

Jamie Jauncey ~ RBCG and women (transcript)

The two women with whom Robert triangulated were, unsurprisingly, his mother and his wife – the only two women in his life about whom we really know anything at all. I will focus on these two and Alan Riach will speak after about the women in his writing.

His mother, known as 'Missy', was Anne Elizabeth Elphinstone Fleming, daughter of Admiral Charles Elphinstone Fleming, who had served in the Caribbean and played a role in the South American wars of independence, so the South American connection was there even two generations back from Robert. The admiral was a contemporary of the fictional Horatio Hornblower and Patrick O'Brien's hero, Jack Aubrey. He could easily have been the model for those two, a swashbuckling eighteenth century naval officer. But he died young, in the influenza epidemic of 1840, on the same day as his eldest daughter, Carlotta.

Anne Elizabeth was born on board his flagship, off the coast of Jamaica, in 1828. After his death she was more or less brought up by her uncle, Mountstuart Elphinstone, her father's brother, who had served as governor of Bombay. He had been invited to be governor general of India, but declined in order to return to Britain to write a history of the subcontinent, which he duly did. He was an erudite man, and a great influence on Anne Elizabeth who was naturally intelligent and grew up to become cultured and cosmopolitan. She loved opera, used to go to Bayreuth every year, and was altogether formidable, a Whig to her marrow, who advised both her younger sons not to vote for Disraeli.

Robert had a close relationship with his mother in childhood, but it became more difficult in his middle adulthood because of the problems that were created by his father's insanity. Once Willie had been taken away from the family, as being a danger to them, and locked up in the house in Dumfriesshire where he spent the next sixteen years, they had had to appoint a *curator bonis*. The detested Auldjo Jamieson controlled the family finances to the extent that Robert, even as a young married man, had to ask for every penny that he needed to spend. To some extent, Anne Elizabeth had to go along with that. It created friction in all parts of the family, not just between Robert and his mother.

Once these family difficulties were resolved they settled into an easier companionship. Anne Elizabeth helped Robert settle in London, and it was through her that he met Shaw, Wilde and all of the other luminary figures who attended Anne Elizabeth's salon. Robert corresponded with her throughout his life and they ended up being close to one another. She lived to be ninety-six, and he was deeply upset when she died.

Then we have Carrie, or Gabriela, who was neither wholly Carrie nor wholly Gabriela. Her story is truly extraordinary and one that is still waiting to be told in full. She was brought up in Yorkshire as the daughter of an area medical officer. She was the eldest of thirteen children and ran away when she was fifteen. She was hauled back again, ran away a second time, and got away for good. She ended up, so the story goes, on the doorstep of Henry Irving, the actor-manager in London, whose wife knew of his predilection for young actresses, intercepted her on the doorstep, so the story goes, and told her that the meeting was off. There the trail goes cold for three years until she meets Robert, apparently in Paris, when his horse shies and she falls. Horsfall was her family name. The horse-fall story is one that repeats itself throughout Robert's life.

Their relationship got off to a rocky start and one can't talk about it without involving her relationship with Missy, which was very difficult. Missy had been expecting Robert to meet up with a suitable English or Scottish heiress who was going to solve all the family financial problems and be an embellishment to the escutcheon. In fact, he turned up on her doorstep having already married Gabriela (as the family called her), this strange elfin creature who spoke with an odd accent that located her somewhere in the Pyrenees, neither fully French, nor fully Spanish. Nobody knew what to make of her. She called herself Gabrielle de la Balmondière, a preposterously theatrical invention.

Missy was horrified and took an instant dislike to her, a *froideur* that never really thawed, though there were some moments of rapprochement, for example, when Gabriela published her Santa Teresa biography. Some of the reviews were savage and Missy consoled her, advising her to pay no attention to the reviews. Happily for Robert, Gabriela was a shrewd businesswoman who managed to keep Gartmore going until 1900 when it was eventually sold. She imported leather goods from Spain, sold off the Gartmore estate feus and made money playing the stock exchange. It was with the proceeds from this

that she was able to buy the elderly Missy a carriage in which Missy and her great friend, Blanche Fane, used to go off, as Missy described it, 'dowagering' together. At that stage there was a thaw between them, but it was never complete. Gabriela referred to Missy as 'my dreadful mother-in-law'. And at the very end, writing to Edward Garnett after Gabriela's death, Missy referred to her as 'poor unsatisfactory Gabriela'. For a woman of Missy's station in life to call someone 'unsatisfactory' was the most damning thing she could possibly say.

That relationship was difficult, which leaves Robert and Gabriela. They also got off to a tricky start, partly because of Missy, but also because they decided to go to Texas for nine months on their honeymoon. They arrived at Brownsville on the Texas-Mexico border in 1885, at the height of the gunslinging era. In this border town people were literally being shot in the back in the street. When Robert wrote to his mother at this time he never mentioned Gabriela, which gives some indication of how things were. From Brownsville, the young couple went to San Antonio, and there they joined a wagon train going to Mexico City, an epic 1500-mile round trip, circling the wagons every night because it was so dangerous, and sleeping with their heads to the fire and weapons under their pillows.

That was a baptism of fire for any relationship. There are suggestions that it all fell apart at the end of that journey. However, they got back together again – if there was indeed a rupture – and they ended up coming back to the UK. Robert then went into politics, which Gabriela said she had no time for. She disliked the life in Westminster, but she became an activist nevertheless, and a political speaker in her own right. She received recognition for her book on Santa Teresa, and she and Robert lead quite separate lives, each travelling a good deal. During these periods Robert may have strayed, and so may Gabriela. She had close relationships with other women, in particular Emilia Pardo Bazán, the Spanish writer, who was a known lesbian, and who Gabriela corresponded with and received support from with her Santa Teresa project. They eventually fell out when Emilia became one of the signatories to the Spanish index of censorship on which Gabriela's book appeared. She had proposed in her biography that Santa Teresa's visions were sexual in nature. This didn't go down well with the Spanish authorities.

Robert and Gabriela were by all accounts deeply attached to one another, even though they spent long periods apart. There's a moment when Gabriela writes

a rather plaintive letter to Robert when he's about to go off on the Moroccan expedition, which resulted in *Mogreb el Acksa*, and says 'do come back safe, darling, it's so much nicer when the two of us can go about together.' She missed him when he was away. Whether he missed her, I'm not absolutely sure. But when she died he was devastated. He is supposed to have dug her grave – which we will see tomorrow, those of us who are coming to Inchmahome – with the help of an elderly estate worker, and when the grave was dug, the night before her interment, he sat at the gravesite and smoked a cigarette. Gabriela had picked up the habit of smoking to keep the insects at bay when they were on the trail in Texas. It was a habit that overtook her. She had an underlying condition of diabetes but it was smoking that probably killed her – a hundred cigarettes a day by the time she died. There's an image of her sitting on the floor in the dining room at Gartmore with the estate accounts spread around her, the papers punctuated by ashtrays overflowing with smouldering cigarette butts.

Robert was devastated by her death. He put up the Spanish inscription on the plaque over her grave which reads: 'los muertos abren los ojos a los que viven.' The dead open the eyes of the living. Missy wrote of her concern for him as he grieved for Gabriela's death. He threw himself into his writing and in due course found a new companion in a wealthy widow named Elizabeth Dummett, known as Toppy for the top hat she wore when out riding. She was with Robert in Buenos Aires when he died, in 1936.

So that's a quick canter through the triangle of Robert, Missy and Gabriela, just to give a flavour of what those relationships were like. Alan will talk now about the women in Robert's writing.