish to acquire the information, there are many considerations, affecting even her individual happiness, which should make us slow to take so important and irretrievable a step. When we meet I shall probably be able to suggest many reasons to you for the reluctance I feel upon this subject. I cannot help fearing it would open the door to serious embarrassment of many kinds.'

8: Mary Wilson to Robert Pitmann, 14 September 1839:

Negotiations over the marriage dragged on for months, much complicated by Henry Russell's refusal to acknowledge that Mary was his daughter. She wrote to Pitman anxiously a few weeks before the marriage, which she hoped he would be willing to attend:

'I trust you will be able to come for every reason in the first place I shall be so glad to see you—and then in the register I see the father's name and profession are put down. I know neither.'

9: Henry Russell to Pitman, from Swallowfield, 9 October 1839:

After negotiations with Pitman, Henry agreed to make a settlement of £1,200 on Mary, but he resisted Pitman's requests that he acknowledge his paternity. Here he explains why:

'For the present I am satisfied on reflection, that we cannot tell Mary, whose daughter she is...[and for] this there are two especial reasons. In the first place, I could not tell her who she is, without at the same time receiving her at least occasionally into my house, and I find, what is perhaps not only natural but proper, that Lady R. [his wife, Lady Russell] would object to this, at all counts while her own daughters are unmarried. In the second place we know as yet but little of Mr Coxhead. He may, and it is reasonable to expect, that he will prove a very respectable man; but if he should, in any particular, turn out to be otherwise, only think with what an encumbrance I should have embarrassed myself, by enabling him to refer to me as his father in lawIf anything on this subject should be said by Mary, I think you might safely tell her that the concealment, which is observed, is as much for her benefit

as for any other reason, and that, if circumstances shall ever arise to make it necessary for her to know the secret, it will no longer be withheld from her.'

(The above correspondence is taken from the Manuscripts division of the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The references are all within Bodleian MS Eng. lett. c. 170: Robert Pitman's correspondence with Henry Russell junior, 15 January 1833-2 March 1840).