

## Whatever happened to Mary Locke?

Mary was the youngest of four children of John Locke, an attorney-at-law in Chipping Norton. By the time she reached her late teens she had lost both parents and was taken under the wing of her uncle, Edward Taylor, the owner since 1772 of Hill House, on the outskirts of Steeple Aston. Taylor had studied law and travelled extensively but chose to live quietly in the Oxfordshire countryside as a man of letters. Mary came to share his tastes, and in 1791 published a 340-line poem, *Eugenius, or Virtue in Retirement*, celebrating his tranquil way of life. Over the next five years 20 poems by Mary Locke - sixteen sonnets and four longer pieces - were published in the widely-read *Gentleman's Magazine*. After July 1796 she fell silent, possibly because her guardian was already suffering from the "most agonizing illness" which would lead to his death in December 1797. Mary raised a touching memorial in Steeple Aston church to her "beloved and generous Benefactor", describing herself as "An Orphan, who for eleven Years found an asylum beneath his hospitable Roof". By his Will, she inherited his entire estate.

The next stage in her story was supplied by local historian William Wing in his *Annals of Steeple Aston* (1875): "Mary Locke, who afterwards became the wife of a Welch gentleman, published through a London firm several juvenile tales, which, within my memory, were popular and commanded an extensive sale". But Wing was mistaken about her husband's origins, and crucially, did not give his name. It was only 32 years ago that the literary world discovered that Mary Locke the poet was also Mary Mister, author of a number of children's books published between 1811 and 1816. The connection was made by Oxford Professor Roger Lonsdale, who included two of Mary's sonnets in his *Eighteenth Century Women Poets - an Oxford Anthology* (OUP, 1982). The story that her husband William Mister was Welsh was corrected only in 2004, when the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography identified him as an apothecary-surgeon from Shipston-on-Stour, Warks. The couple were married in July 1798.

They had a son, Edward Taylor Mister, in 1799, followed after a long gap by a daughter, Sophia Susanna in 1811. They had sold Hill House to George Dashwood, back in 1800, and fairly soon moved to Carmarthenshire - where in 1803 William Mister, Gent., was commissioned Lieutenant in the local Volunteer Infantry (to confront the threat from Napoleon); 1808 saw him promoted to Captain. In 1811 when the 12-year-old Edward Taylor Mister was packed off to Rugby School, his home address was given as "Lantswithiel, Carmarthen". Archivists in the region have been unable so far to identify any such place, but later on the Misters had a house called Glantowy, near the village of Abergwili east of Carmarthen, which was inherited by Edward.

It was at this point that Mary Mister began publishing her books for children. The first, *Mungo the Little Traveller* (1811), records an Englishman's travels in Europe and Africa with his King Charles spaniel, Mungo - as recounted



by Mungo to a gathering of other dogs. Their journeys may well have been recycled from Edward Taylor's reminiscences, or diaries. Some details are a little unlikely - they meet with tigers as well as lions in southern Africa! Mary quickly followed this up with *Tales from the Mountains* (1811), a set of cautionary tales on the consequences of bad behaviour - some clearly set in Wales. In *Adventures of a Doll* (1816) the doll, "the first whose eyes had been taught to open and shut", tells the story of her travels in the company of a variety of girls, some pleasant, others not. One of her first journeys takes her by coach via Gloucester to Carmarthen, perhaps recalling the journey the Misters made themselves, following the Heads of the Valleys road, now the A40. In her introduction to *Mungo*, Mary had written that "This little work was not intended, originally, for the public eye: it was the evening employment of a mother, for the amusement of her child". The dates suggest Mary wrote *Mungo* and *Tales* for her son Edward, *Adventures* and a fourth book, *Little Anecdotes for Little People* (1814) for her daughter Sophia.

Then Mary Locke/Mister again fell silent. She lived just long enough to see both her children grow up. She seems to have died while staying at Taunton, Somerset, in 1829, and her husband died in London the following year. Thanks to Google and various reprint services, Mary's little books are more accessible today than they ever were.