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HENRIETTA WILSON: *THE CHRONICLES OF A GARDEN: ITS PETS AND ITS PLEASURES*  
(A PERSIAN SHEEP, A NEWT, A GLOW-WORM,  
A COATIMUNDI AND A SPARROW THAT  
FELL OUT OF ITS NEST...)

Sara Stevenson

Henrietta Wilson (1810-63) was a distinguished member of a singular family. Orphaned as a child, she grew up with her grandmother and one of her uncles. He was John Wilson (1785-1854), a prominent public figure, known for his combative literary writing and criticism in youth, who later became the Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. Henrietta then moved to live with another uncle, the naturalist James Wilson (1795-1856), at Woodville in Canaan Lane, in the south of Edinburgh (Fig.1). Here she nursed her aunt through terminal sickness, and became an older sister to her children. This kind of reworking of families was normal in a time of severe mortality, but the bond was strong. James Wilson's 'garden was so fragrant and so bright with blossom, there were about the place so many tame and happy creatures, and his own ways were so gentle and so loving, that it was no wonder Woodville became to her a little paradise, and its kind owner dear beyond all others.'<sup>1</sup>

Henrietta's life at Woodville was, at first sight, conventional. She published three books of moral and Christian advice: *Little Things; Things to Be Thought Of* and *Homely Hints from the Fireside* – titles that fall dully on the modern ear. The books, which went into many editions, were designed to advocate social behaviour in terms of grace and practicality, and were doubtless popular as gifts for the discontented young. The works are distinct from twenty-first century thinking, principally because of the assumed role of the woman and her duties. The chapters on visiting the deprived and lonely, and on the responsibility



Fig. 1. Engraving of Woodville, frontispiece to *Memoirs of James Wilson, Esq.*, 1859 or Dr Robert Kaye Greville, 'Woodville', illustration to *Chronicles of a Garden*, 1863.

for nursing the sick at home, are generally outwith modern experience. However, Henrietta was an intelligent and observant woman. Her chapters in *Homely Hints* on worry, for example, are close to the work of our contemporary newspaper columnists, and eminently familiar. She defends accumulation (our clutter) against the tidy-minded, and writes of problems with workmen:

The plumber can't work till the carpenter has been sent for, the carpenter destroys what the painter has just finished, the

locksmith spoils both, and the upholsterer seems to think that doors and windows are of little consequence compared to carpets and curtains, and so he lays down the one and hangs up the other without concerning himself whether the door will open or the window-shutters close ...<sup>2</sup>

At Henrietta's death, she left an unpublished book called *The Chronicles of a Garden: Its Pets and its Pleasures*. The publication appeared with a preface by Dr James Hamilton, who commented that:

Her beloved uncle [James] she greatly resembled in her playful good sense and pleasant ways, as well as in that warmth of affection, which was continually gleaming forth from behind the veil of a habitual retiringness; and she was like him in his love of humour, and, we may add, honourably like him in possessing a power of satire which was never used for the purpose of giving pain ... She was an excellent entomologist, and fully shared with the kind-hearted naturalist his attachment to plants and animals.<sup>3</sup>

In the garden, Henrietta reveals her enthusiasm for nature – an idea of an Eden unencumbered by formal rules. The Wilsons' pleasure in gardening around their house at Woodville embraced large trees, old-fashioned and wild flowers, and daisies on the lawn. Henrietta wrote, tongue-in-cheek:

It is very wrong, I believe, to admire a mossy lawn, or to allow daisies to spring up among the grass; now both are so delightful to me, that I would not care half so much for the little lawns or grass plots in the garden, if they were not soft with velvet moss, and white as snow with gowans.<sup>4</sup>

She makes a good point. The extraordinary determination to eradicate moss and cheerful weeds like the daisy and the buttercup and, indeed, the dandelion – all beautiful flowers – is one of the oddest features of our gardening in this wet country. She defends the large trees, which then, as now, were felled by builders.

To judge by the unsparing use of the axe resorted to when a wooded park is "feued" for villas, be they mansions or cottages, one would think that a fine tree or group of trees was a nuisance to be got rid of as quickly as possible, and that no allotment of ground ... could be ready for either building or laying out as a shrubbery, till every tree had been uprooted and the ground laid as bare as a blasted heath... Poor comfort it is for those who once admired, ay, and loved those noble trees, to be told that now the footpaths will be drier and the roads in better order.

The Wilsons' approach to gardening was at variance with that of their immediate neighbours, the family of Professor James Syme, who lived at Millbank. Millbank was run with the rigour which would have equalled Syme's surgical practice in the Royal

Infirmary; the Wilsons' garden overflowed with life.

James wrote to his niece in 1850, urging her to go and see African succulents growing at Millbank:

*Crassula coccineas*, which are each as large as umbrellas, and covered with flowers from top to bottom. The garden there is in excellent order throughout, but ... everything stands by itself, and is a separate thing, as if there was only one of it in the world, so that a nosegay is quite out of the question. Our own useful blow of roses, honeysuckle, &c., is coming to an end, although the Chinese and damasks [roses] will give us an autumnal show. The gooseberries are ripening fast ...<sup>5</sup>

The Wilsons' gardener was evidently not treated with the respect accorded the Symes'. Henrietta recalled an experiment she had tried, with cuttings from ten roses pushed through holes in thick brown paper into a pot filled with water:

... the gardener smiled contemptuously when the flower-pot was placed in his hot-bed; but if my readers wish to enjoy the garden and the work in it, they must learn to bear with equanimity the quiet contempt with which their little experiments will frequently be treated by the initiated: if the experiments succeed, the triumph is all the greater – if they fail, keep your own counsel.

It is often against the will of the gardener that many an old-fashioned plant is left growing ... but most people who love a garden and flowers, will greatly prefer having plenty of common flowers, and large masses of them, to having a few rarities, however finely grown, which they dare not pick, and can scarcely consider as their own at all.<sup>6</sup>

Henrietta was well aware of the virtue of gardening as exercise, and its beneficial impact on depression or anxiety: 'Any gardening work takes a high rank among the efficacious means of soothing and occupying a harassed mind ...'. In speaking of sowing seeds and tying up flower stems, she added that these two activities 'are popularly supposed to comprise all a lady's work in a garden' (requiring little muscle and little risk of getting the hands dirty). But she disagreed: 'The pleasure that there is in the actual, practical work of a garden, must be tried before it can be understood. Liking for it will grow by exercise.'<sup>7</sup>

James Syme, James Wilson and Henrietta were all, in our terms, scientists. The Wilsons were naturalists, and Syme was a botanist as well as a surgeon. But the Wilsons had a more relaxed and open approach to their subject. Most naturalists of the day collected dead animals, which were easier to study, dissect and analyse. But while both James and Henrietta did make collections – and she was to be seen bounding about with a butterfly net in her long skirts late in life

– they preferred live animals and were ready to live with them. They did not share the modern anxiety that an animal living with humans would take on human behaviour and characteristics, and, indeed, recognised that the animal would itself influence the human society it joined.

A sense of this may be seen in James Wilson's account of a Persian sheep, one of a small flock brought into the country by Sir James Gibson Craig, presumably with the idea of breeding from them. Wilson reported that the beast had been sent, as a specimen for stuffing, to the museum, where he found it standing forlorn in a lumber room (Fig.2). He begged to be allowed to take it away to Woodville, on the understanding that when it died naturally, he would return it. The sheep:

was extremely mild, gentle, and affectionate in its disposition, - never attempting to make a *butt* of, or otherwise annoy its friends... Although, of course, not allowed to go at large in the garden, it often escaped there from its own little plot of grass, and wandered about, apparently with a view to satisfy rather its curiosity, or love of company, than its appetite; for it seldom touched any of the plants, except those (of the culinary

kind) to which it had a legal right ... as the weather improved in warmth and brightness, it obviously increased in health and spirits, and throughout the summer season its motions were very free and graceful, and its attitudes at times expressive of great boldness. To human creatures, however, especially children, it continued to be uniformly gentle and attached; but it shewed great spirit in driving all strange dogs from the door, and I once saw it greatly astonish a large bull-terrier, by suddenly bounding upon it, and knocking it head-over-heels. When in a state of eagerness or excitement, it paced about more like a deer than a domestic sheep; that is, it held its head and neck very erect, and its fore limbs very straight and firm, lifting its feet high while walking, and setting them down with force. The stuffed specimen conveys no notion of the way in which it stood upon its pins...<sup>8</sup>

The sheep died during a snowstorm over a year later, 'deeply regretted by us all'. The stuffed animal was presented to the Royal Museum in 1827 by James Gibson Craig, without comment on this episode in its life.<sup>9</sup>

The sheep was not alone. The house and garden overflowed with animal life. The Wilsons kept and observed large numbers of birds, mammals and insects. They reared glow-worms brought up from Kent. Since the female glow-worm signals for a



Fig. 2. J Stewart, engraved by Lizars, 'The Persian Sheep, drawn from the stuffed animal in the Edinburgh Museum', illustration for *The Natural History of the Ruminating Animals*, 1836.





Fig. 3. Henrietta Wilson, engraved by Pearson, 'A dream of our pets', showing the coatimundi as one of the quartette in the central cage, illustration to *Chronicles of a Garden*, 1863.

mate from long grass, it is pleasing to think of their daisy-strewn lawns with these little green-gold lights gleaming among the flowers. There is even a touching story told of a relationship between James Wilson and a glow-worm: ‘so devoted was he to a glow-worm, that he carried it with him during a long tour in 1853, and was greatly mortified when at last he lost it. He used to feed it at breakfast-time by placing it in an egg-shell on the table, and most likely the wrong shell had been put into the box, and the poor lampyris left to waste its brightness on the desert air of Skye.’<sup>10</sup>

The Wilsons preferred to study animals from life, and opened their house (Fig.3), to creatures of all kinds. In Henrietta’s case, they filled her dreams with surreal images. She wrote:

... it would require a volume to describe those that have been reared, trained, tamed, and fed within the precincts of our small abode. The mere list would appal most people: at different times we have had a succession of dogs, an ichneumon, a coatimondi, monkeys, rabbits, guinea-pigs, mice, squirrels, hedgehogs, and, occasionally, cats and kittens. In the ornithological department, we have had eagles, hawks, owls, cormorants, seagulls of all kinds, silver-pheasants, grouse, quails, ravens, rooks, magpies and jackdaws; starlings, jays, a cockatoo, parrots, parroquets, pigeons, bantams, and small cage-birds of almost every kind.

She was justifiably proud of the situation: ‘The chief peculiarity about our pets was their tameness, and agreeing in general most wonderfully with one another.’ She explained:

The great secret of training and attaching animals, seems to be kindness and quietness, and a certain sort of friendly intercourse with them, which, perhaps, is only understood by those to the manner born. All teasing them, even in fun, should be avoided, if you wish them to trust you and be gentle ... there are few, either among quadrupeds or birds, that will not soon get attached to the person who feeds them; but they are frequently far more strongly attached to the individual who understands them, and keeps up a quiet friendly intercourse with them. Unless this sort of “rapport” is established between us and our pets, they are (to my mind) hardly worthy of the name; they degenerate into “captive animals,” and can neither give pleasure to others, nor be made happy themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The coatimundi, from Central America, was amongst the extraordinary animals they lived with for many years. Henrietta observed that it:

... had an extraordinary predilection for rubbing any strong perfume on its tail; if a bunch of tansy or feverfew were given to him, he would seize it eagerly in his forepaws, and, seating himself so as to bring his tail in a convenient position, he would then crush and rub the plant all over his tail, sniffing and sneezing with evident relish all the time. Lavender water, or any perfume poured on a piece of paper, was instantly

applied in the same way; and one of the few occasions on which he was known to bite, was when a lady, whose reticule he had snatched from her hand, and out of which he had torn her scented handkerchief for this ludicrous purpose, attempted to take it from him, an interference with his toilet which he resented accordingly ... His “passive resistance” was worthy of a quaker; on all occasions of leading him off to the stable, after having been indulged with a visit to the house, or a seat at the fireside, when he felt the pull at the chain fastened to his collar, he first resisted, then laid hold of the chain with his forepaws, but when he found all his efforts unavailing, he lay down on his back as if dead, and allowed himself to be thus dragged unresistingly out of the house and down the avenue. When within a few yards of his kennel, however, he used to start up and run, as if for his life, till he got into it. He never attempted to bite on these occasions; however unwilling to be led off, he might be lifted and carried with perfect impunity; all he did was to manifest his repugnance to the change of quarters in this “anti-annuity tax” fashion of passive resistance.<sup>12</sup>

The Wilsons’ relaxed approach to the animals sharing their lives is underlined by the current advice given by American pet stores offering to sell coati, for example: ‘Owning a coatimundi is something like caring for a permanent toddler with sharp claws and teeth and an amazing ability to climb, swim, and get into mischief. If coatis aren’t bottle raised at a young



Fig. 4. Dr Robert Kaye Greville, Newt wearing a dress, illustration to *Chronicles of a Garden*, 1863.

age and continually socialized, they can become violent and dangerous ...'<sup>13</sup>

The family's tastes were not only exotic. They studied the natural life of Scotland with the same intensity. They turned a goldfish bowl into a fresh water aquarium:

no one entered the drawing-room who did not examine and watch with interest the reptiles and insects living there, an interest the pretty but stupid gold-fish never excited. One large water-newt was an especial object of curiosity; he did not object to being taken out of the water and handled: indeed he had to submit occasionally to be made a plaything of by the children of the family, and more than once he was dressed in a doll's frock and carried about tenderly, the little fat forelegs of the newt being suggestive of infantine arms!

The history of our City now has to encompass a newt in a dress (Fig.4) – which is surely unique?

At first sight, it would seem that Professor John Wilson does not fit within this story. He appears to be a different kind of person from either his brother or niece – dominating, combative, an accomplished boxer, a hunter and, in his youth especially, verbally aggressive. But his daughter's biography makes it clear that this aggression was balanced by kindness – especially towards the young. In this context, most strikingly, he lived with a sparrow. Mary Wilson Gordon records:

I remember a hapless sparrow being found lying on the door-steps scarcely fledged... It was brought into the house, and from that moment became a *protégé* of my father's. It found a lodging in his room, and ere long was perfectly domesticated, leading a life of uninterrupted peace and prosperity for nearly eleven years. It seemed quite of opinion that it was the most important occupant of the apartment, and would peck and chirp where it liked, not unfrequently nestling in the folds of its patron's waistcoat, attracted by the warmth it found there. Then with a bolder stroke of familiarity, it would hop upon his

shoulder, and picking off some straggling hair from the long locks hanging about his neck, would jump away to its cage, and depositing the treasure with an air of triumph, return to fresh conquest quite certain of welcome. The creature seemed positively influenced by constant association with its master. It grew in *stature*, and began to assume a noble and defiant look. It was alleged, in fact, that he was gradually becoming an *eagle*.<sup>14</sup>

When John Wilson was failing in health around 1850, a family party travelled north to Perthshire: 'The more adventurous of the party treated the weather with contempt, taking long walks. Of these were Mr James Wilson and his niece, who wandered over large stretches of ground, but few of the others could compare notes of adventure with them.'<sup>15</sup> Both Henrietta and James exemplified the family energy and athleticism along with their driving love of nature.

The Wilsons' relationship with the animal world was based on affection and interest. Their approach illustrates the emotional intelligence essential to human society, and correctly sees our own society as a branch of nature. It undercut the utilitarian view, which may, quite wrongly, dominate science, an idea of objectivity, stemming from an assumed distinction and superiority. Under such a cold, judgmental eye, neither people nor animals will relax and reveal their nature. Henrietta's title concludes with the word 'pleasures', and the warmth of that pleasure gives us a sheep that was loved and mourned, and a cheerful coati trotting past, striped tail high, in a waft of lavender.

They held a sophisticated, humorous and open view of nature, which communicates their pleasure two centuries later.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 3 James Hamilton, op. cit, p. v.
- 4 Henrietta Wilson, *The Chronicles of a Garden*, p. 52.
- 5 Letter from James Wilson to Henrietta, 24 July 1850, quoted in James Hamilton, *Memoirs of James Wilson, Esq, Naturalist* (London 1859), p. 247.
- 6 *Chronicles of a Garden*, pp. 93-4.
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 6 and 11.
- 8 James Wilson, 'The Persian Sheep', in Sir William Jardine, *The Natural History of the Ruminating Animals, Mammalia* (Edinburgh 1836) vol. IV, p. 164-6.
- 9 It was shown at a meeting of the Wernerian Natural History Society, 10 February 1827, *Memoirs of the Wernerian Natural History Society, for the years 1826-31* (Edinburgh 1832), vol. VI, p. 563. On the same occasion John James Audubon exhibited specimens of the coloured plates of his

great work on American ornithology.

10 *Memoirs of James Wilson*, p. 117.

11 *Chronicles of a Garden*, pp. 142-3.

12 *Chronicles of a Garden*, pp. 154-5.

13 <https://www.thesprucepets.com/pet-coatimundi>

14 Mary Wilson Gordon, '*Christopher North*' *A Memoir of*

*John Wilson, Late Professor of Moral Philosophy in the*

*University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1862), vol. 2, pp. 251-2.

15 *Ibid*, p. 338.

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