

ELIZA COOKE (1778-1837)
—A BIOGRAPHICAL FOOTNOTE

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Some ten years ago when my book *From Awakening to Secession* was published, I had to concede defeat over the identities of some shadowy figures, who appeared in its pages and who, I had to admit, were little more than names. In 2010, much more information (especially genealogical) has found its way onto the web and my search skills are greatly improved.

One of these unknown characters was a loyal English friend of the Bourg-de-Four Assembly (later known as *La Pélisserie*) in Geneva. In his account of the early Genevan *réveil*, one of the earliest members of that assembly, Émile Guers, briefly referred to Eliza Cooke as one who in the early days of persecution (c.1820) ‘stayed with us for a long period of time and whose memory will always remain precious to those who knew her’. He also recorded that, shortly before her death, she had contributed £500 towards the building of the Pélisserie assembly in 1837. Her home at Hilton Park, outside Wolverthampton, is also mentioned in the *Mémoires* of Ami Bost, who visited England in 1835 and was nursed through a serious illness there by Eliza Cooke and her niece. In the same year, when another member of the Genevan assembly, Rodolphe de Rodt, responded to the missionary call made by Anthony Norris Groves and followed him to England and thence to India, he too, visited Eliza Cooke at Hilton Park,¹ with another Swiss missionary recruit, Ferdinand Gros.² But who was this lady and from what sort of family did she come?

1. T.C.F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-1835* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp.105, 301. My ignorance of the lady’s identity is reflected in my use of Bost’s spelling of her name without the final ‘e’.

2. Gros went to India and later for reasons of health went to the Île-de-France where he had originally hoped to go and where Miss Cooke had offered with another lady to support him in his work. *Feuille de la Commission des Églises Associées pour l’évangélisation*, vol.I (Geneva, 1837), p.20.

Eliza, the third daughter of George John Cooke (1735-1784), MP for Middlesex was baptized on the 4th December 1778 in Harefield.³ The Cookes were a family of barristers, four of whom in succession, were Members of Parliament and three of whom (also in succession) were Chief prothonotaries of the Court of Common pleas. Eliza's great-grandfather, Sir George Cooke (1676-1741), had bought Harefield Park in Middlesex where for many years there was a full-length, life-size statue of him by Sir Henry Cheere.⁴ His son (Eliza's grandfather), George Cooke, was elected, together with the notorious John Wilkes, as MP for Middlesex in 1768 and his subsequent death in the same year gave rise to a further contested election when Wilkes was expelled from Parliament.⁵

Eliza Cooke had three older brothers who all served with distinction in the armed services. When she was twenty years old her older brother Edward died of severe wounds received in an engagement with the French in the Bay of Bengal in March 1799. The East India Company erected a memorial to his memory in Westminster Abbey.⁶ Her older sister Penelope (1770-1826) married the 6th Earl of Cardigan, so that Eliza Cooke was an aunt of the 7th Earl Cardigan (1797-1868), the 'last of the Brudenells', later (after

3. There is a basic account of the family in B. Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Great Britain & Ireland*, 2 vols., 5th edn (London, 1871), ii. pp.1440-1 (under 'Vernon of Hilton Park', 'Vernon of Harefield', and 'Family of Cooke of Harefield Park'), but it is seriously inaccurate in places and details of dates of birth, baptism and death must be corrected, making reference to W.F. Vernon (ed.), *Notes on the Parish of Harefield, county of Middlesex* (London, 1872), p. 47, and the International Genealogical Index.

4. Details of Sir George's career, the style of the statue and its inscriptions, together with the name of the person in the USA who acquired it a few years ago, are available on line in Case 21 of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Forty-ninth Report of the Reviewing Committee: Export of Works of Art 2002-2003, 2. p.63-66. <<http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/ewoa20022003report2.pdf>> [accessed April 2010].

5. G. Rudé, 'The Middlesex Electors of 1768-1769', *English Historical Review*, vol. 75 (1960), p.601.

6. *A historical description of Westminster Abbey, its monuments and curiosities* (London (Truscott) 1844), p.31.

his aunt's death), associated with the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War.

A younger sister Maria (1781-1827) married Major-General Henry Vernon-Graham (1779-1861) who was to be the owner of Hilton Park, Wolverhampton, and with whose family Eliza appears to have been living after her return to England. It was Vernon Graham's daughter who helped Eliza Cooke nurse Ami Bost at Hilton Park in 1835. In spite of her association with the Swiss *dissidents* and her support for missionaries sympathetic to the Brethren, there are no indications that Eliza Cooke's ecclesiastical associations in England were anything other than Anglican.