



Jeremy and Samuel Bentham – The Private and the Public

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Jeremy and Samuel Bentham – The Private and the Public¹

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Introduction

This paper is an examination of some aspects of the family life of Samuel Bentham, inventor, naval architect, and ‘brother of the more famous Jeremy’, as one might term him. It must be emphasised at the outset that the paper does not attempt a full examination of Samuel Bentham’s career and achievements, but is rather a brief survey which concentrates on the private aspects of his life. A thorough treatment of his life, work and significance is yet to be undertaken.

The title might suggest that the two Benthams are given equal weight in the discussion which follows, but this is not in fact the case, as the main subjects of the paper are Samuel Bentham and his family. However, it is difficult to discuss Samuel without placing him in juxtaposition with Jeremy, as the two brothers were exceptionally close, and their lives were frequently intertwined. In addition, by exploring some of the elements of Samuel’s life, we may incidentally learn more about Jeremy.

Nor is it suggested that one Bentham was a private figure and the other a public figure. The real situation was not so clear-cut as that. The brothers led very different lives, it is true. Samuel’s life was spent in a more public arena than that of his somewhat reclusive brother; moreover, Samuel had a family, while Jeremy did not, and consequently had a more complicated private life. So we could say that Samuel had greater experience of both the public *and* the private aspects of life. Clearly a stark differentiation between one public figure and one private figure simply does not stand up.

A brief summary of the life and career of Samuel Bentham (section 1) is followed by an examination of the relationship which Jeremy Bentham had with Samuel’s family (section 2), with a particular emphasis on Jeremy’s relationship with

¹ Paper given at the Bentham Seminar, UCL, March 2002. Thanks are due to everyone whose contributions to the discussion have improved the content.

his nephew George Bentham (section 3). Next Samuel's illegitimate children are discussed (section 4), and Jeremy's involvement with them is examined (section 5). The final section (section 6) briefly contrasts Jeremy's private way of life with the more public working life which Samuel led, and illustrates how Samuel incorporated some of Jeremy's ideas into the sphere of his workplace.

1. Samuel's life and career

Samuel Bentham was born in 1757, the only surviving sibling of Jeremy Bentham. In the nine years which separated them, five other children had been born and had died in infancy or early childhood, and their mother died in 1759. These family circumstances may have contributed to the remarkably close bond between the two brothers. At the age of fourteen Samuel was apprenticed to a shipwright, with whom he served seven years. In 1780 he travelled to Russia, where he spent many years in the service of Prince Potemkin.² Samuel was initially employed as a shipbuilder, but his career in Russia gave him many other opportunities to use his talents as an engineer and inventor, constructing machinery for industrial use and experimenting with processes such as steel-making.

He also designed and built many novel vehicles, including an amphibious vessel and an articulated barge built for Catherine the Great. He was decorated for his part in a decisive victory in the war against the Turks, and commanded a battalion in Siberia. Eventually he came to have complete responsibility for the factories and workshops on Potemkin's country estate, and it was there, while considering the difficulties of supervising his large work-force, that Samuel devised the principle of central inspection, and designed the Panopticon building which would embody that principle. Samuel was renowned for his charm and was always popular with women – he came close to contracting a marriage with a Russian countess, and had several other romantic entanglements as well. However, when he eventually returned to England in 1791, he was still unmarried.

For the next few years he was involved, with Jeremy, in trying to promote the Panopticon scheme in London, and he continued to design machinery for use in the

² Information on Samuel Bentham's life and career is taken from the several volumes of correspondence in *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*, and from M.S. Bentham, *The Life of*

Panopticon. It was during this time that Samuel became acquainted with Mary Sophia Fordyce, who was to become his wife. Mary Sophia was the daughter of a Scottish doctor and scientist, George Fordyce, who had been a friend of Jeremy's for many years, since Jeremy had attended Dr Fordyce's lectures on chemistry as a young man.³ Not very much is known about the courtship of Samuel and Mary Sophia, but we can glean a little information from a letter which he wrote to her in February 1795. She had been conducting an experiment, under his supervision, concerning the exhaustion of air for manufacturing purposes; he wrote:

What do you mean by not reporting progress? I suppose you are ashamed of what you have done and therefore have not dared to tell it me. You have broken the still, damaged the air pump, burnt your fingers or after a dozen mistakes have finished by spoiling a pound & half of potatoes. Take courage - I will check my wrath and deal not with you according to your deserts. In short I send you my absolution for past sins on condition of your giving immediately a faithfull [sic] account of your disasters.⁴

Permeating Samuel's observations on the experiment, there is an affectionate and teasing tone, although as a *billet doux* the letter is perhaps a little clumsy. It is perhaps significant that Samuel was courting a woman able to share his interests in science and engineering. The couple married in October 1796.

Mary Sophia was a clever and capable woman, although the expression of her talents was somewhat limited by the conventions of the time. It is not known how much education she had, but from an early age she had been accustomed to help her father with his writings, and this was a role which she was to assume both for her brother-in-law Jeremy, and also for her husband Samuel. Later on when she had children she was responsible for their education and this was a task which she took seriously and executed thoroughly. She was also responsible for the programme of

Brigadier-General Sir Samuel Bentham, K.S.G., London, 1862. Additional material on Samuel's Russian career is taken from Ian Christie, *The Bentham's in Russia*, Oxford, 1993.

³ See *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. Bowring, 11 vols, Edinburgh, 1843, x. p. 133.

⁴ Royal College of Surgeons, Hunter Baillie Collection, iii. 122.

study which the young John Stuart Mill undertook during the time he spent with the Samuel Benthams in 1820.⁵ Samuel and Mary Sophia had five children.

In March 1796, Samuel Bentham was appointed Inspector General of Naval Works, with responsibility for the upkeep and improvement of the dockyards, which necessitated a fair amount of travel around the country. His job seems to have been a difficult one. Samuel's almost boundlessly inventive mind produced a constant stream of suggestions for improvements, and although some of these were implemented – for example, he introduced steam power into the dockyards and installed machinery to replace human labour in many areas of dockyard activity – his superiors at the Navy Board were generally reluctant to make changes, and many of his suggestions failed.

One of the stipulations of his post was that all proposals, along with a full account of the supporting reasons, had to be submitted in writing by the Inspector General himself, committing Samuel to lengthy and time-consuming written explanations for even the smallest proposals. For example, in 1805 Samuel made a proposal for a new arrangement of the offices at one of the smaller dockyards, Deptford. The change proposed was minor, concerning a more efficient usage of the office buildings; yet the letter which Samuel had to write, explaining the reasoning behind the proposed changes, ran into tens of pages.⁶ The letter is by no means unusual in its length, or in the wealth of its detail, and such letters must have taken up a huge amount of Samuel's time while Inspector General. One cannot fail to conclude that Samuel's professional life at this stage was marked by almost constant frustration and thwarted by petty bureaucracy.

His wife spent a great deal of time helping him with such correspondence, as well as looking after their growing family. When George Bentham was born in 1800, it was Mary Sophia who wrote to inform Jeremy of the birth of his nephew:

As I understand my Master is too idle to tell you that we have another son, I think I must give you the tidings myself; & you may rejoice that I do it so early because thereby you will be spared all expatiations on the beauties virtues & endowments of the hopeful boy.⁷

⁵ See John Stuart Mill's *Journal*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, xxvi. ed. J.M. Robson, Toronto, 1988.

⁶ Samuel Bentham to the Navy Board, 28 February 1805. National Maritime Museum, ADM/Q/3323.

Even though the baby was only 2 days old, it was the mother rather than the father who found time to send the news to Uncle Jeremy.

In 1805 Samuel Bentham went back to Russia on government business, and he and his family remained there for two years. The journey to Russia was a lot more complicated this time than it had been on Samuel's earlier visit, when he was a young man travelling on his own. This time, he had to charter an entire ship to take all his companions: all the 'young fry', the governess, the lady's maid and her niece, various 'shipwright men' and a surgeon.⁸ The difficult journey was aggravated for Mary Sophia by seasickness which struck most of the family. In Russia, Samuel's mission for the British government proved to be blocked by constant obstacles, and he returned home two years later without having achieved any of the ostensible official objectives, although he had supervised the construction of a Panopticon. Mary Sophia also found the experience of living in Russia rather trying, mostly because she could not find suitable and reliable servants; yet as usual she occupied herself with the children, their education and their pursuits, and continued to be a supportive assistant to her husband.

On the family's return to England, Samuel found that his post as Inspector General had been abolished in his absence, and indeed the family came to believe that he had been sent to Russia for the express purpose of getting him out of the way while his post was abolished. In 1814, he and his family moved to the south of France, where they lived until 1826.

Shortly after their departure for France, the family suffered a great blow when the elder son, Samuel junior, died, aged 17. On this occasion Samuel himself, as well as his wife, wrote to Jeremy, informing him of the sad event. Both letters are moving expressions of the grief of bereaved parents. Samuel wrote 'at ½ past 5 in the afternoon I lost my boy my friend and companion from whom for the last twelvemonth I had no secret and in whom I found the most correct judgement'.⁹ Samuel records that his son's last words were 'my breather pipe is stopt' which seems somehow appropriate for the son of an engineer. It seems that the parents had been expecting this outcome for some months, but that they had kept their fears from the children. Samuel wrote 'till all was over we concealed all apprehensions from the

⁷ George Bentham collection, Linnean Society.

⁸ Jeremy Bentham to Dumont, *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vii. ed. J.R. Dinwiddy, Oxford, 1988 (CW), p. 309. Hereafter *Correspondence (CW)*.

other children as well as from himself'. However, Samuel realised the impact that his brother's death would have on George, writing of 'poor George' and 'the loss of a brother to whom the attachment was as strong as can be'.¹⁰ Indeed many years later, in 1827, George was to write to his elder sister Mary Louisa: 'It is a sad thing to think how those whom I have most loved and confided in have been separated from me, my poor brother whom I had never quitted a single day till his last fatal illness'.¹¹ There was little that the parents could do to protect George, although Mary Sophia was determined not to 'sink under' the loss of her son, for the sake of her other children.

The family lived in various places in France before settling in 1820 at the Château de Restinclières, near Montpellier. At least some of their journey through France was made in a carriage of Samuel's invention, which incorporated sleeping compartments – a sort of prototype Dormobile – which caused a certain amount of embarrassment to his daughters.¹² The house at Restinclières was large and the grounds extensive, and the plan was to cultivate the land for profit, with George taking on most of the management of the operation. Samuel had many ideas about new methods of farming: he imported agricultural machinery as yet unknown in France, and installed a complex system of irrigation on his land.¹³

The cultivation of Restinclières was reasonably successful for a time, but in the end for various reasons the family returned to England. One factor was the threat of a lawsuit from neighbouring residents, who objected to Samuel's irrigation system, which, they claimed, was diverting the local water supply.¹⁴ There were more personal reasons for leaving France too. Mary Louisa, the eldest daughter, had married a Frenchman but the marriage had not been a success and she had spent much of her time living with her parents and her little daughter at Restinclières. (Incidentally, in the years to come, Mary Louisa was to have much cause to regret her choice of husband – who abandoned her, owed the family money, and at one stage even abducted her children from her.)¹⁵ It seems that Samuel's younger daughters Clara and Sarah, as they grew up, found life on a country estate in the south of France

⁹ *Correspondence (CW)*, viii. ed. S.R. Conway, Oxford, 1988, p. 515.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

¹¹ George Bentham, *Autobiography 1800-1834*, ed. M. Filipiuk, Toronto, 1997, p. 262. Unless otherwise stated, this is the source of information about George and his family.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 73-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁵ See letters and journals in the George Bentham collection, Linnean Society.

rather limited from the social point of view, and although they went on several trips to Paris and to England, they were generally rather dissatisfied with their rustic lives.

One factor for their eventual return to England seems to have been the wish of George and his sisters, all of whom felt that they could not establish themselves in France and that they had a better chance of marriage in their own country. George had come close to marrying a French woman at Montpellier, but in the end the objections of her family had made the marriage impossible. In 1824, George wrote to his father from Paris: 'my object is to marry and at Paris there would be the same objections as at Montpellier. All these are reasons for going to England as soon as possible'. It seems that George felt as though he belonged neither in France, nor in England. He implored his father: 'you must feel how necessary it is for me to regain if possible the esteem of my countrymen', adding that hitherto he had thought of himself as French, but now, perhaps influenced by the failure of his engagement, he saw:

too well how impossible it is to think of establishing myself permanently in a country where I must always live as it were alone and separated by an insurmountable bar from all those who surround me and with whom I should have wished to have made permanent connexion.

George was close to his sisters, and in addition to his own wishes, increasingly he felt responsible for them and for their prospects, perhaps a natural role for him to adopt as the only remaining son. He wrote to his father:

For my sisters' interests it is necessary to find some means of establishing them in England. They cannot marry at Montpellier; they cannot live there long to be rejected and despised by their acquaintance as old maids are in France.¹⁶

The family, with the exception of Mary Louisa, was back in London by 1826.

Once back in England, Samuel spent most of his time writing on various naval matters, and right up until the very end of his life he was still conducting experiments

¹⁶ Letters from George to Samuel, in the George Bentham collection, Linnean Society.

– his last experiment being on the influence of the shape of a ship's hull on its speed and direction. Samuel Bentham died in 1831, aged 74.

2. Jeremy and the family

Although Jeremy Bentham proposed marriage on more than one occasion, he had remained unmarried and had no children of his own. He was always particularly close to his only brother; how involved was he then with Samuel's family?

While the family were in Russia, Jeremy kept in close touch by letter with Samuel and Mary Sophia, and did not entirely forget the children. On one occasion, he sent some gold watches for the children, and was sufficiently acquainted with the difficulties of dividing spoils fairly between siblings to warn: 'I submitt whether the best mode of disposal would not be drawing lots, without choices to any body'.¹⁷ The nephews and nieces also wrote to their uncle. Because of George Bentham's later eminence as a botanist, at least some of *his* letters have been preserved, whereas those of his sisters and brother have not generally survived. The content of George's first letters illustrates that in addition to their academic education, the children were receiving instruction in more practical subjects, including horticulture, which was always a particular interest of their mother's.

When Samuel's family moved to Restinclières, Jeremy wrote rather sceptically of George's suitability for the role of manager of the estate:

You look to George with that fond anticipation which is so natural. But his life has been hitherto that of the fine gentleman: he has never yet been out of leading strings: and whether the conversion of a fine gentleman into a farmer - a successful, which to be he must be an anxiously and constantly attentive, farmer - be a change to be relied upon as a security against anxieties and regrets, is another question.¹⁸

While the members of Samuel's family were settling in to a new life in France, they relied on Jeremy to send things which they needed from England and in this they were perhaps somewhat demanding. During the dozen years which they spent in France, they made frequent requests to Jeremy for items which they wished to have sent over

¹⁷ *Correspondence (CW)*, vii. p. 323.

– items ranging from seeds, agricultural implements and furniture, to books, toothpicks and jewellery. Much of the surviving correspondence between the brothers is concerned with such ‘commissions’. One such letter from Jeremy to his brother, dated January 1821, contains an exasperated outburst:

My Brother turns me over to his wife: his wife turns me over to one of her daughters, who makes up her commissions into a pudding, which poor old Uncle aged 73 is to analyse as well as he can for the purpose of distributing the contents amongst the different dealers and such friends as he can find: not forgetting gingerbread and toothpicks, as if in France there were no bonbons good enough, nor a quill nor any thing else that teeth could be picked with. Amongst you you have almost broke the back of the old pack-horse. I am filled with remorse and melancholy every time that I think of the time I have misapplied from the endeavour to serve the whole human race to the endeavour to afford a few trifling gratifications to a family who I hope and believe are fond of one another, but who would not care if all besides were in the Sea, if toothpicks and gingerbread could be obtained with equal ease.¹⁹

One might sympathise with Jeremy Bentham, distracted from his work by a constant stream of demands from France, some of which do seem rather trivial. The commissions of a single family do seem of trifling importance in comparison with the welfare of the ‘whole human race’, and it is undeniable that Jeremy Bentham believed that he could be of service to the human race (whether he succeeded or not is another question). However, one must not forget that Jeremy did not have any direct dependents, and had no reason to consider anyone’s wishes but his own. At an early age he had made the decision not to work as a lawyer, but rather to spend his time writing, in the service of the human race. To some extent he was able to pursue such a course because he had remained unmarried and had no dependents. His solitary lifestyle provided him with the luxury of devoting himself to the whole human race.

On one of George’s visits to London with his sisters Clara and Sarah, in 1823, he visited Jeremy at Queens Square Place, but it seems that the invitation was

¹⁸ *Correspondence (CW)*, x, ed. S. Conway, Oxford, 1994, p. 11.

extended to George alone and not to the girls. In his *Autobiography*, George gave an account of this visit:

After dinner he kept me till 11, to talk to me about my sisters, about his own occupations, and many other things. I do not know how he will be persuaded to see my sisters, which he now says he is determined no to do. He says that either he will like them or he will not. If for argument sake he should not, then there would be only harm done by their meeting. If he should like them, and should see them once or twice, there would come the pain of parting, but this would be, I should think, just as good a reason for not seeing me or any one else. I hope however that in time he may alter his determination.²⁰

This rather cool attitude towards his nieces is in marked contrast with Jeremy's relationship with George.

3. Jeremy and George

In 1789 in his work 'Supply – New Species proposed', which suggested that the new government in France could raise revenue by the appropriation of collateral successions, Jeremy Bentham wrote:

To preserve to children the succession of their parents is matter of absolute necessity. It is not matter of equal necessity to preserve to brothers the succession of brothers: still less to nephews the succession of Uncles. - Why so? because the brother has had for his primary and only regular dependence the succession of his father, the common parent. The dependence of the Nephew in like manner has not been upon his Uncle, who perhaps has children of his own, but upon his father. Is the Nephew left by his Father an orphan without provision? But so may any

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-8.

²⁰ G. Bentham, *Autobiography*, p. 104.

other child be who has no Uncle. Whatever provision is made for orphans in general may serve for this particular case.²¹

At the time of writing this, Jeremy Bentham did not have any nephews, so the question was for him a theoretical one. Years later, when he did have nephews, did his views change?

After 1816, when Samuel Bentham junior died, George Bentham became Jeremy's only nephew, and the only one of Samuel's children with whom Jeremy had much of a relationship. It has to be said that this was probably because Jeremy saw the opportunity to make use of his young nephew as an amanuensis or editor. It is also true that, because George Bentham later reached eminence as a botanist, his papers, letters and journals have been preserved. As a 'public' figure, we have more information about him and his life than we have about his sisters, who lived their lives wholly in the private sphere, and who are consequently 'hidden' from us.

We have already seen that Jeremy refused to see George's sisters on one of their visits to London, so it is pleasing to read in George's *Autobiography* that when Samuel and his family came back to London in 1826, the whole family, including the sisters, dined at Queens Square Place, where 'the large table [was] set out in the dining room down stairs for the first time' since they left London twelve years before. The original intention had been that, for George at least, this was to be a temporary visit, and that in the autumn he would return to France and be formally engaged to his French sweetheart. However, once back in London, Samuel most forcefully dissuaded George from returning to France, putting forward 'very strong arguments derived from pecuniary circumstances'. It seems that Samuel had sought some financial support for George from Jeremy, but that none had been forthcoming; had Jeremy's opinions about the financial responsibility of uncles for their nephews remained unchanged in practice? We shall see. Although George complied with his father's wishes that he should not return to France, he was very disappointed, not least because the abandoning of the estate at Restinclières meant that five years' hard work, not to mention the money spent, had been wasted.

²¹ *Rights, Representation, and Reform – Nonsense upon Stilts and other Writings on the French Revolution*, ed. P. Schofield, C. Pease-Watkin & C. Blamires, Oxford, 2002 (CW), p. 212. Hereafter, *Representation and Reform* (CW).

For several years now George's own inclination had been to devote much of his spare time to his increasing and abiding interest, botany, particularly during his last year in France, 1825, which he described as 'a thoroughly botanical year'.²² However, he had also found time to prepare a French translation of his uncle's *Essay on Nomenclature and Classification*, which he worked on over a period of some years and finally published in 1823. After the disappointment on the subject of George's financial support, when it became clear that he would have to earn a living, he decided to enrol at Lincoln's Inn and train as a lawyer, a decision which caused some heated disagreements with his uncle. George related that when he informed Jeremy of his decision, Jeremy replied:

Well then, if you must earn money by the practice of insincerity and dishonesty, there will be an end of all communication between us. In practising the law you must learn insincerity, and where there is insincerity with me, there can be no sympathy, there is no use in coming together, so we had better separate than quarrel.²³

George replied that he had no money of his own, and that although he was comfortably off while his father was alive, without wishing to hoard or accumulate money, he would eventually have to earn a living. Jeremy's response to this was to point out repeatedly that he had given up everything for the public good and he did not see why George should not do likewise; he also hinted that George would, within two or three years, inherit enough from him to provide an adequate living. Doubtless it is true that Jeremy Bentham 'did not see' why his nephew should not lead a life similar to his own – frugal, solitary, and devoted to 'the public good' – but in two respects George's situation differed widely from his own. In the first place, George had no independent income; and secondly, he was still a young man, who wished, sooner or later, to marry and have a family. For both of these reasons it was perhaps a little unrealistic of Jeremy to expect George to follow a path similar to his own.

The upshot of these negotiations was some sort of compromise, with George agreeing to spend time working as one of his uncle's assistants, while effectively deferring his legal studies. George began work on Jeremy's papers on logic,

²² G. Bentham, *Autobiography*, p. 215.

eventually producing his own version of them which was printed as *Outline of a New System of Logic* in 1827, and he also worked on his uncle's papers on Codification and other subjects. Probably more gratifying to George than this work was the publication of his own botanical catalogue of Pyrenean plants which appeared in November 1826. He also found time to help Samuel with *his* writing, on various naval matters.

By the spring of 1827, the subject of George's earning a living cropped up again, partly because, as George put it, his uncle's fortune was 'daily diminishing'. Once again George raised the possibility that he should devote the whole of his time to his legal training. Jeremy's response took him somewhat by surprise:

when. I entered upon the subject, what was my surprise when I found him agree with me entirely, and notwithstanding his having but a day or two ago absolutely forbidden my thinking of practising law, he now completely entered into my views, told me what practical books he had that might be of use to me and, in short, entirely precluded the need of my proposing the alternative, or of saying any thing about his money.

George's explanation for this *volte face* was that Jeremy had been 'dreading' some further appeal for money, because his finances were in a 'disorderly' state, and because he felt that he had 'not done justice' to Samuel in this respect. These factors combined to create a situation where Jeremy 'cannot bear to have a word said about money, and it is astonishing how cunning he is at finding out when a discourse may turn to that subject and at warding off the blow'.²⁴ So, rather than commit himself to supporting his nephew financially, Jeremy gave his blessing to the pursuit of the law as a career. However, Jeremy's equable acceptance of this course of events was not to last long. Just a month later, Jeremy demanded that George should make himself available every morning to help with work on the Procedure Code. George protested, 'feeling' as he put it, 'the importance of persisting in the course of legal studies' he had commenced. This provoked another angry outburst from Jeremy:

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-3.

whereupon he told me that if I preferred to do so, he must immediately come to a complete rupture with the whole of our family. Discussion continued, in the course of which he got exceedingly irritated, raked up all manner of imaginary complaints against my father and mother, reproached me with breaking my engagements with him, threatened me with altering his will; in short, there is nothing harsh or disagreeable which he did not say, particularly as I was obliged to answer him rather positively in some things. In short, after two hours we separated, with a complete quarrel if I did not give a satisfactory answer to his proposition, for which I had a day or two to consider.²⁵

This account does not portray the philosopher in a very favourable light, to say the least. Reluctantly George capitulated to his uncle's ultimatum and once again deferred his law studies.

And so George spent a few more years dividing his time between his uncle, his father, the law and botany. Botany, however, was always George's first love, and it was only after Jeremy's death, when George (and his sisters) did inherit some of the family estate, that he was free to pursue his true career. In the end, Jeremy Bentham's behaviour with regard to his nephew was in accord with his own writing on the subject many years before, when he said that it would be a 'hardship, were .. the destitute Nephew' to receive no relief out of the estate of his Uncle, and that 'between [...] brothers and brothers' children [...] there is a natural' intercommunity of goods.²⁶

4. Samuel's illegitimate children

As we have seen, in contrast to his solitary brother who had no direct experience of the private sphere of the family, nor of the demands and responsibilities generated by a family, Samuel Bentham was financially and emotionally responsible for a large family. In addition to these dependents, he also had three known illegitimate daughters, for whom he made at least some provision over the years.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

²⁶ *Representation and Reform (CW)*, p. 212.

Indeed, it seems that Samuel's first experience of fatherhood was illegitimate. In August 1796, Jeremy wrote a note to his brother, saying: 'Collins insults you, and says you don't know how to get Boys: he got five of them to one girl',²⁷ from which it is clear that a daughter has been born to Samuel. Just two months later Samuel married Mary Sophia Fordyce. Samuel was almost 40 years old when he married and his bride was over 30.

At the time of their marriage, then, Mary Sophia's husband was the father of a little two month old daughter. No evidence has been found which indicates how Mary Sophia felt about this. It was not particularly unusual for men to wait until their thirties and beyond before marrying, and consequently neither was it unusual for them to have illegitimate children, usually with women of a lower social class, before marriage. As a young man in Russia, Samuel had written disparagingly of an English acquaintance in St Petersburg who had:

picked up a playhouse girl whom he has married and by whom he is at present entirely governed, a woman who without sense to see either his interest or her own or even any passion which can induce him to pursue any one object to please her makes him however to submit to every whim of the moment.²⁸

(Incidentally, the scorn shown here by Samuel for the 'playhouse girl' is echoed by Jeremy Bentham in his work *Nonsense upon Stilts*, when he says that the abuse of words inherent in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man means that 'the acts of the senate' are 'loaded and disfigured by the tinsel of the play-house'.)²⁹ Nothing is known about the occupation of Maria Burton, the mother of Samuel's child. A letter of hers makes it plain that she was not well educated; perhaps she too was a playhouse girl; although we do know that later she became a respectable businesswoman in Bishops Stortford.³⁰ Mary Sophia would probably have had to accept without question and with a good grace the fact that her husband already had a child.

Less than a year after her marriage, Mary Sophia gave birth to her own first child, Mary Louisa, who was christened at St Margaret's, Westminster, in September

²⁷ *Correspondence (CW)*, v. ed. A.T. Milne, London, 1981, p. 244.

²⁸ Christie, *Benthams in Russia*, p. 44.

²⁹ *Representation and Reform (CW)*, p. 322.

1797. It was at this christening that Samuel's two families, the legitimate and the illegitimate, first came into contact with one another. The parish register for St Margaret's gives the details of the christening of Mary Louisa, 'daughter of Samuel by Mary Sophia'. The next entry in the register records the baptism of another baby with the surname Bentham, another girl, named Alicia, date of birth August 12th 1796, who is also recorded as 'daughter of Samuel by Mary Sophia'. This baby, named after Samuel's own mother, must be the baby whose birth drew the disparaging comment from Collins. The parish register provides a public (and of course untrue) record that Mary Sophia Bentham was the mother of a baby born before her marriage, almost exactly a year older than the first legitimate child of that marriage. Was it difficult for Mary Sophia to witness the christening of her husband's child, or was this too something which a wife would be expected to accept without complaint? Was it difficult for her to have it recorded in an official document that she was the mother of a baby born before her marriage? These are questions to which no answers can be given with any certainty.

Regardless of the conventions of the era, the relationship between the two women, Mary Sophia the legitimate wife and Maria Burton the ex-mistress, was difficult and fraught with recrimination.

Almost 20 years after the baptism at St Margaret's, in April 1816, when Samuel Bentham and his family were living in France, Jeremy Bentham's amanuensis John Herbert Koe received a letter from Maria Burton, by that time living in Bishops Stortford. She wrote:

I received your letter this morning and am obliged to you but am really much surprized to think Mr B- should not know any thing of my poor Alicia. When I parted with my dear child and was taught to believe she was to be brought up under the eyes of her Father and unkle . he gave as his reason the express desire of his Brother likewise saying it would be a means to insure his protection for her.

Maria's letter also reveals that Alicia's name was chosen by her father: 'Bentham asked me to let her be Christened Alicia (she before was Maria)'. In the mother's

³⁰ See below.

opinion, the change of name was definitely not to the daughter's advantage; as she writes:

another injury poor Alicia is likewise to be subjected to is when Bentham made a settlement on our Children their they are named (Sophia and Maria) of course their she is likely to be a Looser [sic].

So Samuel had not one, but two daughters by Maria Burton.

One intriguing question is, where were these girls during their childhood and early adulthood? Maria Burton believed that Alicia at least, if not Sophia, was to have been 'brought up under the eyes of her father and uncle', but the girls seem simply to have disappeared for great tracts of time, although Mrs Burton's letter also states that she and her daughters had spent time in a workhouse. The letter contains many charges against Mary Sophia: that it was she who had frustrated the plan that Alicia should be brought up under the protection of Samuel and Jeremy; she who had prevented Maria from seeing Alicia; and she who had threatened to stop Maria's money should she move nearer to London. Maria Burton does not seem to blame Samuel himself for any remiss behaviour; she writes:

but ill as Bentham has been *made* to use me and his children I can't believe he has done this injury to Alicia premeditatedly.

If Maria Burton ascribes hostile feelings to Mary Sophia and blames her for injustices done, then she also expresses overt hostility herself:

I am confident I have not done any thing to offend her tho she is a Lady of too much sense to think it possible for me to be much attached to her, who brought me and my children to a workhouse and actually to beg for bread for Sir Samuel Benthams children, this is a painfull remembrance, but it reflects disgrace more on the name of Bentham than me.

She concludes her letter with the heartfelt complaint ‘how wrong it is to trust one woman with power over the happiness of another’.³¹

In addition to his Burton daughters, Samuel had another daughter named Elizabeth Gordon, who seems to have fared rather better than her half-sisters. George Bentham wrote in his *Autobiography* about ‘Lise Gordon’ (as he called her) ‘who before we went to Russia [...] had been brought up as one of us. She was about two years older than my eldest sister, went with us to Russia, and when we returned home was left in the Gagarins’ family as a *demoiselle de compagnie*’.³² On the occasion mentioned when Jeremy Bentham sent watches for the children, he sent four, and one of them was for Elizabeth. Indeed there is a touching description in one of Jeremy’s letters of how delighted the girl was to receive such a gift:

The announcement of Gordon’s cost her a night’s sleep: but report says that her joy was a little damped by the apprehension lest her’s should be taken from her; which, of course, it will not be.³³

It seems that Elizabeth had a happy childhood as part of the Bentham household, although it was not until many years later that the children, including Elizabeth herself, found out for certain that Samuel was her father. This came to light in 1822, when Elizabeth was visiting France. George recorded:

She believed herself to be a natural daughter of my father’s, though he declined to acknowledge it to her; but when, passing through Montpellier, I took much to her, whom I remembered as a favorite in our family when children, she confided to me her suspicions, entreating me to verify them, which I had subsequently the means of doing, beyond all doubt and very much to her satisfaction.³⁴

It is cheering to read that Elizabeth was ‘a favourite’ in the family and this would suggest that Mary Sophia did not harbour any hostile feelings towards this particular

³¹ Letter in the Koe MSS, in private hands.

³² G. Bentham, *Autobiography*, p. 94.

³³ *Representation and Reform* (CW), vii. p. 323.

³⁴ G. Bentham, *Autobiography*, p. 95.

little cuckoo in the nest. As to the ‘means’ of verifying Elizabeth’s suspicions, one can only speculate, and perhaps wish George had been a little less discreet.

In 1807, when she would have been only about twelve years old, Elizabeth was left in the care of the Gagarin family in Russia, firstly as a companion and then as a governess to their daughter. Nothing much is known about her life with them but they were an aristocratic family and one can assume that her life was reasonably comfortable, better than the workhouse, for certain. A letter which she wrote to Samuel in 1813 illustrates that she had received a good education, as she describes the books she is reading in French and although she claims to have forgotten quite a lot of her English, her letter is well written. Elizabeth wrote this letter many years before she knew for certain that Samuel was her father, but it is clear from what she says that he and his family have been kind to her. She writes:

It is with great grief that I see weeks, months and even years pass over without receiving a single line from you, and without knowing whether you are in good health. Sometimes I am enclined to think you have totally forgotten me, but this gloomy thought soon vanishes when I call to remembrance all your kindness.. If you forget me, you will only make me unhappy, and I flatter myself that is far from your desire; but if I were to forget my dear benefactors, I would be the most ungrateful creature upon earth.

She ends her letter ‘Pray present my respects to Mrs Bentham and kiss the children a thousand times for me’.³⁵ Clearly this daughter of Samuel’s had somehow found a place in the heart of Mary Sophia which had not been available for the Burton girls.

Mary Sophia’s acceptance of Elizabeth is confirmed by another letter which Elizabeth wrote to Jeremy Bentham in 1822, taking the opportunity of sending a letter with Prince Gagarin who wished to be introduced to Jeremy. Jeremy forwarded the letter to Samuel, with the introduction ‘the following Letter may perhaps be more or less interesting to Lady B’. In her letter, Elizabeth says that she is visiting Paris, and had hoped to see Samuel and Mary Sophia, but had been disappointed, as they were in the south at the time (although as it turned out, it was during this visit to France that

³⁵ Letter in the George Bentham collection, Linnean Society.

Elizabeth did ascertain that she was Samuel's daughter.) In the event, Jeremy declined to see Prince Gagarin, although Elizabeth had very much hoped that he would:

I trust that I am not wholly obliterated from your memory, & that of course the prince being able to give all possible information concerning me, will meet with a friendly reception from you. For my part I shall impatiently wait for his return, in hopes that he will bring me good news respecting the state of your health and welfare: and especially if he be the bearer of a letter, the favor will be received Sir, with the most joyful gratitude.³⁶

However, as Jeremy explained to his brother, he did not feel that seeing Gagarin was a wise idea:

It was not altogether without regret that I found myself under the necessity as it seemed to me to leave such an application unnoticed .But the object of the application could not be other than to put questions to me: and what could have been my answers?³⁷

It is possible that Jeremy feared that Gagarin would ask questions about Elizabeth's paternity, questions which he would be unwilling to answer. As it turned out, Elizabeth was shortly to receive confirmation of her suspicions about who her father was, so nothing much was lost by Jeremy's unwillingness to answer questions. Nonetheless it is rather sad to picture Elizabeth waiting in vain for an answer from the man who had been an uncle to her, and whom she held in such high esteem: in her letter she spoke of 'the high regard' she had for 'a person related to the family which has conferred such great obligations' upon her. Once again, Jeremy Bentham's attitude towards his niece does seem a little inconsiderate, to say the least.

5. Jeremy and the illegitimate daughters

³⁶ Copy of Elizabeth's letter in Jeremy's letter to Samuel, *Correspondence (CW)*, xi. ed. C. Fuller, Oxford, 2000, p. 55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

We have already seen that although Jeremy Bentham worked closely with his nephew George for a number of years, he did not really have very much to do with Samuel and Mary Sophia's daughters. Given his neglect of his legitimate nieces, it is not therefore surprising to find that he ignored the plea from Elizabeth Gordon for some contact with him. However, with one of Samuel's illegitimate daughters, Jeremy did have some involvement, albeit not of a face-to-face kind. While Samuel and his family were in France, Jeremy undertook to make payments to Sophia Burton and possibly to her mother too.

The earliest reference to such a payment is from October 1814,³⁸ and the latest from 1828, after Samuel's return, whereupon Jeremy remarks not unreasonably to Samuel 'it not belonging to me to answer letters from that quarter, now that you are here to answer them yourself'.³⁹ One must also remember Maria Burton's assertion in her letter to Koe that Samuel had told her that it was 'the express desire of his brother' that Alicia should be brought up 'under the eyes of her father and uncle'. It is impossible to be certain of the truth of Samuel's claim – too many elements of the story are missing – and we cannot really assume from this that Jeremy cared very much either way what happened to Alicia. What is certain, on the other hand, is that in Samuel's absence, Jeremy was responsible for the sending of money to the Burtons. Indeed, not only Jeremy but also Mary Sophia was involved in the arrangements for sending money: in one of her letters from France Mary Sophia adds a note at the end: 'Mr Koe did I request the favor of you to send 10£ to Bishops Stortford? If not you would much oblige me by doing it now'.⁴⁰ Presumably the supervision of such payments constituted a part of Mary Sophia's role as manager of the household, along with the other domestic accounts.

Some years later, in 1820, Samuel again called upon Jeremy to help him with arrangements for the two Burton girls. Jeremy made several attempts to visit a man named Corston, who ran an establishment for orphan or destitute girls, probably a school of some sort, where they could earn their keep. This plan does not appear to have been successful, in spite of Jeremy's efforts. This episode once again reveals the extent to which Mary Sophia was involved in the arrangements made for her husband's offspring; Jeremy writes in March 1820: 'Why should Lady B give up the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, viii. p. 428.

³⁹ Letter at BL Add. MSS 33547, ff. 223-4.

⁴⁰ G. Bentham, *Autobiography*, p. 37..

thoughts of placing the two creatures in that way? The chances should expect to find better for them of doing well on that plan, than if left to themselves'.⁴¹ It is also clear from the extant correspondence that Mary Sophia herself exchanged letters with Sophia Burton, but as the two women were mere private creatures of little importance, none of the letters which passed between them have been deemed worthy of preservation. There is a copy of one of Sophia's letters to Jeremy Bentham among the Bentham papers in the British Library, but on its own, without the rest of the relevant correspondence, the bulk of its content is tantalisingly incomprehensible.⁴² By this stage, there is no further mention of Maria Burton, the girls' mother.

The journal kept by John Colls, Jeremy Bentham's amanuensis, records that payments were made two or four times a year to Sophia Burton, the 'two creatures' by now having become just one, unless one payment was intended for both girls. In February 1821 the money was sent to Battersea House Boarding School, though whether Sophia was a pupil, or, more likely, a teacher, is not clear. However by the autumn of that year she was back in her home town, Bishops Stortford, and henceforth it was to that place that the money was sent. As mentioned, the payments to Sophia Burton continued until at least 1828, but almost nothing is known about the adult lives of these girls.

6. Private life and public life

Thus we have seen that there was a dimension to Samuel Bentham's life – the 'interior' life of a family – which was quite absent from Jeremy Bentham's life. The daily routines of life with children, not to mention the burdens associated with the financial maintenance of supporting a large family, were both almost entirely outside of the scope of Jeremy's experience, except insofar as he was aware of these things with relation to Samuel. In this sense, Samuel was the more fully developed 'private' man, a man with a populous 'private' life. By contrast, Jeremy could be viewed as the more 'public' figure. His concerns were on a wider scale, concerned with the fate of the whole of mankind, no less. As he put it in a letter to Samuel:

⁴¹ *Correspondence (CW)*, ix. ed. S. Conway, Oxford, 1989, p. 406.

⁴² Copy included in Jeremy's letter to Samuel, 9-10 August 1821, *Correspondence (CW)*, x, p. 373.

I have the affairs of the wicked world upon my hands as well as those of Restinclières. You have those of Restinclières only.⁴³

It is undoubtedly true that Samuel had ‘the affairs of Restinclières’ on his hands, but what Jeremy overlooks perhaps is the time and energy which can be absorbed by the most ordinary events of family life. Jeremy was in touch with politicians and statesmen, leaders and thinkers across the ‘wicked world’, yet he scarcely had to concern himself with such mundane domestic matters as the feeding and clothing of a brood of children, not to mention the serious issues of career and marriage choices for those children as they grew up. Nor did he ever deal at first hand with the pain of bereavement which follows the death of a child, or the distress caused by the distress of one’s children.

However, while it is true that Jeremy’s concerns were of a more ‘global’ nature, on the other hand, Samuel had to earn a living not only for himself but also for his family, including at various times the three illegitimate daughters. He simply could not afford to live a solitary life of contemplation, writing on the huge moral and political topics of the day, as his brother did. Besides, his was a more adventurous and outgoing nature, and such a hermitic life of contemplation would never have suited his temperament. So Samuel went out into the world to earn his living, initially as a young man in Russia, and later, on his return to England, in the dockyards. In this respect, Samuel was far more at home in the public sphere than Jeremy. The difficulties which Samuel encountered, with the Navy Board and also on his second trip to Russia – the frustrations and difficulties of bureaucracy and workplace tension – were also unknown to Jeremy. It is not true, of course, that Jeremy Bentham never experienced frustration in *his* working life, for we all know that he did, frequently; but the frustrations of a solitary genius whose ideas are spurned is of a different nature from the frustration of a person who must work alongside other people on a daily basis.

Apart from his visit to his brother in Russia between 1785 and 1788, Jeremy seldom ventured far from Queens Square Place, and he led a reclusive and quiet life. His contact with the outside world was to a large extent conducted through the medium of his writing, and on the rare occasions when he met his disciples or

⁴³ *Ibid.*, x, p. 271.

admirers, they usually came to his 'hermitage', to be granted an audience one at a time. Although the scope of his interest may have been international, the reality of his day to day life was played out on a very small stage indeed.

Throughout his career, Samuel incorporated Jeremy's ideas into his work, and in this way those ideas achieved a wider currency than they would have if Jeremy alone had been responsible for their dissemination. For example, it is well known that the original idea for the Panopticon, which became one of the most famous of Bentham's inventions, was initially Samuel's, who devised the scheme while supervising the workmen on Potemkin's estate in Russia. Jeremy then wrote his series of letters on the subject, and, as is also well known, spent many years fruitlessly trying to have the scheme adopted by the British government. While Jeremy's attempts to have a Panopticon built in London eventually came to nothing, Samuel on the other hand did succeed in having a Panopticon built, during his second trip to Russia, between 1805 and 1807. So both the conception and the execution of the Panopticon were Samuel's achievements.

Some years later, after Samuel's post had been abolished and he had parted company with the Navy Board, he published a book called *Desiderata in a Naval Arsenal*,⁴⁴ one of several works in which Samuel attempted to justify and explain his work during his years as Inspector General of the Dockyards, a post in which he was constantly hampered and thwarted by the reactionary bureaucrats of the Navy Board. It is a theoretical work drawn from Samuel's years of experience in the various British dockyards, which discusses issues relating to dockyards in general, although it ends with a plan which relates specifically to the dockyard at Sheerness. On the subject of the layout of dockyard buildings in general, Samuel writes:

That the Arrangement of the whole of the Accommodations in point of relative Situation one to the other, should be such as that the Office of the superior Officer, to whom the general superintendance shall be entrusted, being in a Situation as central as possible, the buildings and other accommodations provided for the carrying on every branch of business . should be brought so near to the central office, or at any rate

⁴⁴ *Desiderata in a Naval Arsenal, or an Indication, as officially presented, of the several particulars proper to be attended to in the Formation or Improvement of Naval Arsenals; together with an Outline*

be placed on such a line of direction in respect to it, as that while the superior officer, from his central situation, may take a more or less distinct view of the whole of the business subject to his controul, the several subordinate officers in their respective offices, should inspect each the particular business intrusted to him, and so that the communication between the scite of all the works and the offices in which they are regulated and taken account of, be as short and direct as possible.⁴⁵

So, while each department of the dockyard – the storehouses, the docks, the offices and so on – has its own supervisor, the dockyard as a whole should be subject to the principle of central inspection. This is the panopticon principle applied in a completely different context.

When Samuel comes to discuss the particular requirements of Sheerness dockyard, he describes how the several offices of the dockyard should be arranged in such a way as to ensure efficient inspection; those businesses which need most inspection – such as stores, which might easily be stolen – should be kept under the closest inspection and be sited nearest to what he calls the ‘central spot’.⁴⁶ He describes how the central building has a higher section in the middle, which has a commanding view of the whole dockyard, enabling ‘every transaction’ of the dockyard to be inspected at any time. He continues:

of the great advantage resulting from this arrangement, experience has been already obtained in the instance of a building constructed not many years ago upon a similar principle under my direction in a foreign Country.⁴⁷

The plan for Sheerness is accompanied by a diagram which shows how the panopticon principle can be adopted for use in a dockyard.

of a Plan, formed by order of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, for the Improvement of the Naval Arsenal, at Sheerness, London, 1814.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Conclusion

To conclude, we could say that Jeremy Bentham was a man concerned with the *public* good, who had a somewhat limited experience of *private* life. What then was his view of his brother's large family, the existence of which made Samuel's life very different from Jeremy's and which presented challenges and difficulties which a lifelong bachelor could scarcely imagine? We have already seen that Jeremy took some trouble to help in various ways with practical arrangements but that he became exasperated on occasion by the family's demands on him; we have also seen that in George, he saw someone who could be useful to him, although he had less interest in 'the trio of idle girls' as he once called his nieces.⁴⁸ As for the qualities in Samuel which perhaps contributed to him becoming a father of eight, Jeremy made a wry comment in 1821. Samuel had been describing the difficulty of finding workmen for the estate at Restinclières, and Jeremy's response was:

Send George on a roving commission from cottage to cottage to beget them [...] Remember how gladly at his age' (George was 20 at this time) 'his father would have been so employed.'⁴⁹

And on another occasion Jeremy wrote to a friend, who was considering marriage:

If you do, you must not think of having my consent; for what if you should happen to tip the perch before all the children are grown up? For my part, I am too old to be capable of taking any tolerable care of them; and Sam, were he to have no more, has enough, of all conscience, of them already.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Jeremy to Samuel, March 1821, *Correspondence (CW)*, x. p. 319.

⁴⁹ *Correspondence (CW)*, x. p. 300.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vii. p. 561.



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