MELBOURNE CLUB SPEECH: "FATHERS & DAUGHTERS"

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Susan Crennan

Ladies, and gentlemen, Fathers and Daughters. I was very pleased to accept the invitation made on behalf of the Club by Philip Ayres to give tonight's speech. I have been told that the Fathers and Daughters dinner is one of the most popular evenings in the Club's social calendar, and I can see the truth of that before me. I do have daughters, but I am, after all, only a mother, so I thought that the first rational step in preparing myself would be to consult my husband on the mysteries of the father-daughter relationship. He refused to be drawn, claiming some kind of professional privilege — a novel and courageous submission, as we judges sometimes say.

Having failed in that attempt to gather authentic intelligence on the topic, I decided to turn to the next best source: the representation of that relationship which we find in literature. The three particular novels I want to say something about were written by women (so they were all at least daughters, but only the third was a mother): Jane Austen, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. I will begin, however, with a man, the American poet Robert Lowell, who was the father of a daughter.

In 1959 Lowell published a volume of poems called *Life Studies*. In one of the poems, "Home After Three Months Away", there is a passage describing Lowell's infant daughter:

> "Dimpled with exaltation,
> my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
> Our noses rub,
> each of us pats a stringy lock of hair —
> they tell me nothing's gone.
> Though I am forty-one,
> not forty now, the time I put away
> was child's play. After thirteen weeks
> my child still dabs her cheeks
> to start me shaving. When
> we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
> she changes to a boy,
> and floats my shaving brush
> and washcloth in the flush …
> Dearest, I cannot loiter here
> in lather like a polar bear."

When I first read this poem I was struck by the accuracy and tenderness with which Lowell has observed and recorded his daughter's bath time behaviour. Every parent will have such recollections, but few could evoke them so convincingly. He describes an intimate and domestic moment, full of the charm and sweetness of early childhood. Indeed, the lines are full of the sense that our children are our gifts, our treasures. So much is obvious: yet there is more. Where, you might ask, has Lowell been, when away for three months? The answer is found in the surrounding poems: he has been in hospital, gravely ill. The poem concludes with these lines:

> "I keep no rank nor station.
> Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small."

This may be what he has referred to in the earlier line: "Dearest, I cannot loiter here". The experience may be more than he can handle. On the other hand, it seems that, in loitering with his daughter, Lowell is being offered an entry back into normality: it is as if life itself were speaking to him through his daughter, saying "welcome back" — this unconditional love and peace, it is all still here for you. What he makes of it is another question.

So that is one thing a daughter can give. What has a father to offer in return?

Let us go back one and a half centuries, to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. This is, perhaps, the most famous exchange in Austen's entire novel. The heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, is under pressure from her mother to accept a marriage proposal from the creepy Mr Collins, whom she abhors:

> "'Come here, child,' cried her father as she appeared. 'I have sent for you on an affair of importance. I understand that Mr Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true?' Elizabeth replied that it was. 'Very well—and this offer of marriage you have refused?'
>
> 'I have, Sir.'
>
> 'Very well. We now come to the point. Your mother insists upon your accepting it. Is not it so, Mrs Bennet?'
>
> 'Yes, or I will never see her again.'
>
> 'An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents.—Your mother will never see you again if you do

> *not* marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*.'"

Now, Mr Bennet is by no means an ideal father or character generally, but it would be fair to say that few people who have read this exchange have not been tempted to stand up and cheer. Why is that? Mr Bennet has decisively intervened in a difficult situation for Elizabeth. The wishes of her mother, the superficial attraction of Mr Collins as a husband, the want of suitors: all these things could conspire to force her into an unwanted marriage. Her mother, who is not a serious thinker, if I can put it that way, would, in other circumstances, with other daughters or a more supine husband, have successfully colluded with the unwanted suitor. Mr Bennet's intervention settles the matter decisively. Jane Austen is nothing if not subtle, and Elizabeth's reaction to that intervention is revealing:

> "Elizabeth could not but smile at such a conclusion of such a beginning; but Mrs Bennet, who had persuaded herself that her husband regarded the affair as she wished, was excessively disappointed.
>
> ...
>
> Not yet, however, in spite of her disappointment in her husband, did Mrs Bennet give up the point. She talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns. She endeavoured to secure Jane in her interest, but Jane with all possible mildness declined interfering;—and Elizabeth sometimes with real earnestness and sometimes with playful gaiety replied to her attacks. Though her manner varied however, her determination never did."

I think we are meant to see that Elizabeth is quite capable of repelling her mother's assaults unaided: her father should not be too

proud of himself. Indeed, it might be said that he has quite correctly estimated his daughter's true strengths. All the same, it is for personal liberty and good sense that he makes his stand against his wife and for his daughter, and that credit must be given to him, without discounting Elizabeth's own resolve.

Yet things can go wrong.

I now want to touch only briefly on George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. I mention this as an instance because George Eliot and other novelists such as Christina Stead, who wrote *The Man Who Loved Children*, deal with circumstances where fathers failed in ways which haunt their daughters. However, that is another way of saying that these novelists sought to explore, through their fictions, the importance of the father-daughter relationship, and by no means to belittle it.

The Mill on the Floss opens when the heroine, Maggie, is about nine and it charts her life until its end when she is in her early 20s. In the first chapter it is made very clear that Maggie is a preternaturally clever child. Her father, a miller, is hot headed and confrontational and rather rashly engages in a lawsuit which he loses. This sets in chain catastrophe and humiliation for the family: the father falls ill, is made bankrupt and dies prematurely.

Before this cascade of trouble starts, we see Maggie as a person who loves reading and thinking and is, as a result, in constant trouble with her family circle (in accordance with contemporary social canons) for failing to meet the expectations for a stereotypical girl of her time and station. She is made miserable by constant chiding from her mother and others for reading too much, being vague and so on. An emblematic aggravation with her mother is that her hair is always unbrushed and untidy because she has other priorities such as reading and thinking. She feels much misunderstood and unjustly treated. On one occasion when her mother's censorious and rather better off relations are in the house, in a spectacular gesture of self-assertion, Maggie impulsively cuts off her lovely long hair. When she appears, domestic pandemonium ensues: her mother screams; her aunts and even uncles engage in manifold recriminations. Then her father intervenes. Here is the intervention and the narrator's comment on it:

> "'Come, come my wench,' said her father soothingly, putting his arm round her, 'never mind; you was i' the right to cut it off if it plagued you; give over crying: father'll take your part.'
>
> Delicious words of tenderness! Maggie never forgot any of these moments when her father 'took her part;' she kept them in her heart, and thought of them long years after, when everyone else said that her father had done very ill by his children."

A while after that episode, at the start of painful process of the family's ruination, Maggie's father has his first attack of serious illness. Only she could rouse him. Here is George Eliot on that:

> "Poor child! it was very early for her to know one of those supreme moments in life when all we have hoped or delighted in, all we can dread or endure, falls away from our regard as insignificant — is lost, like a trivial memory, in that simple, primitive love which knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us, in their times of helplessness or of anguish."

Next Maggie's father falls into the deepest depression compounded by his anxiety about her future in their gravely reduced circumstances. Even she cannot rouse him. Family and friends are driven away by what George Eliot calls "his savage silences" and as I mentioned he dies prematurely. At no other time in her life does Maggie enjoy the unconditional love she had from her father. The memory and experience of this sustains her through some very painful adult experiences which turn always on the family catastrophe; her fierce desire to be herself and her thirst for truth and justice in her dealings with others remain matters in which her father had supported her.

In her last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, Elizabeth Gaskell returns to many of the great themes of 19th century fiction: the strictures imposed by a society which is nevertheless changing rapidly, the difficulties of negotiating one's way through the thickets of gender, class and race (as the universities now like to describe them) and, not least, the familial relationships of marriage and parenthood. Molly Gibson, the heroine, is the daughter of the local doctor in a "little straggling town" in the north of England. The two powerful families are the Hamleys, representatives of the ancient gentry, and the Cumnors, highly autocratic but recently created

Whig aristocrats. John Gibson, Molly's father, occupies an ambiguous social position, which gives his daughter some entrée into both these families, with dramatic results in each case.

John Gibson was widowed young when Molly was six years old. Molly remembers the time when her mother was alive as a golden age, and enjoys a close, but she thinks exclusive, relationship with her father.

All this changes in her adolescence. Dr Gibson marries a widow, employed as a governess at Cumnor Tower. The marriage is a disappointment to Dr Gibson as well as an experience of shocking dispossession for Molly.

Mrs Gibson is a true comic monster — perhaps among the worst examples of the literary cliché of the stepmother. Devious, untruthful, self obsessed and scheming, she could have made Molly's life a nightmare. But, as the novel progresses, with the support of her father and stepsister, and her own gradually emerging powers of self assertion, Molly becomes a formidable figure indeed, well deserving the happy fate the conclusion of the novel presages.

In this progression, Molly's father plays a complex role. He is a strong protector of the young Molly, as we see when he decisively intervenes to ensure her safe return after family friends carelessly leave her behind following an outing to Cumnor Tower. He is a

playful and tender companion, but amidst the affectionate teasing we see a theme of authoritarianism, of knowing best, which transmutes itself into less desirable forms in later episodes. Expressing her relief at being rescued from Cumnor Tower, Molly tells her father: "Oh! papa, I never was so glad in all my life. I felt like a lighted candle when they're putting the extinguisher on it." To which he replies, in sententious Victorian style: "Did you? How d'ye know what the candle feels?"

As Gaskell sums him up:

> "[H]is domestic affections were centred on little Molly, but even to her, in their most private moments, he did not give way to much expression of his feelings; his most caressing appellation for her was 'Goosey', and he took pleasure in bewildering her infant mind with his badinage. He had rather a contempt for demonstrative people".

Instructing a new housekeeper about Molly's education, he prescribes his approach:

> "Don't teach Molly too much: she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child, and if I find more learning desirable for her, I'll see about giving it to her myself. After all, I am not sure that reading or writing is necessary. Many a good woman gets married with only a cross instead of her name ... but, however we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and you may teach the child to read."

Badinage, but disquieting all the same. It is no accident that the fated husband for Molly turns out to be a dashing Victorian explorer savant.

When Molly is a teenager, Dr Gibson takes fright when one of his apprentices is caught attempting to send her a declaration of love. This has two consequences. First, he immediately, without consultation or explanation, sends her to live at Hamley Hall, which brings her into the ambit of Squire Hamley and, more importantly, his two sons. Secondly, he realises that there is a danger of gossip if he has two young men in the household with a teenage daughter without a mature woman as chaperone, and this turns his mind to remarrying, in the event, calamitously. His wife comes from Cumnor Tower, as referred to earlier, and she brings much unpleasantness to his household. She does her best to use her daughter, Cynthia, to lure the elder son of the Hamley family — who, as it turns out, already has a French wife, married in secret, and anyway dies prematurely. Dr Gibson's failure to explain to his daughter why he wants her out of the house has serious consequences for Molly. Dr Gibson reminds his wife about the reason in front of Molly, without explaining it. Molly's response shows the value of candour:

> "But what were Molly's feelings at these last words of her father's? She had been sent from home for some reason, kept secret from her, but told to this strange woman. Was there to be perfect confidence between these two, and she to be forever shut out? Was she, and what concerned her — though how, she did not know — to be discussed between them for the future, and she to be kept in the dark? A bitter pang of jealously made her heart sick ... Thinking more of others' happiness than of her own was very fine; but did it not mean giving up her very individuality, quenching all the warm love, the true desires, that made her herself?"

Despite these, and other episodes, Gaskell in no way suggests that Dr Gibson is a poor father: he is a man of his time, of course, but the emotional centre of his life remains his daughter. We are meant to understand two things. The first is that the task of preventing unhappiness or disappointment in children is, even for so admirable and decent a man as Dr Gibson, near impossible. An act designed to protect his daughter's reputation (and we see the deadly power of gossip in this small community later in the novel) turns out to distress her in several ways, and with various consequences. Nevertheless, he remains a person of deep and valued significance in her life, even in the later stages of the novel, where he shows not only the moral firmness of his earlier self, but also a degree of flexibility and humour which is most attractive. The second thing is that the misunderstanding between them on this central question makes the difficulties of negotiating the challenges facing Molly more pronounced than they may have been, although the outcome is in many ways triumphant for her: she is powerfully vindicated by the conclusion of the novel as a decisive, reliable, tough and intelligent young woman. And she gets her man.

Finally, may I finish as I started with a poem written by a father about his daughter. W B Yeats married late in life and wrote "A Prayer for my Daughter", for his infant daughter Anne, after decades of reflecting in his own life upon the fugitive quality of adult happiness. The poem is intensely personal because his wishes for

his daughter are made in the context of his long and unsuccessful pursuit of Maud Gonne. I will just read some of it:

> "Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle hood and coverlid
> My child sleeps on ...
>
> And for an hour I have walked and prayed
> Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.
>
> ...
>
> May she be granted beauty and yet not
> Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught
> Or hers before a looking-glass ...
>
> ...
>
> In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;
>
> ...
>
> May she become a flourishing hidden tree
> That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
> And have no business but dispensing round
> Their magnanimities of sound,
> Nor but in merriment begin a chase,
> Nor but in merriment a quarrel.
>
> ...
>
> And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
> Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;"

Yeats' essential wishes, expressed ornately over 90 years ago, that his daughter as an adult will quickly enjoy the deep contentments which at first eluded him, and that she will command the love of others worthy of her, can hardly be bettered.

In his memoirs, Yeats said: "We artists suffer in our life if we do not love most of all life at peace with itself."

Let me finish by saying that, although we must admit there are many different ways of accessing the plenitude of life, the novelists and poets I have mentioned tonight show us two things: first, harmonious relations between a father and daughter can be a superb foundation for a "life at peace with itself"; and, second, that great boon works both ways.