

Social Justice and Arts Devotee

Ellen Melicent Cobden
1848-1914

Ellen Melicent Ashburner Cobden, known as Nelly, was the granddaughter of **William Cobden** and **Millicent Amber** and fourth child of their son Richard Cobden, the radical MP and leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, and his wife, Welshwoman, Catherine Anne Williams (Kate). Nelly seems to be best known as the first wife of the painter Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) but she had a life of her own, engaging in the women's suffrage movement, local and international politics, avant-garde art, and was also an author of two novels.

Nelly was born in Manchester on August 6th in 1848, although the birth was registered in Kensington, London. Her father Richard was in the process of moving the family from Manchester to 103 Westbourne Terrace, Kensington, to be near his work in parliament as the MP for the West Riding, Yorkshire. But the house was not quite ready to move into.

So, mother Kate remained in Manchester until Nelly was born and both were well enough to travel. For the first 3 months of Nelly's life the family rented a furnished house at Hayling Island, Hampshire, to have some time to themselves before settling at Westbourne Terrace.

Nelly had a brother, 7-year old Richard Brooks and 2-year old sister Katie, and later the next year another brother was born, William Hugh, but he died 3 months later. By the time Nelly was 14 years old she had 3 more siblings: Emma Jane Catherine (Jane), born 1851; Julia Sarah Anne born 1853 (Anne); and Lucy Elizabeth Margaret (Maggie), born 1862. Jane and Anne were to become leaders in the campaign for women's suffrage.

Creative and progressive friends

Travelling around the country and overseas was part of family life, largely due to her father's business and political engagements, as well as for family holidays. At the age of 3 Nelly stayed with close family friends, the Schwabes, at *Crumpsall House* in Manchester while her mother was expecting the birth of Jane at their London residence. The Schwabe family were German Jewish immigrants who ran a calico printing business in Middleton, near Manchester. They were highly regarded as



Ellen Melicent Cobden 1870s.
Source: Tate Britain

benevolent employers, progressively minded, and their friends and guests were often exiled Europeans such as the French novelist Alexandre Dumas, the Polish/French composer Frederic Chopin, and the pianist and conductor Charles Halle. Other friends were Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Gaskell and Wagner. The Schwabes were great friends of the Cobdens, accompanying them on some of their European tours. Mrs. Julie Schwabe was also a robust campaigner for girls' education.



Above: Julie Schwabe, a close friend and great supporter of the Cobden family.

Source: middletonia.co.uk

Left: *Crumpsall House*, Middleton. The home of Julie and Salis Schwabe, friends of the Cobdens. Source: paulineconolly.com

Dunford House, Heyshott, West Sussex c1863, the Cobdens' family home. Source: West Sussex Records Office.



Privileged childhood

The Cobden children had a privileged middle-class upbringing. The girls having, for the times, a quality education through governesses, small boarding schools and family travel to the continent. By the age of 5 years, whilst their mother awaited the birth of Anne in London, and renovations were being completed on the old family estate, *Dunford House* near Heyshott in West Sussex, Nelly and older sister Katie were sent to another family friend, Mrs Gardner, who had a school at *Dome House*,

Bognor in Sussex. Here is an advertisement in the *Ecclesiastical Gazette*, December 1855:

'EDUCATION by the SEA-SIDE, with EXCELLENT BATHING - Mrs. Gardner receives a limited number of YOUNG LADIES, who are educated and treated in every respect as a Private Family. Terms for Board and Instruction in French and English, including History, Geography, Writing, and Arithmetic. 40 Guineas per annum; under Twelve years of age, 30 Guineas. Music, Dancing, Drawing, German, and Italian, by approved masters, on the usual Terms. Highly respectable references will be given.

Address Mrs. Gardner, Dome House (West), Bognor, Sussex.'



Dome House, Bognor where Nelly attended Mrs. Gardner's school. Source: bognorheritage.com

Love of nature

Like her sisters, Nelly loved nature and was very fond of animals. At age 11 on holiday in Paris she wrote about saving a sparrow that had fallen from its nest: 'A dear little tame thing, it will eat out of my hand and perch upon my finger'¹. On the farm at *Dunford*, she had a collection rabbits, dogs, cats, goldfinches, parakeets, ponies, donkeys and other creatures she would look after, and was very upset when lambs were taken from their mothers for slaughter.

Death of her brother

In 1856 a tragedy occurred when their 15-year old brother Richard (Dick) died from scarlet fever whilst at boarding school in Germany. Nelly, now aged 7, had been very close to Richard, corresponding frequently whilst he was away. 'I send you a little curl of my hair, that you may sometimes think of one who loves you very much

..... You will write to me very soon and tell me how long it will be before I shall have the pleasure of seeing you.¹²

The death, a major impact on the whole family, had particularly long-lasting effects on their mother who never recovered from this tragic loss and became dependent on opiates. She lacked sleep, and became irrationally suspicious of the causes of her son's death. Julie Schwabe travelled over 1000 kms to stay at *Dunford* with Kate for several days, then offered the Cobdens, including Nelly, Jane and Anne (the eldest child Katie being at boarding school), her seaside mansion (previously the Bishop's Palace) at Glyn Garth in Anglesey Wales. This the family took for 3 months, Richard taking leave from parliament. The family then returned to *Dunford*, but from then, right through 1857, Kate's health did not improve.

Teenage years

During the late summer of 1857, Nelly stayed with family friend Katherine Ashburner, at 4 Chichester Terrace in Brighton. The Ashburners were wealthy merchants with business interests in America and India, and whilst they were away temporarily in India, their daughter Sarah ran away from her English boarding school. The Cobdens looked after her at *Dunford* until her parents returned. In 1859, Nelly aged 10, Jane aged 8 and Anne aged 6 were baptised together at their local parish church, St James, Heyshott. Katherine Ashburner was Nelly's godmother and her name was added to Nelly's. Nelly also stayed with the Ashburners at *Oak Leigh*, Sunning Hill Berkshire for a period between 1860 and 1861.

In 1858 the Cobdens suffered another loss when Nelly's uncle Frederick died from a painful 'disease of the spinal cord'. He was her father's older brother, ex-business partner, unmarried, and spent a lot of time with their family, helping to look after *Dunford* when Richard was in London.

In August 1862, the last Cobden child, Lucy Elizabeth Margaret (Maggie), was born. Nelly, now 14 years old, was a student at Miss Jeaffreson's School, Sussex Square, Brighton. At 16 years old Nelly went on a continental tour, and after returning to England, stayed with family friends, the Scrivens, in Hastings. This family were well established there as bankers, judges and mayors.



Sussex Square, Brighton where Nelly went to Miss Jeaffreson's school in 1862. Source: Wrench series postcard



Nelly age 18 years. Source: West Sussex Record Office

The responsible daughter

Nelly was the daughter who seemed closest to her father, and it was she on whom he relied in times of family difficulties rather than her older sister Katie. When she was 15 years old, her father wrote to her: 'Much will depend on your influence & still more on your example,.....I wished to have told you how much your Mamma & I looked to your good example,' and he asked her to 'bring [your sisters] into a perfect state of discipline.'³ Nelly was always conscious of living up to her father's expectations, and this continued even more so after his death.

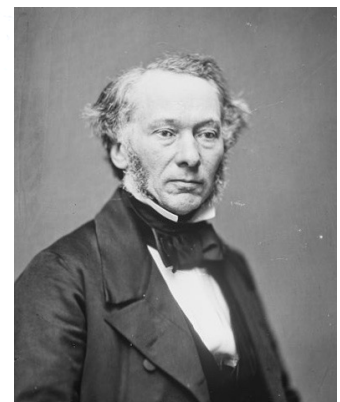
1865 was the most difficult year. It began pleasantly enough in February with Nelly, Katie and their mother attending Sally Ashburner's wedding at *Tilgate Manor* in Sussex. Richard at this time was suffering his frequent respiratory problems and was in poor health. However, an important debate was

about to begin in parliament, and feeling he needed to contribute, was determined to go to London. On March 21st, Nelly accompanied her mother and father to an apartment in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall. On arrival, Nelly noticed 'he complained of an Asthamatical [sic] feeling.'⁴ after climbing up the stairs.

Death of her father



The apartment with the Blue Plaque (insert) in Suffolk Street, London, where Richard Cobden died. Photos: Euan McGillivray 2016



Richard Cobden photograph taken in 1865 the year of his death. Photo: Matthew Brady

Over the next few weeks, Richard rallied and sunk several times, but doctors and medications had little effect. All the while Nelly was helping her mother nurse him, sometimes keeping vigil all night. On one occasion he was well enough for her to read him the newspapers. But he continued to deteriorate, and then, just as the bells of St. Martin's in the Field could be heard to ring, he passed away at 11.15am on April 2nd. The cause of his death was bronchitis and congestion of the lungs. Nelly and her mother were present, as well as close friend and fellow Anti-Corn Law Leaguer John Bright, friend George Moffatt, future son-in-law Richard Fisher and Dr. Roberts. John Bright recorded that Nelly was 'almost delirious'¹⁵ with grief. After taking her to his wife and some family friends, and a walk in Hyde Park, Bright then took Nelly to a Piccadilly florist where he bought her 'a sweet nosegay' and then back to Suffolk Street where she placed the flowers 'over the heart which had loved her so tenderly.'¹⁶



The burial of Richard Cobden at West Lavington churchyard April 1865. Source: Gravel Roots

Devoted daughter

After the funeral procession of an estimated 2000 mourners ranging from national and international dignitaries to the local people of Midhurst and Heyshott, Nelly's father's body was taken to the West Lavington churchyard for burial with her brother Richard. A service was conducted at the church, including a eulogy from his brother-in-law and admirer Rev. James Edwin Thorold Rogers of Oxford. According to Bright, at the gravesite:

'standing by me and leaning on the coffin, was his sorrowing daughter, one whose attachment to her father seems to have been a passion scarcely equalled among the daughters.'¹⁷

He was referring to Nelly. In 1887, Nelly along with Florence Nightingale and two other women, was one of the first female members admitted to the Cobden Club established by her father's free-trade allies in the year following his death. When the Cobden Club was revived in 1893, Nelly, her sister Jane and their cousin Helena Mary Carroll Cobden, were prominently seated next to the Chairman Lord Playfair, at the celebratory dinner at the *Ship Hotel*, Greenwich.

Fortunate annuity

In 1866 on June 30th elder sister Katie married barrister Richard Chester Fisher at Trinity Church Paddington. The officiating minister was the Rev. James Edwin Thorold Rogers, and Nelly and Jane were among the witnesses. The Fishers were old neighbours from Sussex, and were a great support to Kate and the girls immediately after Richard's death, as were many old friends such as John Bright. Kate had refused an annuity from the government, but her friends began The Cobden Tribute Fund which raised over £25,000 to be invested in a trust for her and her daughters. This enabled the sisters to live well for the rest of their lives. Nelly had an annuity of £250, a very comfortable income in those days.

Branching out

Over the next few years Kate was kept busy with projects memorialising Richard whilst Nelly was managing the family's financial affairs, making sure the accounts balanced and the bills were paid. Then Kate decided to rent out their home *Dunford House*, and later, put most of the furnishings up for sale. Life as they knew it at *Dunford* came to an end. Kate then purchased a property in London at Petersham Terrace, Kensington for herself and her daughters, although she only lived there part time, and part time at *The Hurst*, later called *Oatscroft*, on the *Dunford* property. The 1871 census shows Petersham Terrace as the address for Nelly (who is also shown visiting the Ashburner's in Berkshire), Jane, Anne and Maggie, but Kate was visiting friends in Lancashire. This was soon to become the norm with Kate separating herself more and more from her strong-minded daughters. From the early 1870s, Kate took the youngest, Maggie, and went to live in various places in North Wales until 1874 when she returned to *The Hurst* at *Dunford*.

Now a wealthy woman, and being well accustomed to travel, Nelly demonstrated her adventuring spirit, and with her sister Anne, accompanied an expeditionary party with Sir Robert Playfair, Consul General of Algeria, to the Aures Mountains in Algeria in 1874.

Nelly (right) in Algeria with Minnie (Agnes Mary) Playfair and unknown woman. Source: West Sussex Record Office



Death of her mother

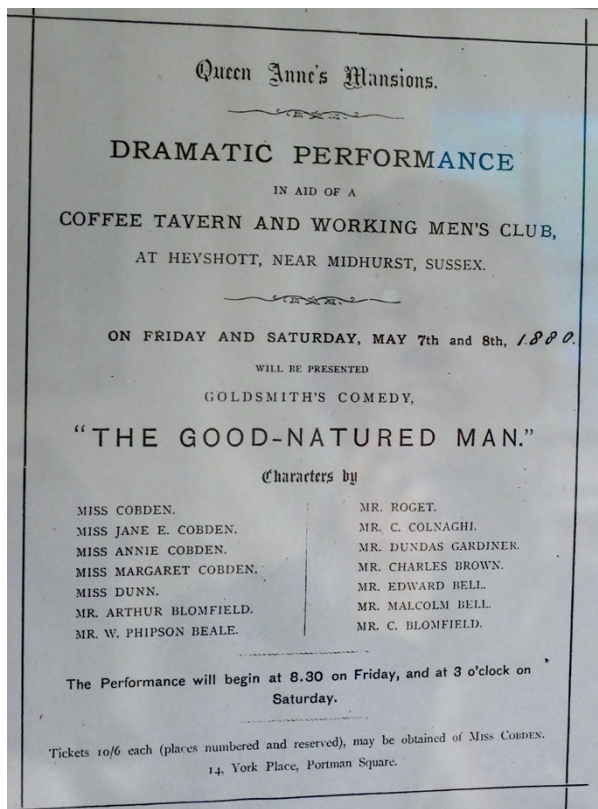
Nelly's mother spent the last years of her life at *The Hurst*. She had been complaining of weakness for some time, and in April 1877, Kate died from liver and heart disease.



Nelly's mother, Kate Cobden in widowhood. Source: West Sussex Record Office

Social justice at home and abroad

The Cobden daughters had been brought up from an early age to consider the needs of those less fortunate than themselves, and had undertaken voluntary work for the local villagers at Heyshott when they were living at *Dunford*. Nelly's concern for social justice was also evident when, in the late 1870s, she and her sisters, were working in London's east end in services to assist the poor.



In 1879 the sisters founded the Working Men's Club at Heyshott, which provided a coffee house, recreational and meeting venue for the local farm labourers. In 1880 Nelly and her sisters produced a play at the new and very fashionable Queen Anne's Mansions, to raise funds for the Heyshott Working Men's Club. She and her sisters (except Katie) took acting roles in the comedy *A Good-Natured-Man* by Oliver Goldsmith. The sisters were living at 14 York Place, Portman Square.

Poster at the Heyshott Working Men's Club (now a private home) advertising the Cobden sisters' performance of 'A Good-Natured Man'. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2016

Nelly also joined the South Africa Conciliation Committee in 1900 with her sisters Jane and Anne and her cousin Helena Cobden Hirst. In 1906 on June 23rd the

London Daily News published Nelly's letter protesting against Britain sending warships to Russia:

In Russian Waters.
Sir,—Why at this moment should British warships be sent on a friendly official visit to Russian ports? Does the country wish it? Would the Government of the day, after Mr. Gladstone's famous pamphlet, have dared to send British warships to Naples on a friendly official visit to "Bomba"? Yet all the cruelty that Mr. Gladstone denounced was not one per cent. of the cruelty in the catalogue of crimes that Mr. Thorne to-day in the House of Commons lays to the charge of the Russian Government.
This may not be the moment to break off relations with that Government; it certainly is not the moment to demonstrate in its favour.
Will those of the Independent Labour Party be the only members of the great Liberal majority in Parliament to denounce this projected demonstration?—Yours, etc.,
June 21, 1906. E. M. COBDEN SICKERT.

Supporting Irish 'Home Rule'

Nelly, with her sister Jane, passionately advocated justice for the Irish, at a time when the Irish Home Rule movement was gathering momentum. In September 1887, Nelly and Jane, with other like-minded English and Americans, went to Mitchelstown in Ireland, with a deputation from the English Home Rule Union, to support William O'Brien, Irish MP, at his trial (he was arrested for advising Irish tenants not to leave their houses when the government ordered them to be evicted). *The Western Times*, Exeter September 27th reported that:

'The ladies present had prepared a large basket of asters, geraniums, anemones, fuchsias, and laurels, and this was presented to Mr O'Brien by one of their number, with a note to the following effect:- Mr. W. O'Brien, MP – as a token of admiration and sympathy from some who value the rights of free speech and public meeting in their countries, and hope for their speedy establishment in his. – (signed) Amy M. Mander, Jane Cobden, Ellen Cobden Sickert, Annie Higginbotham, Isabel Rowntree, J. Ellen Foster USA Sept. 23rd, 1887.'

The next month Nelly, Jane and Isabel Rowntree wrote a letter to *The Times* which was copied into many other papers around England and Ireland, describing the ruthless tactics of the British government that supported evicting women and children when they could not pay their rents.

NO RENT!
NO LANDLORDS' GRASSLAND
Tenant Farmers, now is the time. Now is the hour. You proved false to the first call made upon you. REDEEM YOUR CHARACTER NOW.
NO RENT
UNTIL THE SUSPECTS ARE RELEASED.
The man who pays Rent (whether an abatement is offered or not) while FARNELL, DILLON &c. are in Jail, will be looked upon as a Traitor to his Country and a disgrace to his class.
No RENT, No Compromise, No Landlords' Grassland, Under any circumstances.
Avoid the Police, and listen not to spying and deluding Bailiffs.
NO RENT! LET THE LANDTHIEVES DO THEIR WORST!
THE LAND FOR THE PEOPLE!

Irish Land League poster from the 1880s. A cause strongly supported by Nelly. Source: Wikipedia

Back home on 11th November, Nelly attended the annual meeting of the Women's Liberal Association for South Kensington, and seconded a motion from Mrs. Bateson, who had been part of the Home Rule deputation to Ireland, 'protesting against the attempt of the present government, to suppress the right of public meeting, freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press in Ireland.'⁸

The motion was carried. The following January 6th, at the Kilburn Liberal Club, Nelly gave a speech giving a graphic description of the conditions she and Jane witnessed on their visit to Ireland, including seeing the wretchedly poor inhabitants of decaying and ruined towns, deserted villages, empty factories, broken bridges, and an overbearing police presence.⁹ In February 1889 Nelly and Jane were signatories to the newly formed Committee of National Protest against British rule in Ireland, and on March 7th Nelly attended the annual meeting of the Home Rule Union at the Conference Hall of the National Liberal Club.

Sometimes Nelly and Jane received criticism from their own quarters. Their decision to support the Irish Ladies' Land League and the Plan of Campaign, which had radical strategies for dealing with landlords' rents, off-sided some of their father's old colleagues and sections of the English women's rights groups that supported Anglo-Irish women.

Women's suffrage movement

Following their mother's lead in supporting the women's suffrage movement (Kate had signed the Women's Suffrage Petition in 1866), Nelly and her sisters also became involved in these controversial issues. In 1879, Nelly wrote a poem *The Rights of Women* and from this time on Nelly was involved in the women's suffrage movement, but kept a lower profile than her sisters Jane and Anne who became very active in different branches of the movement. In 1888 Nelly supported the Central National Society of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, who agreed to form a London branch to enable more direct pressure on the government for women's voting rights. In the early 1900s, she became a supporter of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), a more radical and militant group led by Emmeline Pankhurst in Manchester, of which her sister Anne was a member. When Anne was on trial for suffragette activities in 1906, Nelly and Jane gave her their full support, and celebrated with her at the *Savoy Hotel* dinner when she was released from prison two months later.

In 1909 Nelly donated funds to the WSPU Prince's Skating Rink Exhibition that showcased suffragist arts, crafts and information about the women's movement. On June 18th 1910, Nelly took part in the Women's Suffrage Procession, organized by the Women's Freedom League, of which Anne was a high-profile member.

Kensington WSPU stand at the Women's Exhibition 1909 to which Nelly donated funds. Emmeline Pankhurst is seated in front. Source: Museum of London.



Walter Richard Sickert



In the early 1880s Nelly met the artist Walter Sickert. She may have met him through her friendship with his sister, a journalist and lecturer, Helena Swanwick, who was also involved in the women's suffrage movement and mixed in artistic circles, or perhaps through her own sister Anne who frequently visited Sickert's studio before she married Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson, the Arts and Crafts book binder and printer. Walter was regarded as a bohemian dandy and had, not very successfully, tried to pursue an acting career, but was also engaged in the visual arts. In 1881 he began his art training by working under the American painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler in his London studio. Whistler sent Sickert to Paris in 1883 to take his *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* to the Paris Salon. He also sent him with a letter of introduction to the artists Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas, the latter whose studio he visited and with whom he struck up a friendship.

Walter Richard Sickert in 1884, the year before he married Nelly.
Source: Wikipedia

Marriage and meeting Degas

In 1885 on 10th June, Nelly age 36, married Walter, age 25, at the Marylebone Registry Office. The witnesses were her friends, the painter Emily Osborn, and Mary Elizabeth Dunn. Nelly's address was 10a Cunningham Place Marylebone and

Walter's was 12 Pembroke Gardens Kensington. The newlyweds left London in July to spend their honeymoon travelling around Europe, before arriving at 21 Rue de Sygogne in Dieppe on the Normandy coast, to spend the rest of the summer. Here, Whistler and some French artists joined them, including in September, Edgar Degas who arrived for a short stay and produced a pastel work of the men called *Six Friends at Dieppe*.



At Dieppe in 1885: Back row from left - Ludovic Halevy, Walter Sickert, Jacques-Emil Blanche and Ellen Cobden Sickert. Degas is centre row far right. Source: Tate Britain (from glass negative at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.)



Reflections - Portrait of Ellen Milicent Cobden - by Nelly's friend Emily Mary Osborn. Oil sketch on canvas, date unknown. Source: West Sussex Record Office. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2018

The Degas portrait of Nelly



Unhappy Nelly Pastel by Degas made in Paris 1885. Source: Museum of Montserrat, Spain.

The next month Nelly and Walter went to Paris and visited Degas. During this time, Degas made a pastel drawing of Nelly entitled *Unhappy Nelly*. For many years the identity of the sitter was thought to be another Nelly, until Anna Robins, who worked at the Tate Britain, and was familiar with photographs of Nelly Cobden, realized who it was. She also noted the sitter is wearing the typical outfit of a suffragist - loose and simple, and a locket similar to one in a photograph of her. This was revealed in an issue of *The Independent* of September 2005 when previewing the exhibition at the Tate Britain: *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris 1870-1910*. It went on to quote Anna Robins: 'No one had been aware that it was her because people were not aware of the extent to which Sickert and Ellen [Nelly] had been involved with Degas until we researched this show. Degas had actually developed a crush on her sister Jane.'¹⁰

Nelly supports Walter

Nelly and Walter returned to London and by the end of December had moved into 54 Broadhurst Gardens, South Hampstead where Walter had his studio on the top floor. Walter's career as an artist was developing, largely due to the financial support of Nelly that allowed him to fully devote himself to his painting. Nelly also supported him

in other ways such as when his father died in November that year it was Nelly who stepped in to help his family with his ailing mother.

The Whistler portraits of Nelly

Late in 1885, Whistler had begun a portrait of Nelly, called *Arrangement in Violet and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Walter Sickert*, but 12 months later she was becoming impatient for it to be finished. She wrote to Whistler requesting further sittings and promising to bring Walter with her:

FINCHLEY ROAD STATION

54, BROADHURST GARDENS,
SOUTH HAMPSTEAD. N.W.

2nd December 1886

Dear Mr Whistler,

I see by my diary that I last sat to you on the 23rd December 1885 & that we went abroad on the 21st July 1886. So my long presence seems to have had quite as deterrant effect as my long absence!

If you can manage to take up the work at once we will be free on any afternoons you like to fix & I will drive Walter down (as I should always come dressed) and he will be able during the sittings [to] attend to any affairs in which he can be useful to you -

Yours very sincerely

Ellen M. Cobden Sickert¹¹

Money problems

The Sickerts had been having some difficulty making the instalments to pay for the portrait and perhaps this is why there was a gap in Nelly's sittings. Walter wrote a letter to Whistler requesting the temporary refund of a £25 down-payment on the picture:

54, BROADHURST GARDENS,
SOUTH HAMPSTEAD. N.W.

'My dear Jimmie,

Things have so arranged themselves that I am just now & shall be for some weeks in serious difficulty for money. I want you if you can to let me have back the balance of £25 which you have on account for Nelly's portrait for a while.....'¹²

Whistler graciously obliged. The work was eventually paid for and exhibited in London in 1887 at the 64th Annual Exhibition of the Royal Society of British Artists. According to Nelly herself, the painting was later destroyed – how and why is unknown. In 1886 Walter also had commissioned from Whistler a portrait of himself, which seems not to have been finished and has since been lost.

Walter commissioned another portrait of Nelly from Whistler, *Green and Violet: Portrait of Mrs Walter Sickert* made in 1893 - 94. This one is presently owned by the

Fogg Museum (Harvard Art Museums). *American Art News* of December 27th 1919 reported the painting was showing at the *Howard Young Galleries* in New York and it had been exhibited between 1894 and 1915 in many galleries, including: the *New Gallery London*; Salon de Société Nationale and Whistler Memorial Exhibition in Paris; the Glasgow Institute; Whistler Loan Exhibition, Boston; Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco; and the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.



Green and Violet: Portrait of Mrs Sickert c1893 oil painting by J M Whistler. Source: Harvard Art Museums

Collecting art

In 1889 Walter bought Nelly a Degas watercolour, *The Rehearsal of the Ballet on the Stage* (c1874), although it was probably Nelly's money that actually paid for it. It was kept for a while at her sister Jane's, perhaps because the Sickert's housing arrangements at the time were not so secure. As Nelly was financially supporting them both, they continued to be under some financial strain. The following year Nelly had to sell her house and they moved in with Walter's mother in Pembroke Gardens before later moving to Jane's at 10 Hereford Square, Kensington (where the couple were still listed with Jane in the 1891 census and even after Jane's marriage in 1892).

Other Degas works bought by Nelly and Walter included *Mlle Becat aux Ambassadeurs*, and *Woman at a Window* bought in 1892. These works Nelly often loaned to various exhibitions in London and Paris, including exhibitions at the (anti-Royal Academy) New English Art Club, of which Walter was a member. They also bought some work by Whistler: *A White Note* (1861), *The Opal Sea* (1885) and a portrait of Maud Franklin, a model and mistress of Whistler's.

Marriage breakdown

If Nelly thought she was marrying a devoted and chaste husband, and if Walter thought he was marrying a woman content to sit and wait for him at home, they were both seriously mistaken. Nelly's involvement in politics and the suffrage movement (begrudgingly supported by Walter¹³), and Walter's need to travel back and forth to the continent for exhibitions and painting excursions, meant they increasingly, through the 1890s, spent a lot of time apart.

However, Nelly gave undying support for Walter's art, financially and emotionally. She believed he was a great artist. Through her social connections, he was put in touch with wealthy and influential people, potential patrons and promoters, and no doubt she enjoyed the avant-garde artistic circle in which they mixed. Even after Walter had a falling out with Whistler in 1897 (Whistler was a witness in a libel suit against Walter concerning his criticism of artist Joseph Pennell), Nelly remained friends with Whistler and his wife Trixie.

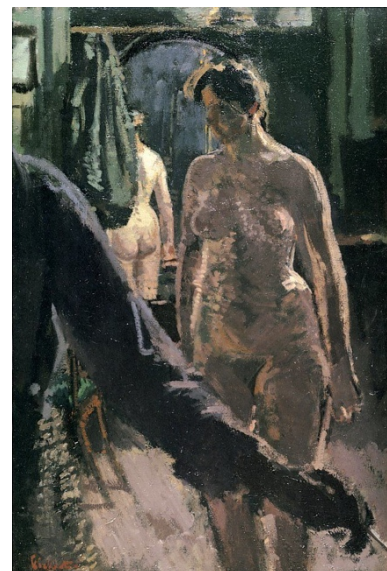
Infidelity

The key problem in the marriage was Walter's constant extra-marital affairs, including casual dalliances as well as serious affairs with music-hall actresses¹⁴, artists' models, female artists and socialites. These had been going on since the start of their marriage and Walter eventually freely admitted it was part of his way of life. Amongst his friends and colleagues he was well known for it. Somehow, Nelly was ignorant of it or chose to be.

In 1895, she stayed away on the continent, mainly in Venice, and it was here when Walter was temporarily staying with her that she discovered a letter from one of his lovers and confronted him with it. He asked for forgiveness, which she granted, but he would not change his ways. Her sister Jane advised her:

'I fear to say that W.S. will never change his conduct of life - and with no guiding principles to keep his emotional nature straight he follows every whim that takes his fancy - you have tried so often to trust him, and he has deceived you times without number.'¹⁵

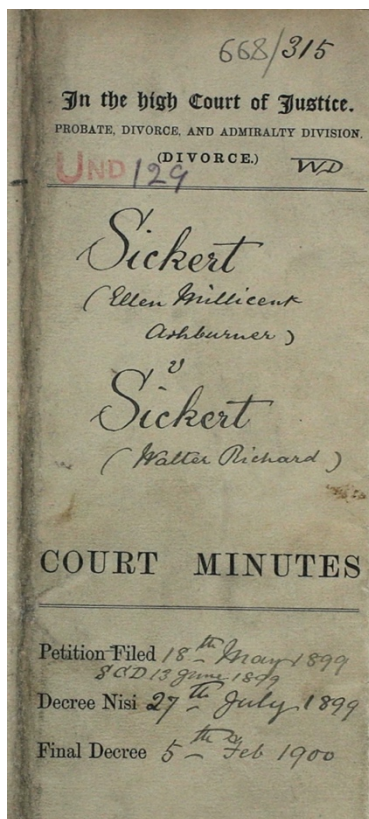
Nelly remained in Venice for the rest of that year, and until June 1896, when she went to Fluellen, Switzerland. Walter joined her there in September, but on discovery of his further infidelities, Nelly had finally had enough and the couple agreed to separate. She also withdrew her financial support, forcing Walter to have to earn his own living.



The Studio: The Painting of a Nude 1906 by Walter Richard Sickert. Source: Tate Britain

Divorce

Finally, in December 1897 Nelly began divorce proceedings against her husband. Early on, Walter pleaded to Nelly he would change, but after consultation with her lawyer, she agreed to continue with the case, formally from May 1899. This was confirmed in some correspondence between them in 1898, where Walter finally admitted to her his history and inability to change his lifestyle:



The Sickerts' Divorce Court Minutes document. Source: Ancestry.com

December 8th 1898

Dear Walter, - In spite of your having told me, when we parted in Switzerland in September 1896 that, immediately after our marriage and ever since, you had lived an adulterous life and that you felt sure you could never live a different one, I have been hoping against hope that you would abandon it, but all that I have heard of you during the last two years has forced me to give up all possible hope for the future – Yours truly E M Sickert

Walter replied on December 14th:

My dear Nelly, - I have received your letter of December 8th. It is quite true that I have not been faithful to you since our marriage, and it is equally true that during the two years since we parted I have been intimate with several women. As I told you long ago, I cannot continue a life of dissimulation. I have chosen my mode of life and I am unable to alter it. An undertaking to do so on my part would be misleading. – Ever your profoundly attached, Walter Sickert.¹⁶

Therefore, Walter did not fight the charges, perhaps keeping his eye on expenses (he was still struggling with the huge expense from losing a previous lawsuit).

For Nelly, pursuing the divorce was not easy and would have been very stressful, for amazingly, she still loved him, and wrote to Jane: 'I am dreadfully upset & have hardly done anything but cry ever since,.....I see how far from dead is my affection for him.'¹⁷

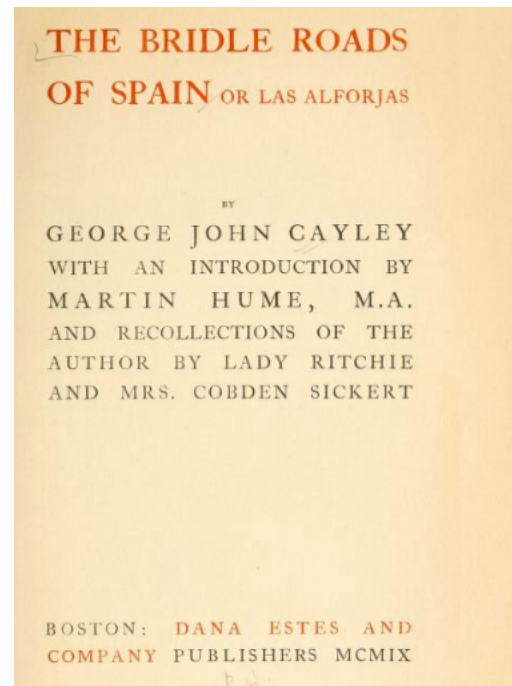
Proving desertion

It was also very brave, as in those days it was not easy for a woman to divorce her husband. She had to prove he was unfaithful *and* had deserted her. And all this was reported in the public domain. There was also the consideration of the Cobden reputation. Her brother-in-law, Jane's husband, publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin, used his influence in journalist circles to have the Cobden name omitted in the newspaper reports.

The question of what constitutes desertion was also raised in the press¹⁸. It was contended that Walter had deserted Nelly because he had been living with another woman whom he would not give up, which prevented Nelly from living with him. It was also noted that he did not contribute anything to her financially. On these grounds, plus the grounds of infidelity, her divorce was granted on July 27th 1899. After the divorce, they remained on friendly terms, and Nelly secretly gave him support by giving money to a friend to buy his paintings.

The novelist

In the years following the divorce, as well as her engagement in the suffragist movement, Nelly entered into her literary career. Under the pseudonym Miles Amber (the name of a great-uncle), Nelly poured all her experience of complex marital relationships into her novel *Wistons – A Story in 3 Parts*, set in a fictional rural district resembling Midhurst and *Dunford*. It was dedicated to Jane and published in 1902 by T. Fisher Unwin in his series First Novel Library. It received mixed reviews. Some critics knew the true identity of the author, some noted it was the work of an inexperienced writer, and others praised the evocative descriptions of the landscape setting. Her descriptive, evocative writing is also evident in recollections she was asked to contribute about the author George John Cayley (1826-1878), English writer, barrister and MP, in the 1909 republication of his *The Bridle Roads of Spain (Las Alforjas)*. She vividly recollected impressions of Cayley from the time when she and her sisters stayed in Algiers next door to Cayley and his family. The other contributor to the book was Lady Anne Thackeray Ritchie, daughter of the author William Makepeace Thackeray.



Cover page of *The Bridle Roads of Spain (Las Alforjas)* 1909 publication. Source: California Digital Library

Childhood memories

Nelly was still based at Jane's in Hereford Square until about 1907 when she moved to 29 Buckingham Gate, Westminster, her last private address. She also decided to drop Sickert and Ashburner from her name, so by deed poll in 1913, Nelly returned to being Ellen Melicent Cobden. That year, she wrote her second and final novel *Sylvia Saxon – Episodes in a Life* also published by T. Fisher Unwin. It also had mixed reviews but *The Times* noted: 'The merit of the novel lies in the comprehending and skilful picture of Sylvia's childhood and the materialism of the capitalist circles in which she moves.' and *The Spectator* wrote: 'The writer's gifts of intuition and of observation are remarkable.'¹⁹ It was based on her childhood

memories of growing up in the world of politics. She dedicated this book to her friends Emily Mary Osborn and Mary Elizabeth Dunn.

Final years

In the later years of her life, Nelly was an active author, and took up learning ancient Greek. On September 4th 1914, at the age of 66, Nelly died of cancer in a nursing home in Northgate, Chichester. Her sister Jane stayed with her in her final days. In her will Nelly gave the copyright of her books and letters to Irene Noel (later Noel-Baker) one of her executors, her share of the copyright of her father's papers to Jane and Anne, and her residual estate to Anne.

Nelly was cremated and specific instructions were given regarding the burial site for her ashes which was to be at *Oatscroft* on the *Dunford* estate, the country home of Jane and her husband. In a small private ceremony attended by Nelly's sister Anne, Anne's husband Tom, their cousin Helena Hirst, friend Irene Noel, and *Oatscroft's* gardener Frank Daughtry who had prepared the grave for Nelly's ashes. Jane and her husband were not in attendance, so Anne wrote back to Jane describing the event:

'..... Daughtry had arranged a grave at the spot mentioned & Tom & I fetched the urn from the house, we opened it & put the ashes into the grave which we had lined with leaves & ferns, & ourselves covered it with the soil. We then broke up the urn & dug a hole for it some distance away & buried it where it will never be seen. On the grave we planted a little chestnut tree - It was all very peaceful, & beautiful in the little wood - & the ashes will rest there undisturbed.....'²⁰

There is a granite stone marking the burial of the ashes of Jane (d.1947) and her husband (d.1935), as well as an inscription memorializing Nelly.

Ann Hurley

2021

hurleyskidmorehistory.com



29 Buckingham Gate, Westminster, Nelly's address from 1907. Source: Hathaways Real Estate

Notes:

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- ¹ Cornwell, Patricia - *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed Chapter 26 The Daughters of Cobden* (2002)
- ² Cornwell, Patricia - *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed Chapter 26 The Daughters of Cobden* (2002)
- ³ Cornwell, Patricia - *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed Chapter 26 The Daughters of Cobden* (2002)
- ⁴ Rogers, Jean Scott - *Cobden and his Kate - The Story of a Marriage* (1990) p172
- ⁵ Rogers, Jean Scott - *Cobden and his Kate - The Story of a Marriage* (1990) p176
- ⁶ Rogers, Jean Scott - *Cobden and his Kate - The Story of a Marriage* (1990) p176
- ⁷ Morley, John - *The Life of Richard Cobden* (1903) p937
- ⁸ *The Daily News* November 12 1887
- ⁹ *The Daily News* January 10 1888
- ¹⁰ *The Independent* September 25 2005 article by Anthony Barnes *Solved at last: experts uncover true identity of Degas' unhappy ballerina* [HTTP://WWW.INDEPENDENT.CO.UK/](http://www.independent.co.uk/)
- ¹¹ *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler* - Glasgow University Library
- ¹² *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler* - Glasgow University Library
- ¹³ 'I shall reluctantly have to support a bitches suffrage bill..... But you are to understand I shall not by this become a "feminist".' Sickert referring to the 1918 bill that gave votes to some women.
- ¹⁴ One such dalliance was with the music hall actress Minnie Cunningham. Sickert exhibited a painting of her at the New English Artists' Club in 1992 with the subtitle 'I'm an old hand at love, though I'm young in years' which apparently 'was tantamount to a public humiliation of her [Nelly], with its implication of an affair' - Hafner, Robert Julian - *Mistress, Model, Muse and Mentor: Women In the Lives of Famous Artists* (2014)
- ¹⁵ Cornwell, Patricia - *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed Chapter 26 The Daughters of Cobden* (2002)
- ¹⁶ *South Wales Echo* July 28 1899
- ¹⁷ Cornwell, Patricia - *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed Chapter 26 The Daughters of Cobden* (2002)
- ¹⁸ *Shields Daily Gazette* July 27 1899 and the *South Wales Echo* July 28 1899
- ¹⁹ *The Spectator* Archive August 29 1914 p2
- ²⁰ Letter from Julia Sarah Anne Cobden-Sanderson (1853-1926) to her sister Emma Jane Catherine Cobden Unwin (1851-1947) October 2nd 1914 (Cobden MS West Sussex Record Office)

Other resources:

Baron, Wendy - *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (2006)

Cobden, Richard; Howe, Anthony - *The Letters of Richard Cobden: Volume II: 1848-1853* (2007)

Pennell, Elizabeth Robins and Pennell, Joseph - *The Life of James MacNeill Whistler* (2014)

Richardson, Sarah - *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (2013)

Richardson, Sarah - *You Know Your Father's Heart - The Cobden Sisterhood and the Legacy of Richard Cobden* Ch 13 *Rethinking Nineteenth-century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays* - Howe, Anthony; Morgan, Simon (Eds.) (2006)