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INTO AFRICA

The Imperial Life of Margery Perham

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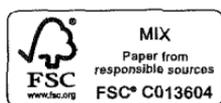
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CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH: A PROPER GIRL

Swallowed up now by the burgeoning conurbation that is modern Manchester, the small English Midlands town of Bury has lost much of its independence as being firmly of Lancashire. But in the last years of Queen Victoria's long reign, such was not yet the case. In those days its dissenting heritage, dating from the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, remained strong, as did its almost equally robust Church of England character. Bury was a quiet, if not sleepy place, hugging the banks of the River Irwell and located about midway between the bigger neighbouring towns of Bolton and Rochdale. But with its rail-line laid out in 1846 and its storied regiment of fighting men, the Lancashire Fusiliers, Bury could claim to be almost their equal, *if not in size then at least in reputation*. Nonetheless, then as now, it was an out of the way place for most people and, given Britain's ongoing North-South divide portrayed famously in the Victorian fiction of Benjamin Disraeli and then later Elizabeth Gaskell, perhaps not the most auspicious of towns in which to be born. But that is where, on 6 September 1895, Margery Freda Perham entered the world. 219 Walmersley Road, the Perhams' house, was one similar to that of their middle class neighbours, functional and with no pretensions to grandeur; indeed, it was much like the one they would move to subsequently in Harrogate, a slightly larger and newer house located at 36 Old Kent Road. But together they would be the starting point for Margery Perham's remarkable Oxford to Africa journey, one that would take her far beyond the familiar streetscapes of a late-Victorian market town.

Frederick Perham, Margery's father, born in 1854, was tall and swarthily handsome and, as a successful wine and spirit merchant, a suitably respectable member of the middle classes in an age that demanded it. Her mother, Marion Hodder Needell, one year her husband's junior, was nurturing and

demure, but thanks to a grandmother who had been a novelist, had a literary disposition, which she passed on to some of her seven children, most notably to Margery. As the youngest child and second daughter amongst five surviving sons, Margery was especially beloved and was pulled very easily into the rough and tumble games of her elder brothers.

Frederick and Marion Perham had married in 1881 in the parish church of Netherby, Dorset, her home county. The move north to Bury, nearer Frederick's home, would soon follow, as did the children in quick succession, beginning with Arthur in 1884 and joined soon by Cecil, Wilfrid, Oliver, and Edgar, and one other girl, Ethel. Not long after Margery's birth Frederick decided to move the family a little further north still, to bustling Harrogate in North Yorkshire. Well known as a spa – and, increasingly in the emergent age of the package holiday, a tourist-town – Harrogate had more to offer him as a merchant, as well as to his growing family. There, on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales, the children thrived amidst an outdoor and sporting life. Sturdy and fearless, young Margery took easily to sport, attempting to keep up with her brothers in riding, rambling, shooting, and golf, and from an early age was a thoroughgoing tomboy, as such young girls used to be called.

In those turn-of-the-century years, as the Victorian era drew to a close, Margery Perham's life was a round of innocent pleasures, of first schooling, of Sunday attendance at the Anglican parish church of St. Wilfrid's, recently built and where her father served as warden, of scrapes, and of childhood diseases. In one of the earliest examples of her writing extant, as a seven-year-old in the spring of 1903 she reported to her elder sister Ethel, then aged fifteen, that 'Spring cleaning has nearly finished. My measles has [sic] run away, it has been very naughty to me'.¹ In this brief postcard sent from Harrogate to Ethel who was away at school in Bangor, North Wales, we see a matter of fact tone mixed together with whimsy, traits that would come to define the writing style of the adult Perham. In the meantime, in the pre-vaccination world of the first decade of the twentieth century, she suffered through her share of childhood scourges, surviving them all and in 1904, like other children of her social class, was sent away to school, south to Windsor to attend St. Stephen's College, an institution for girls run by the St. John Baptist Clewer Sisterhood. Founded in 1849, this Anglican order was closely connected with raising 'fallen women', and notably in this regard to the legacy of Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone's 'rescue' work amongst the prostitutes of Piccadilly and elsewhere in central London, which he carried out during much of the latter part of his storied political career. The college, as Perham would have known it half-a-century later, had nothing to do with

work among the 'penitents', as the streetwalkers were called. But it was a school that still strongly emphasized service to the poor and dispossessed and its ethos took root in the young Margery.

The great attractions of the school, however, and those that mark the six years she spent at Windsor, were a continuing love of sport, and of excellence in the classroom. 'Little Midget', as Edgar nicknamed her then – itself a measure of reciprocal jocularly – 'do you play La Crosse [sic] now? It must be a very silly game according to you'.² Silly or no, she played all the games and continued to do so after leaving St. Stephen's in 1910 for the bigger and rather more august surroundings of St. Anne's School, Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire. Founded by Canon Nathaniel Woodard in 1874 in the full flush of Victorian anglo-catholicism, and the coincidentally strong push for education for girls and women, St. Anne's School would prove to be an inspired choice for the fifteen-year-old Perham. She spent four glittering years there, during the last of which she was head girl. The adolescent Perham, it seems, was a human whirlwind. She played hockey, lacrosse, tennis, and cricket, was various grades of prefect, edited the school newspaper, and, as if to keep the school itself on the straight and narrow, was 'chapel bellringer'.³ She was completely taken up with life at St. Anne's and especially with the inspiration provided by one of her teachers, Mildred Roechling, who taught history and would go on to become headmistress of a leading school in Nova Scotia. Upon (unsurprisingly) winning an open scholarship in history to St. Hugh's College, Oxford in 1913, Perham asked to have it deferred for a year on account of little money available from home by which to supplement her £30 per annum award. The school of course was very happy to have her around for another year, and at Speech Day in 1914, the headmistress, Miss Anne Rice, extolled Perham's virtues, calling her 'one of the most excellent heads the school has known, vigorous not only in scholarship, but also in power for good'.⁴ To reinforce the point, Margery then carried off that year's school prizes for languages and general literature. Her mark on St. Anne's was significant and today both the Perham Society, a discussion group for senior students that in her era was called the Political and Social Problems Club, and Perham Hall, the school's main entry-way, speak of her impact there.⁵

Throughout her years at St. Anne's, Perham's filial relationship with her brother Edgar had deepened significantly, far outstripping that she had with any of her other four brothers. He was just two years older than she, and letters between them passed back and forth regularly. These letters are full of the exuberance of youth, as well as with the over-seriousness that is part of adolescence too. Along with the lighthearted and steady use of

nicknames: 'Midget-fidget'; 'Midge'; 'Heavenly Virgin'; Edgar's tone could also turn dark and occasionally lapse into regret, a hint of bitterness, or even sarcasm. Margery's obvious prowess at games was a source of brotherly pride for Edgar, but not unreservedly so. 'A supreme moment of joy', was the way he described his reaction to her success at cricket in her last year at St. Anne's. But then, in the same letter, his tone changes quickly as he goes on to say such joy 'gives me more pleasure than many things that happen in this family – for we are having a tense time of it at present'. Unfortunately, there is no way now to clarify his reference. Perhaps the looming war – these words were written in July 1914 – was casting a pall over the Perhams like it did over so many other English families during that summer when the lamps began to go out all across Europe. More likely, however, was a continuing tension in the relationship between Edgar and his father, not of course unusual in the paternal dynamic, but possibly exacerbated by the fact that Margery's success on the sporting field – traditionally a site for manly achievement – contrasted sharply with his own lack of the same. This, it seems, was something for which he believed his father was partially responsible: 'It is regrettable that Father has always been willing to give the opportunity', he wrote while praising Margery for her ability along the 'games line, [but] he has been careless as the result'. Meanwhile, Edgar was hopeful that Margery's own sometime angular relationship with their mother had settled into the 'sweetest and most amicable terms possible'.⁶

Margery and Edgar's sibling relationship had itself always been one of fun and action and (melo)drama. Music and dancing, recitation and acting, all were part of their Edwardian childhood and youth. Much of what they did, it appears, they did together. One summer, for example, probably about 1913 while back home in Harrogate, they both participated in a community 'Grand Concert' in which Edgar on piano played a sonata by Beethoven and Margery recited 'The Lioness', a rather purple poem, but interestingly with a notional African theme.⁷ The event seems to have been a ringing success.

Edgar's diary and notebooks from these early years are a revealing compendium of jottings and diagrams, of pictures and caricatures, and of poetry and history. They contain numerous references to Margery, as well as simple pencil sketches of them both. In one of the now yellowing notebooks there is a poem entitled, 'To Margery'. It contains five stanzas, the final one finishing off with the not very flattering, perhaps even hurtful, words: 'All the world knows – you are plain!'⁸ Put it up to the sometime biting tongue of childhood, perhaps, although even by then it must have been becoming clear to Edgar that his overachieving sister was anything but plain.

By the time Margery left St. Anne's she had reached her full height of 5'10". Photographs of the period reveal her to have thick lustrous brown hair, which she usually wore in a fashionable bob. Her complexion was clear and she had highly penetrating hazel (sometimes described as brown or grey-green) eyes. She exuded intelligence and physicality. She would not have been described as beautiful in a conventional sense, but her height, her confidence, her ability both to think and to do made her very attractive nonetheless, if not intimidating. While no record exists of youthful romance one can surmise that for most awkward teenage boys Perham might have been entirely too mature and too accomplished to risk asking out.

Given her natural self-confidence Oxford's approach filled Perham with anticipation rather than trepidation. Women had been going up to the University since the 1870s, although it still was not permissible for them to be awarded degrees. Her college would be St. Hugh's, a relatively recent women's foundation established in 1886 and located in leafy North Oxford, where ultimately she would read for a degree in Modern History, the same course taken by the emerging Arabist and friend of T.E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, some thirty years earlier and with whom Perham would later bear comparison. Bell was the first Oxford woman undergraduate to be placed in the first class by the examiners in Modern History, astounding them with both her knowledge and her forthrightness.⁹ Perham would do much the same thing. But that would come later. In the meantime, during those last months before Oxford, a time, it was remarked upon widely, of especial warmth and beauty in England, and before Europe descended into four years of darkness, Perham enjoyed her last full summer of adolescence. Turning nineteen in September she readied herself for the emotional excitement and intellectual stimulation of undergraduate life, and yes, for the opportunities it would offer her for sport and exercise, the latter being 'a very necessary thing in Oxford,' according to the sometime sedentary Edgar.¹⁰ Her parents, especially her father, were liberal in the sense that they expected their daughters to gain a university education and once the finances were in place to do so, Perham's way was thus clear to go. And so in October 1914, at the beginning of Oxford's academic year, she arrived at the place from which she would never really, or for very long, leave for the rest of her life.

NOTES

Chapter One

- 1 Perham Papers, Box 1/File1/Folio 1.
- 2 PP, 1/2/1–2.
- 3 PP, 5/2/2.
- 4 PP, 5/2/4.
- 5 PP, 5/2/1.
- 6 PP, 1/2/5–8.
- 7 PP, 4/4/1–5.
- 8 PP, 3/4/50.
- 9 Georgina Howell (2006). *Daughter of the Desert: The Remarkable Life of Gertrude Bell* (London, Macmillan), 40.
- 10 PP, 1/2/11–12.