A Passion for the Impossible

The Life of Lilias Trotter

Miriam Huffman Rockness
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Garden lilies grow in fertile, well-drained soil. They require shelter from cutting winds, shade for the roots and lower stems, and full or partial sun for the heads.
The Alexander Trotter family lived the happy, disciplined life of the Victorian upper classes; godly, serious, kind to the poor at a distance, sheltered from all that was offensive. So Lilias grew, beloved and loving, in the sheltered atmosphere of a stable home surrounded by beauty and culture.

—Patricia St. John, Until The Day Breaks

Eighteen fifty-one was a very good year. England had survived its uneasy transition from eighteenth-century agricultural society to industrial nation, emerging mid-nineteenth century as the leading commercial world power. The country’s continued supremacy at sea had laid the foundation of an empire, and a strong national financial system was spawning a new, powerful mercantile and professional class.

During the first dozen years of her reign, young Queen Victoria (1837–1901) witnessed the establishment of both a penny post and the telegraph, as well as the railway mania of the 1840s, when over 6,000 miles of track were laid in Britain alone. The coming of the railway changed not only the face of her kingdom, but marked a great divide in British history, the shift from stagecoach to train.

And if the Railroad Age defined a new Industrial Era, the Great Exhibition declared England’s supremacy in the world. Housed in
the Crystal Palace, a glass and steel phenomenon four times as long as St. Paul’s Cathedral and twice as wide, the glorified world fair symbolized the peace, prosperity, and progress of Britain. It was a personal triumph for Victoria’s husband, Albert of Saxe-Coburg, the driving force behind this event.

This international feat heralded a Golden Age for England, captured in the name Victorian and characterized by values and virtues personified in the royal couple. Although the nation could not ignore certain realities—poverty, prostitution, and crises of religious faith—the faithful and the faithless agreed, by and large, on an ideal of conduct and attitude associated with their sovereign’s name. This ideal meant earnestness, respectable comportment and behavior, “character,” duty, hard work, and thrift.

If England took its place as a “world nation” the year of the fair, then London, the host city, surely could be considered, in the words of Ford Madox Ford, a “world town.” The foundation of a sound Bank of England and healthy credit system spurred the growth of the City, making it the financial and commercial center of the empire. London had the nation’s highest concentration of population, and its residents consumed the highest rate of the country’s goods.

The River Thames, London’s nerve center, connected the financial institutions in the East End—the City—with the royal borough of Westminster, which ruled England through Buckingham Palace and through its Houses of Parliament. While reform bills of the 1830s had broadened the base of representation, the governing bodies were still dominated by the landed aristocracy, who, from their stylish town houses, supported a “dining society” and a cultural life comparable to any in Europe.

In the early 1800s, savvy aristocrats with West End estates began laying out elegant squares and terraces to house newly rich merchants and bankers, a rising and powerful upper middle class. The
expansion continued throughout Victoria’s early reign, filling in the green spaces between the financial/political centers along the river and the established West End. Shops and artisans’ services appeared between the squares of well-to-do residences.

At the west end of London, directly south of Regent’s Park, lay the medieval village of Marylebone, which had the highest concentration of Georgian dwellings in the city. The Prince Regent, in one of his grandiose schemes, targeted this area for the most ambitious and successful efforts of town planning ever to be undertaken—and completed—in London.

The plan was magnificently developed and executed by John Nash. The royal park was laid out as a setting for classically designed villas and terraces, then linked to the busy world of Westminster by means of a new thoroughfare which became Regent Street. Completed in 1828, though not all the designer intended and after sixteen years of difficulties, the plan did succeed in essentially reorganizing London’s West End, providing a triumphal procession mile, south from the beautifully developed Regent’s Park to the capitol. Slum properties were cleared along the way, parks and squares laid out, and Buckingham House converted into London’s official royal residence, with young Victoria as its first royal resident.

In London’s fashionable West End between Baker Street and Portland Place and immediately south of Regent’s Park was “the best property in Marylebone,” according to town planner John Nash. There, at Devonshire Place House on the corner of Devonshire Street and Upper Harley, Isabella Lilias Trotter was born on 14 July 1853 to Alexander and Isabella Trotter. Nearby, tall traditional terrace houses laid out along the sedate Georgian squares housed families similar to the Trotters, families who were inspired by Victorian ideals, grounded on biblical principles, and guided by Samuel Smile’s self-help maxims.
One block from Regent’s Park, the Trotter offspring—supervised by governesses, like other children living in this prized location—played in the open fields of the park or the adjoining gardens of Park Square while mothers enjoyed offerings from the Royal Botanical Society and garden shows. A short two blocks off Portland Place, Lilias’s father, like other breadwinners of the area—merchants and bankers and professional men—was connected by the royal mile of Regent Street to the royal borough and, just another two miles “down river,” to the Bank of London, Royal Exchange, and Stock Exchange—in short, to the political and economic centers of the world.

By stagecoach these men had an easy return in the evening to home and family and the pleasures of West End society. In that environment, dinner parties were a preferred form of entertainment, and conversation was honed to an art. West End society not only discussed the books and letters fresh from the London presses, but it entertained the writers who penned them—Dickens, Trollope, the Brownings, James. Residents flocked as well to the exhibitions of the Royal Art Society and rubbed shoulders with the artists who painted them—Turner, Rossetti, Hunt—as well as the critics who promoted or panned them, most notably, the irrepressible John Ruskin.

Into this privileged world, Lily was welcomed by a brood of children from her father’s first marriage to Jacqueline Otter, which had ended in Jacqueline’s premature death four years before. Alexander Trotter supported his large and growing family from his prosperous career as a stockbroker for Capel, Norbury, and Trotter Co., located in the City. This stock brokerage firm, at the time, was one of the two most important firms on the Stock Exchange and in London. Recruited to join the firm at the age of twenty-three and joining the Stock Exchange the following year, young Alexander was
a member of the Atheneum Club, the most intellectually elite of all London’s clubs. His reputation as a man “with high qualities of intellect and acquirement”\(^3\) was demonstrated early with his publication at the age of twenty-five of a lucid and thoroughly documented study of the financial positions of the states of the North American Union.

When, in 1851, thirty-five-year-old Isabella Strange married the thirty-seven-year-old widowed stockbroker, she was initiated immediately into the first-time roles of wife, homemaker, and mother to six children all under the age of fourteen. Lily’s birth in 1853, followed respectively by Alexander and Margaret four and seven years later, brought the additional challenge of blending the children from the two marriages into one strong family unit, a feat accomplished “most harmoniously.”\(^4\)

Isabella clearly relished these roles. Devonshire Place House was a “choice London mansion,”\(^5\) by her own description, beautifully situated just off Regent’s Park. Spacious rooms comfortably accommodated the growing and changing family while the conservatory and greenhouse allowed nature-loving Isabella to cultivate and enjoy her beloved plants and flowers. A staff of servants, personal and domestic, lightened her task, freeing her for the responsibilities of nurturing the lively family.

On the surface, the Trotter family could be seen as the picture of Victorian respectability. Their religious instruction was guided by the Church of England at St. Marylebone Parish Church located two blocks from their home. So enamored were Alexander and Isabella of the popular parish curate, Pelham, that they named their youngest child, Alexander Pelham, after him. The Trotter sons were educated at Harrow School, a public school in an outlying London suburb, continuing their studies at the University in Cambridge or at military college. The daughters were tutored by governesses at
home, polishing their skills in German and French, along with other refinements such as art and music. Sons and daughters alike enjoyed the enrichments of location and privilege: offerings from the Royal Botanical and Zoological Institutes at nearby Regent’s Park, summers on the continent, and holidays in the country or by the seashore at Cromer.

Yet, like any other home, the real action took place beneath the surface. Lily was greeted at birth by four brothers—Coutts and William in their early teens, twelve-year-old Henry, and ten-year-old Edward—and their two younger sisters, Jaqueline and Emily. Early on, Lily learned to stand her ground, agitated by the teasing typical of brothers. Her nickname, “Tiger Lily,” was probably inspired by an incident, laughingly recalled years later, when Lily sprang to the defense of her kitten, rescuing the tormented with one hand and boxing the ear of the tormentor with the other.

Environment alone, however, does not account for Lily’s spirit. Born of a mix of strong Scottish blood, she was given names, Isabella and Lilias, linked to both her maternal (Strange) and paternal (Trotter) lineage. Lilias’s strong-willed, fiercely independent forebears exhibited many of the character traits which years later would mark their namesake. Likewise, the unique artistic gift and sensibility which would inform Lilias’s life and work were clearly evident in her ancestral line.

Isabella Lumisden Strange, Lily’s maternal great-grandmother, was considered to be a woman of “much originality and strength of character.” Granddaughter of the Bishop of Edinburgh, she was fervently pro-Scotland and a Jacobite. She embraced the cause of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, Young Pretender in his attempt to
restore the Stuart monarchy by seizing the British throne from the Hanoverian George II. Isabella was so adamant in her politics that she made it a condition of her favor that her suitor, Robert Strange, fight for Prince Charles Edward Stuart. Fight Robert did, right up to the fateful Battle of Culloden, identifying himself so completely with the cause that he engraved a plate for new bank-notes for the dynasty that was never to be. After the decisive defeat of 16 April 1746, soldiers came to search for him as he hid in the house of his ladylove. Resourceful Isabella deftly lifted her hoop skirt, under which the fugitive took refuge. She continued to work steadily at her needlework, caroling a Jacobean song, while the soldiers searched in vain. Robert’s faithfulness was rewarded with Isabella’s hand in marriage two years later. Not easily discouraged by the political defeat, the couple named their first son Charles Edward, long after it was fashionable to do so! Willingness to follow her personal convictions regardless of risk or cost was a trait that would likewise distinguish her great-granddaughter, Isabella Lilias Trotter.

If Robert Strange sacrificed safety to embrace Isabella’s political causes, she sacrificed security for her talented husband’s artistic ideals. Exiled for three years on the Continent due to his radical political causes, Robert pursued his art, studying in Rouen, Paris, and with the Italian masters in Italy. After the amnesty extended to Jacobites, the young couple returned to London and enjoyed a ten-year respite, during which Robert distinguished himself as an engraver “in the very first European rank” and as an educator, importing collections of the best classical prints from Italy and issuing them at low cost to improve the public’s taste—a proclivity that would be evidenced in his great-granddaughter’s adult-long passion to print and propagate, at her own expense, edifying literature for the masses. The following twenty years, however, were marked by flux in favor and finances, as Robert battled the Prince...
of Wales and the Royal Academy of Art for his principles and causes. He and Isabella alternated living in Britain and on the Continent as his position rose and fell—they, like Lilias, caring less for security in art or politics than for their deeply felt convictions. Finally, the tide of favor turned toward him in 1787, ending four decades of uncertainty, when his engraving of Benjamin West’s painting of the royal family won him a knighthood.

Sir Robert Strange stood among the best in Europe as a pure historical line engraver and was considered foremost of his day in England. The description of his art in The Dictionary of National Biography is strongly suggestive of the sketchbook drawings of his great-granddaughter Lily, whose work, almost a century later, would catch the eye of yet another challenger of the Royal Academy, John Ruskin. The dictionary description points to “a certain distinction of style and a pervading harmony of treatment” in Strange’s art and adds, “His lines, pure, firm, and definite, but essentially flowing, lend themselves to the most delicate and rounded contours, from which all outline disappears.”

The third son of Robert and Isabella was Thomas Lumisden Strange, Lily’s maternal grandfather, whose portrait hung in Devonshire Place House as a daily reminder of the man who, in contrast to his father, made his name and won his knighthood for diplomacy. Born and raised in London, with a four-year Italian interlude, Thomas chose the path of law, studying first at Westminster school and then Christ Church, Oxford. He was appointed Chief Justice of Nova Scotia, where his reputation for exceptional tact and diplomacy won him an appointment to Madras as Recorder and President of the Court and knighthood preceding his departure to this difficult post. There Thomas and his second wife, Louisa Burrough, an artist in her own right, produced their large family. After nineteen years of distinguished service, they returned to England, where
a year later he was created Doctor of Civil Law at Oxford. His work *Elements of Hindu Law*, published seven years later, remained for many years the great authority on this subject.

Thomas and Louisa’s second daughter, Isabella—Lilias’s mother—was one year old when the family returned to England, where they divided their time between the academic community of Oxford and their London home at Great George Street. She, like her grandmother Isabella before her and her daughter after her, was described as a person of originality—not surprising considering the environment in which she was raised. Political and religious leaders and thinkers of the day were frequent visitors at the Strange home—Drummonds, Dundases, Anstruthers, Arbuthnots, and Eyres, to name a few. One can only wonder, given the mix of people and places to which she was exposed over the years, just when and where Isabella first met Alexander Trotter, brother of her second cousin’s husband, and the man who would someday be her husband and the love of her life.

On the paternal side, Lilias Stuart, Lily’s grandmother, married her own Alexander Trotter in 1797. Through this union, the elder Lilias, daughter of John Stuart of Allanbank, would bequeath more than her given name to the younger Lilias: blood of the Stuart dynasty coursed through her veins, reinforcing with royal ties the Strange family’s allegiance to the Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie. Tradition maintains that the Trotter name originated in 1314, when an ancestor—a knight—“trotted” home on horseback from the Battle of Bannockburn with news of victory in the long war for independence from England. Later Trotter descendants settled in the border county of Scotland on an estate at Kettlesheils in Berwickshire.
The year of the Stuart/Trotter union, 1797, forty-two-year-old Alexander, Paymaster of the Navy, acquired the estate of Dreghorn, located near Edinburgh in the ancient county of Midlothian. Over the next decade he added countless acres to his estate and five sons to his family. Active in national and municipal affairs, Alexander was influential in the development of the City of Edinburgh, being connected with drawing up “A Plan of Communication Between the New and Old Towns of Edinburgh,” which united the romantic charm of the Old Town, built around a castle high on a hill, with the unmatched elegance of the New Town, with its crescents, squares, and wide streets.

Alexander’s fourth son and namesake, Lilias’s father, was born in 1814 at Dreghorn within the shadow of Edinburgh’s Old Town. Young Alexander lived in the beautiful lowlands of Scotland until his early twenties, when he left his homeland to pursue a career in London, the financial capital of the Empire. At the recommendation of his uncle, Sir Coutts Trotter, Alexander became a partner at the James Capel & Co. stock broking firm. The move to London during a time of unprecedented economic prosperity was fortuitous for him and, in time, for his family. It was a decision that later would have an important effect in the development of Lilias’s spiritual and leadership potential.