

D'you ken John Peel?

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John Peel's hound whip

My ancestors are bastards. This is what I learned when I researched my family tree. And it's as question marks that the bastards reveal themselves. Where the straight line that leads back through the generations suddenly curves and breaks with a squiggle and a stop. A child born out of wedlock. A rotten apple on the tree. And the word 'bastard' blotting my research files.

I'm told to start my family research with a question. What do you want to learn? This is easy. I'm a Maxwell. I have automatic membership of a prestigious club: The Maxwell Clan. We have a tartan. A castle. A crest – a stag *couchant* in front of a holly tree – all antlers and nobility and spikes – and reclining in French! We even have a motto for goodness sake – *Reviresco* 'I flourish again'. Who wouldn't want to know more?

I set off, and I get as far north as Carlisle. But there the trail stops. I can't get out of England. The line runs out in 1754 in a small Cumberland village called Sebergham.

But there are the question marks. The first one I spot is below my great-great-great grandmother Mary Maxwell. She has an illegitimate child whose name appears as '?'. But surely here is a story. Where the gaps appear. Where history fails and writers pick up their pens? I forget Scotland. I want to know more about 'question mark'.

I pay for some research at the Cumberland Archives. They send a bundle of documents, including a 'Recognizance for Bastardy before Birth'. I'm shocked by the word each time I see it – and now as I say it I'm worried by it. Is it in the sound – the way it spits off the tongue and out of the lips – or just that it has grown to be a term of offence?

The document is verbose and it takes a long time to get to the heart of the matter.

‘Be it remembered, that on the eighth day of February in the fiftieth year of the reign of our Lord George the Third, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, and so forth, William Rutherford of Hartrigg in the county aforesaid, Husbandman, and John Rutherford of Hartrigg in the county aforesaid, Farmer, personally came before me Browne Grisdale, Doctor in Divinity, one of the Justices of our said Lord the King, assigned to keep the peace in the said county, and acknowledged themselves to owe to our said Lord the King ... the sum of fifty pounds of good lawful money of Great Britain...’

It goes on and on. But where is she? Where is pregnant Mary? Why all these lines devoted to Lord the King – so many that the author gives up and shortcuts to ‘and so forth’. All the men are here. The father of the ‘bastard’, and even his father, and the Justice presiding over the session – a Doctor of Divinity no less – with the ominous sounding name ‘Browne Grisdale’. Do they see Mary in front of them, scared and pregnant and fighting for her child?

Mary finally gets a mention at the bottom:

... Mary Maxwell of Warnell Hall in the said county, single woman, hath, in and by her voluntary examination, taken in writing and upon oath ... declared that she is with child, and that the said child is likely to be born a bastard...

She is ‘single woman’ – *she* defines the ‘bastard’. *She* has no occupation, no ‘and so forth’. ‘Voluntary examination’ sends shivers through me. I see her confessing – submitting to scrutiny. Her body is no longer her own. It never is. In pregnancy, others claim it. Experts tell her how to live and governments and religions claim jurisdiction. Her identity cleaves in two – as her body will do.

How did Mary cope? Condemned by society – facing poverty, the workhouse, the so-called ‘baby farmers’ who took unwanted children for a fee and despatched them. Did she wish away her pregnancy? Did she try to hide it? I sense her powerlessness as she stands before these men. Is she overcome with sickness? Does she feel a fluttering inside her? Does she rest her hand on her belly and feel the life growing there? What became of her child – now a ‘question mark’ written out of her timeline?

Did I say my ancestors are bastards? Well yes, there’s another one. Another Maxwell woman – Mary’s sister Sarah – up the duff and out of wedlock. But this time the father is a minor celebrity.

John Peel is celebrated across the world in the jolly song ‘D’you ken John Peel’. You might hear it as a heel-stompy folk song, or a military march or even a lullaby. However it is sung, it conjures up a Romantic image of legendary huntsman John Peel, striding with his hounds across the desolate fells, sounding his horn.

Melvyn Bragg, among others, is enchanted. He has written about Peel as ‘one of those rare men who retain an unshakeable rooted, local hold and have yet entered into the general imagination of the world. For wherever they hunt, they sing ‘John Peel’ – and they hunt everywhere.’¹ They do indeed Melvyn. Those bastards hunt everywhere.

As I start to research John Peel I quickly discover that most of what is written about him is Melvyn-style: Romantic and idealising. But I'm watchful as I read, and I know an imposter when I see one. I begin to pick out clues. One blogger writes:

Why make a hero of one who neglected his farm and impoverished his family by his unrestrained pursuit of hunting?²

I want to know more. I find a description by his daughter who wrote about the place he is buried:

I have had many sleepless nights of late years on his account; but no one could do better for him than we have done. I know the spot where he rests after the turbulent storm of life through which he has passed, and as I reflect over it, what a wasted life it has been!—a total shipwreck made of what might have been all goodness and greatness in man. Poor father!³

A total shipwreck? Robbing his own daughter of her sleep? I'm beginning to dislike the fellow. He is turning from Romantic hero to sociopath before my eyes. I read more. The celebrated huntsman I discover had a drink habit. He would be up all night, drunk and roaming the fells:

He hed a girt rough voice and a rough holloa, and wad put his tongue in't cheek on him,... and when he came through Ireby of a night a bit fresh.... He wad start hollerin' wid his 'Go hark ! ... till niver man-body, woman-body, or child-kind but was wakened fra sleep.⁴

But perhaps I'm not being fair. Wasn't he was just a restless soul, too wild and big for the domestic interior in which he was trapped with wife and 13 children? Various accounts mention his size – over six feet – and strange gait. I read about the house in which he lived and died:

the little farmhouse with its tiny windows that tell of days when window-taxes were prohibitive of light⁵

I see a big man in a dark house with tiny windows. He needs to get out – to be in the wilderness with his dogs. But another anecdote hints at a man who has lost all connection with his world.

On the night of November 14, 1840, his son died. At daybreak he received word that a fox had been astir worrying local geese. John Peel mustered his hounds, got them on the fox's drag, and hunted and killed it. Upon returning home, he was faulted by neighbors for going hunting with his son lying dead in the house.

"Aye," said Peel. "The lad's dead. If he had been alive he would have been with me. But I've got the fox's brush, and it shall go in the coffin beside him. It will be a fitting trophy to take on his last journey."⁶

It's disturbing. On the day his boy dies, he goes straight out, and returns with the bloodied severed tail of a fox to put in the coffin. I imagine being that dead boy's mother. That man's husband. And then I have to stop thinking, because I fear for Sarah Maxwell who is yet to encounter him.

So my research into the Maxwells ended up in the folder of unfinished jobs. Years later I am contacted by another Maxwell in New Zealand. He believes we are researching the same family and is stuck too.

We excitedly exchange information – but don't get very far. There are question marks at every turn. 'By the way,' I ask, as our trails and emails run dry, 'did you come across the John Peel link - you know – him of the song?'

'Yes,' comes the reply, 'but I didn't go much further with that as I don't think I really like him'.

¹ Foreword to 'John Peel: the man, the myth, and the song', *Cumbria Weekly Digest*, May 1977

² <https://lakelandterriertopics.wordpress.com/john-peel-and-ireby/>

³ <http://www.lakelandhuntingmemories.com/JohnPeelNew.html>

⁴ <http://www.lakelandhuntingmemories.com/JohnPeelNew.html>

⁵ <http://www.lakelandhuntingmemories.com/JohnPeelNew.html>

⁶ <https://www.foxhuntinglife.com/foxhunting-horse-a-hound/norman-fine/1001-the-story-of-john-peel>