

THE PERNE SISTERS AND DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S  
*PILGRIMAGE*

*George H. Thomson*

Who were the Pernes of *Backwater*? They were a trio of maiden sisters named Ayre who conducted a private school in North London called Edgeworth House at 28 Alexandra Villas, which was also 28 Seven Sisters Road opposite Finsbury Park. In the Autumn of 1892 Dorothy Richardson began to teach in their school, her job was to look after the younger students. Her employers were Anna Mary Ayre, the Principal, and her sisters Emma Ainsley and Isabella Reed Ayre. A fourth sister, Fanny Ellen Ayre, had died in March 1892, six months before Dorothy Richardson arrived. And a fifth sister Annie Oxley Ayre, in 1884 at the age of 40, had married. She will appear later in this narrative.<sup>1</sup>

The 1891 Census for 28 Alexandra Villas enumerates the four resident Ayre sisters, Anna 49, Emma 48, Fanny 46, and Isabella 43, an Irish-born governess 23, two resident pupils 12 and 14, and one housemaid 15, one domestic 16, and one cook 44, all single of course, for women who held paying positions were almost always single or widowed. Each British Census was conducted in much the same way. Here is the explanation accompanying 1891.

The 1891 Census of England, Wales, Scotland, Channel Islands and Isle of Man was taken on the night of 5/6 April. The completed collection contains detailed information on each individual who spent the night in individual households including name, relationship to the head of the family, marital status, age at last birthday, gender, occupation, and birthplace. Additional information about the dwelling and property was

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted through Ancestry.com and specifically ancestry.co.uk. Much of this information can be found on free web sites but I am not in a position to comment on these since I did not use them. Through Ancestry I accessed U.K. Census figures 1841 to 1911; Birth, Marriage & Death Index Records from 1837-2005; National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1861-1941 and Family Trees publically available on Ancestry.

also collected. The Census forms were distributed to all households a couple of days before census night and the completed forms were collected the following day.

All forms were meant to accurately reflect each individual's status as of 5/6 April 1891 & the household they spent the night in. . . . All of the details from the individual forms were later sorted and copied into The Census books, which are the original records you can view images of today.

This procedure had its pitfalls. Accuracy depended first upon the resident and then upon the clerk who transcribed what the resident had written. For example, in the 1871 Census Ayre was transcribed as 'Ryce', the ornate capital A of Ayre taken to be R, and the **r** taken to be **c**. And the same year, Mary Ayre's sister Ann R. Oxley was transcribed as Ogley. Such errors were unavoidable in the circumstances.

The individuals listed in the 1891 Census are reflected in Richardson's portrait of Miriam Henderson's life in *Backwater*. When she and her mother visit Wordsworth House as it is called in the novel, they encounter the three sisters dressed in black: Miss Perne, Deborah the oldest, is tall with intense black hair and a wrinkled creamy face; Miss Jenny, the second sister, with twinkling eyes and hair askew, is short, lively and does most of the talking; and Miss Haddie, the third, much younger, has 'a long, sad, greyish face and faded eyes'.<sup>2</sup> How true these portraits may be as they relate to Anna, Emma, and Isabella Ayre cannot be determined. But the accuracy of Miss Perne's final statement can be affirmed: on their right is a school for the deaf and dumb (I 192). The 1891 Census lists 27 Seven Sisters Road as headed by a 63-year-old married man identified as a Clerk in Holy Orders; also recorded is a single young woman described as a teacher of deaf and dumb, five so-called scholars, a single male boarder, a cook, and two female servants, single of course. It is very likely that their school received 'scholars' who came in for the day just as the Pernes' establishment accepted day students.

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy M. Richardson, *Pilgrimage* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), Vol. I, *Backwater*, p.190.

Richardson's text is also faithful in minor details. Once Miriam is settled into Wordsworth House she experiences the routine of the evening meal of bread and butter and milk, followed by evening prayers attended by the servants, the cook, tall and thin and old, Flora the parlour maid, short and plump, and Annie the housemaid, raw and grinning. They parallel the three servants in the 1891 Census. However the Irish-born governess, Elizabeth Jane Piatt, present in 1891 is not introduced by Dorothy Richardson until Miriam's second term (I 272-5). Her name is Julia Doyle. It is possible of course that Miss Piatt left the Ayres in mid-1892 and Dorothy was her replacement; and possible too that a new Irish teacher arrived in 1893 in the manner described by Richardson. But whatever the case, it is easy to discern the advantage of bringing Julia onto the scene after Miriam is established at Wordsworth House. Miriam can then sharply differentiate between her own impersonal approach as it relates to the individual integrity of each of her students and Julia's intimate and controlling approach.

The death of Miss Haddie is another instance of the difference between an historical event and its representation in the fiction. In *Interim* Miriam's visit with the Brooms over Christmas 1896 gives rise to a discussion of the Pernes and a detailed insight into Miriam's conflicted feelings about them and especially about Miss Haddie, now dead, who used to come down to the West End and talk to Miriam after she took up her position in the dental office (II 305-7). In fact Isabella Reed Ayre, the Miss Haddie of *Pilgrimage*, did not die until 1900. By that date Dorothy Richardson and her heroine are in the world of *Deadlock*. Miriam has met Michael Shatov (III 16), her life has entered a new chapter to which the Brooms and the Pernes are incidental. It made much more sense then to move to Christmas 1896: the scene exposing Miriam's complex feelings about the Pernes and about Miss Haddie's death. Keep in mind that while Richardson is writing *Interim* in 1917, the events being described date back twenty years, leaving the author ample scope for retrospective rearrangement.

The Census records and the Birth, Marriage, and Death records for the United Kingdom establish facts about the Ayres and their

school, and by extension about the Pernes and Wordsworth House, and lead to a deeper understanding of the Ayre family and their surprising history. It is a history that illuminates some of the roles assumed by women in nineteenth century England. Mary Burton Oxley, born in Tynemouth, North Shields, Northumberland married William Ayre on 7 June 1839 at Hackney, Middlesex. The 1841 Census records his age as 25, born 1816, and his occupation as Surgeon. (When his daughter Ann married in 1884 his occupation was recorded as M..D. of London.) In 1841 his address in the parish of St. John, Hackney was identified as a Private Lunatic Asylum. The residents were: William, age 25; Mary Ayre, 25 (though in fact she was 3 years older than her husband), her occupation not given; a cook, 20; a nurse, 20; an F. S. [Female Servant?], 15; and 6 patients, ages 15 to 80.

Between 1841 and 1848 Mary Ayre gave birth to five daughters. Then in early 1851 William Ayre died, leaving Mary to look after five children and five residents of the Asylum with the assistance of three servants. The 1851 Census, identifying Mary as a widow, gives her address as 115 Mare Street, Hackney.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1861 Census Mary Ayre, age 48, now with five teenage daughters and three servants, is still Proprietor of a Lunatic Asylum with six inmates or 'boarders' as they are called, and is resident at 128 Mare Street. This entire household comprised eighteen single or widowed women. By 1871, the establishment has moved to 73 London House, London Lane, in the same area. Mary Ayre is now 60 [an error for 58], her oldest daughter Anna M. is absent but the four younger daughters are noted, along with Mary's sister Ann R Oxley, 62, and her cousin Anne Hepple, 62, also a cook, three other servants, and 12 'boarders'. Mary is now supervising an establishment of 23 women, all single or widowed,

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<sup>3</sup> Next door at 116 Mare Street lived John Ayre aged 70, a physician no longer practising. Possibly he was the brother of William Ayre's father, also William. The same John Ayre, though not living next door to William, was identified in the 1841 Census as resident in the same Hackney area. A John. J. Ayre was one of the witnesses at the wedding of Ann O. Ayre in 1884. This witness, unless he had attained the remarkable age of 103, could not have been John Ayre the physician.

except for three of the boarders who are married but living apart from their husbands.

Mary Burton Ayre died in the second quarter of 1878, age 66. It is reasonable to assume that the five daughters did not long continue as proprietors of the Asylum after their mother's death. In the 1881 Census, Annie O. Ayre, said to be 34, is present as a Governess Teacher in the residence of Joseph Wrigley, a Woollen Manufacturer of Huddersfield, Yorkshire, a 42 year old widower whose wife Emilie had been buried on 21 May 1880, leaving him with a 10-year-old son and four daughters aged 9, 6, 3, and 2. Theirs was a prosperous household. In 1871 when Emilie, a native of Norfolk, had a year-old son and a two-month-old daughter, she also had four servants, all from Norfolk, the fourth a lad of 17 described as a Page.

The only Ayre sisters apart from Annie who seem to be present in the 1881 Census turn up in Scarborough, Yorkshire. There E. Jane Ayre, a single 45-year-old Lodging House Keeper born in Castle Rising, Norfolk, records three nieces named Freeman, aged 10 to 17, two servants, and two visitors: Mar. H. Ayre 40 and Emma Ayre 33. The handwriting of the clerk who transcribed these Census records was terrible which may help to explain why Anna Mary Ayre's names is garbled. The age of the two sisters is also a problem: Anna Mary's age should be 39 and Emma's 37 or 38. But one can well believe that a Lodging House Keeper might not be fussy about details of age or origin. The Ayres are listed as born in Castle Rising. That column may have been left blank by Jane Ayre and the clerk assumed Castle Rising. It is possible too that these two Ayres belong to another family altogether, as presumably does E. Jane Ayre.

By the time of the 1891 Census the four remaining unmarried Ayre sisters are conducting their private school for girls at Finsbury Park. When Fanny died on 13 March 1892 at age 47 she left her small estate of £207 to Anna Mary Ayre. The next to go as noted above was Isabella on 13 February 1900. The surviving sisters Anna Mary and Emma appear in the 1901 Census along with their independent single aunt, Emma Thornton, now 95.

There are no longer any 'boarders' at the school, just a governess, a governess/student from France, a cook and two maid servants.

When Emma Ayre died at age 69 on 21 Feb 1912 she left her considerable estate of £5,605 to Anna Mary Ayre, spinster. This event is not echoed in *Pilgrimage* nor ever mentioned in Richardson's surviving correspondence. The sole survivor, Anna Mary Ayre, next appears in Richardson's life in 1936. On 18 August 1936 she writes to Owen Wadsworth: 'To-day I go to see, for the first time since I left north London, the head of the school, "Miss Deborah Perne", now aged 100'.<sup>4</sup> And on 26 August 1936 she writes to Bryher: 'Miss Ayre, "Deborah Perne", was quite wonderful. Very thin and small and withered, her raven black hair still only partly grey, she nips about like a girl, has all her faculties and remembers everything and everyone. She refused to allow me to deal with the huge and heavy silver tea-pot. "Grace Broom" and I stayed hours and, when at last we had to go, the old lady seemed not at all tired'.<sup>5</sup> But was the vigorous Miss Ayre 100 years old as Richardson asserts? Records of birth show that she was born in the fourth quarter of 1841 and all the Census records from 1851 onward confirm this date. So in August 1936 she was approaching her 95th year. Quite good enough. Richardson's tendency to be careless with dates was likely the source of the misinformation, especially in view of the inclination obvious in the youthful Miriam of 1892 to exaggerate the age of her employers.

It is time now to return briefly to Annie Oxley Ayre, the third of the sisters. On 26 July 1884 she married the prosperous widower Joseph Wrigley and moved from being Governess Teacher to being wife and the stepmother to his son and four daughters. The ages of the bride and groom on the Marriage Record are 40 and 45. Joseph Wrigley had just been appointed in 1884 as Chief Commissioner for North America of the Hudson's Bay Company. He took up residence in Winnipeg. The public Family Tree of Kerr Montgomery Milne Cairns, Bushnell Ashby Grant, Carter Bampton Philby Green, Wilson Wrigley Knights includes a

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<sup>4</sup> Unpublished letter, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria G. Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.317.

photograph taken in Winnipeg of Ann (or Annie) Oxley Wrigley with her step-daughters Mabel, Helen and Ethel.<sup>6</sup> The former Ann Ayre appears serene and pleasant in demeanour, the three girls round-faced and rather dull. The photo, judging by the appearance of the girls, might date from c. 1888 before Ann gave birth in December 1889 in Winnipeg to her own daughter Constance Mary Wrigley.

Ill health forced Joseph Wrigley to resign his position in 1891. A two-day auction on 25-26 June 1891 was required to dispose of his household possessions which included a magnificent upright piano and a dining table seating 20 with 18 leather dining chairs. The advertisement in the Winnipeg Free Press for this auction is preserved in the records of the Family Tree along with a post-card-type photo of the S. S, Vancouver, Dominion Lines, the liner on which the Wrigleys made the crossing from Liverpool to Quebec City in August 1884 and returned to England via the same ports in May 1891. The Wrigleys settled in the Kensington area of west London and there Ann died in 1924 and Joseph in 1926.<sup>7</sup>

Anna Mary Ayre, spinster, 382 Seven Sisters Road, Finsbury Park London died 22 June 1940 in her 99th year. Probate shows her estate of £5970 to Constance Mary Wrigley spinster and James Bromley Wilson journalist. Constance Mary Wrigley was the daughter of Ann O. Ayre and Joseph Wrigley. James Bromley Wilson was the son of George Edwin Wilson and Ethel Margaret

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<sup>6</sup> See the cover image for this issue. Florence Marion Wrigley, the third daughter just a year older than Ethel, is absent from the picture. She does however appear in the 1901 English Census as a resident probationary nurse in St. Thomas Hospital, Lambeth, London.

<sup>7</sup> See the Hudson's Bay company website. Mr. Joseph Wrigley was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1839, and educated at Rugby College. He was involved in the commercial life of Great Britain having been sent on a trade mission to Russia in 1866 and to France in 1876. Mr. Wrigley was Trade Commissioner for the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada from 1884 to 1891. [http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/biographical/w/wrigley\\_joseph.pdf](http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/biographical/w/wrigley_joseph.pdf). Also Eleanor Stardom, "A stranger to the fur trade": Joseph Wrigley and the transformation of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1884-1891' (Winnipeg, Canada: Rupert's Land Research Centre, University of Winnipeg, 1995) ISBN: 0921206259. See also [http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/wrigley\\_j.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/wrigley_j.shtml).

Wrigley, the youngest of Joseph Wrigley's four daughters by his first wife.

Readers may be interested to know that 'Miss Deborah' continued to occupy the same residence that earlier served as the Ayre sisters' school. The Hornsey Wood Tavern at 25 Alexandra Villas, identified as the Hornsey Wood Hostelry in the 1891 Census, at a later date had its number changed from 25 Seven Sisters Road to 376 Seven Sisters Road.<sup>8</sup> The next three villas, 26 to 28 Seven Sisters Road were renumbered 378, 380, and 382. Some time after Anna Mary Ayre died, the three villas were demolished and replaced by a single five-story white brick edifice, 378-382 Seven Sisters Road. From the 1890s onward the Finsbury Park area had been in gradual decline until it was mainly inhabited by labourers and students who occupied increasingly decaying housing. What Miss Deborah thought about such decline we can only guess but of this we can be sure, she maintained her own dignity, refusing to allow others to wield the heavy silver teapot.

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://deadpubs.co.uk/LondonPubs/>