

# William Kingdon Clifford (1845–1879) and his wife Lucy (1846–1929)

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**Abstract.** My husband Roy Chisholm has, with Ruth Farwell, worked on Clifford Algebras and their applications to the theory of fundamental particles for over eighteen years. Together they had intended to organise a celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Clifford's birth with a academic meeting or conference. In 1992 I became interested in William Clifford's wife Lucy. As a result of my research into her life I met Marysa Demoor of the University of Gent. She is a National Science Foundation Research Fellow working in the field of Victorian literature and had become interested in Lucy Clifford's work as a journalist. The four of us decided to form **The William and Lucy Clifford Research Group** and to collaborate in researching the lives and work of *both* the Cliffords. All of the contributions to this and the other five Clifford events which we have organised or participated in this year are a result of joint research and shared involvement.

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*Why does one want to know about a man's life? He gives you his best in his writings.*

I must disagree with Alfred Lord Tennyson's view. Clearly there is always a risk

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that biographical research may produce unwanted surprises. However, in the case of William Kingdon Clifford, I suggest that the details of his life enhance our appreciation of his works. Furthermore, the story of his novelist wife and her life after her husband's death, provides an insight into the social and intellectual world into which their writings and philosophies were launched. Lucy Clifford is revealed as a most remarkable woman. William Clifford emerges as an entirely likeable, indeed lovable, character whose delightful company was sought and enjoyed by his many friends and who was much respected even by those who disagreed with his views.

The story begins in Exeter in England on May 4th 1845 when William was born.

His second name, Kingdon was his mother's maiden name. She died when he was nine years old and her constitutional weakness is said to have been passed to William. William was a brilliant child who displayed exceptional mathematical ability. He developed into an all round intellectual and progressed through Templeton's Academy in Exeter to King's College in London and then in 1863, with a minor scholarship, to Trinity College Cambridge. Fred Pollock, later Sir Frederick Pollock, Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford University, who was to remain William's closest friend for the remainder of his life, noted the arrival of Clifford at Trinity College in this way

*Not many weeks had passed of my first term at Trinity when it began to be noised about that among the new minor scholars there was a young man of extraordinary mathematical powers, and eccentric in appearance and opinions.*

He was, when he arrived at Cambridge, an ardent High Churchman. However, after reading Darwin and meeting Spencer, Clifford renounced his faith and became an eloquent and outspoken expounder of agnosticism and later atheism. He became a fierce enemy of the formality of religions, which he regarded as subversive to morality. At that time all Members of Cambridge University were required each year to affirm their allegiance to the Church of England by publicly signing the 39 Articles of Protestant Faith which had been drawn up three centuries earlier. By renouncing his faith and refusing in 1866 to sign, Clifford denied himself the possibility of a Professorship at Cambridge although he was elected Fellow from 1868 to 1871. Then, University College in London – known then as the 'Godless College' – offered him in 1871 the post of Professor of Applied Mathematics and he spent his most productive years there.

While still at Cambridge he was an enthusiastic gymnast and took great pride

Fig. 1. 9 Park Place where a commemorative plaque has been placed by the Exeter Civic Society

in demonstrating his skills. In 1869 he wrote that he “*was in a very heaven of joy*” because he had been asked to demonstrate his ‘corkscrew’ again and again.

This consisted in running a lamp-post or pole, leaping up and grasping it with both hands and swinging round as many times as possible while descending. A friend described another of his exploits

*His nerve at great heights was extraordinary. I am appalled now to think that he climbed up and sat on the cross bars of the weathercock on a church tower and when by way of doing something worse I went up and hung by my toes to the bars as he did the same.*

William Clifford was an impressive orator and an enthusiastic and able debater. He was elected to the famous elite society of Cambridge ‘*The Apostles*’. This club was notable for the high intellectual qualities of its members among whom were Frederick Dennison Maurice, Alfred Tennyson, James Clerk Maxwell, James and Leslie Stephen, Henry Sidgwick, Bertrand Russell, Maynard Keynes and Leonard Woolf. In their weekly debates the members, limited to twelve in residence at the University, had to obey certain rules which embodied the ‘*Spirit of the Apostles*’. The main rules were that members had to give their honest opinions on the most delicate and inflammatory issues of the time, and that every member had to respect the views of the other members however much they disagreed with them.

In the November of the first year at the age of eighteen Clifford published his first mathematical paper – he had been an undergraduate for only two months! He threw himself into Cambridge life, studied French, German, Spanish, Greek, Arabic and Sanskrit. He also learned Morse Code and Shorthand. In his third year he won the Trinity College prize for declamation with a discourse on Sir Walter Raleigh. It was Clifford who was responsible for the first translation into English of Riemann’s 1854 paper on the new non-Euclidean geometries. He was much influenced by that work and in 1870 his address to the Cambridge Philosophical Society included these points

*Riemann has shown that as there are different kinds of lines and surfaces, so there are different kinds of space of three dimensions; and that we can only find out by experience to which of these kinds the space we live in belongs...*

*I wish here to indicate a manner in which these speculations may be applied to the investigation of physical phenomena. I hold in fact,*

1. *That small portions of space are in fact analogous to little hills on*

Fig. 2. Corkscrew

Fig. 3. Church Steeple

- a surface which is on average flat; namely that the ordinary laws of geometry are not valid in them.*
2. *That this property of being curved or distorted is continually being passed on from one portion of space to another after the manner of a wave.*
  3. *That this variation of the curvature of space is what really happens in that phenomenon that we call the motion of matter, whether ponderable or ethereal.*
  4. *That in the physical world nothing else takes place but this variation, subject (possibly) to the laws of continuity.*

Did Clifford actually anticipate Einstein as some people have suggested? We shall never know. Historians of mathematics and science disagree about this, but Clifford's powers of imagination about space were undoubtedly great. In Volume One of Lectures and Essays (edited by FR. Pollock and L. Stephen and published by Macmillan in 1879) in one of several references, Clifford 'anticipates' Einstein's curvature of physical space in these words

*I am supposed to know that the three angles of a rectilinear triangle are exactly two right angles. Now suppose that three points are taken in space, distant from one another as far as the Sun is from Alpha Centauri, and the shortest distances between these points are drawn so as to form a triangle... Then I do not know that this sum would differ at all from two right angles; but also I do not know that the difference would be less than ten degrees.*

Also in Volume One (pp. 237-238) he writes

*Now, whatever may turn out to be the ultimate nature of the ether and of molecules, we know that to some extent at least they obey the same dynamic laws, and that they act upon one another in accordance with these laws. Until, therefore, it is absolutely disproved, it must remain the simplest and most probable assumption that they are finally made of the same stuff – that the material molecule is some kind of knot or coagulation of ether.*

Had Clifford not diversified his interests so actively he could well have been first Wrangler, but in 1867 without working for his examinations, he, like Whewell, Sylvester, Sir William Thompson and Clerk Maxwell before him took second place in the Tripos and was second Smith's Prizeman. In this year he also gave his first public lecture at the Royal Institution.

While a fellow of Trinity William Clifford took part in the 1870 Eclipse Expedition to view the eclipse of the sun on December the 22nd of that year. This photograph from the Royal Astronomical Society shows Clifford seated at the

right. The ship, *The Psyche*, struck a rock off the coast of Sicily and sank, although the instruments and crew were saved. The photographs of the corona that they obtained were exceptionally successful.

Clifford was a most vivacious speaker. The Metaphysical Society, The London Mathematical Society, The Sunday Lecture Society, the British Association, the Royal Institution and The Royal Society – all these bodies have records of brilliant discourses given by him. He made only the briefest of written notes before his lectures, but was said to be one of the only mathematicians who could make *anyone* he talked to feel that they too could understand mathematics. His FRS came in 1874 when he was 29. He had by the way modestly refused – and who else can we possibly imagine doing this – an earlier nomination on the grounds that he did not want to ‘*become respectable just yet*’. Among those proposing him for election were Maxwell and Tyndall who nominated him on the basis that he was

*... distinguished for his acquaintance with the metaphysics of geometrical and physical science and as an original investigator in the same.*

Of course it was not surprising that such an attractive and vital character as Clifford would be drawn to an exceptional woman. In 1874 he met Sophia Lucy Lane. On the 7th of April 1875 he left a message on the blackboard for his students

*I am obliged to be absent on important business which will probably not occur again*

It was his wedding day!

Lucy and Willi, as she called him, seemed made for each other. A delightful description of their Colville Road home is to be found in Edward Clodd’s ‘*Memories*’

*At the Clifford’s you were sure to meet someone worth knowing. There was no Smart Set to fill their empty time and waste yours in inane gossip; no prigs to irritate you with their affectation; no pendants to bore you with their academic vagueness, but just a company of men and women who wanted to meet one another and have a full and free talk.*

Lucy and William’s life together was full of happiness. Clifford was a most attractive companion. He loved children and parties and discussions and fairy tales. Their two daughters were a delight to him and it seemed that nothing could spoil the glorious future that had been predicted for him. However the signs of pulmonary weakness were upon him and consumption, that ‘*pestilent pursuer of genius*’, took hold. His great nervous energy – he would work right

through the night at times – coupled with his constitutional weakness were to prove a fatal mixture and by 1876 he was showing signs of a most serious breakdown in health. He spent six months away with Lucy in Algiers and Spain and Switzerland. Lucy was to use these travels to advantage in her writings. With all writers even great personal tragedy is grist to the mill, and time and again her husband's philosophies, his loss of faith, the nature of his sickness and death, were to be reflected in her writings. By 1878 he was clearly not well enough to work and the Senate of University College took two unprecedented steps.

First, the University Senate changed its statutes so that Clifford might retain his Chair but only be required to lecture if he was fit and then only on his own chosen aspects of his work.

Secondly, a Public Testimonial Fund was set up to demonstrate the affection and respect that was held for him. Over 200 friends and colleagues made financial contributions and signed a tribute to him. They hurried this through so that he would know of it before he died. Interestingly, many notable academics who declined to add their names to the Testimonial because they did not agree with Clifford's atheistic views, contributed later for his widow.

In January 1879, with William dangerously ill and not expected to survive the passage, the Cliffords sailed to Madeira in the vain hope that he would recover, but there on March 3rd 1879 at the age of only thirty-three William Kingdon Clifford died.

Fifty-seven of his papers were collected and edited by R. Tucker and published in 1882 as '*Mathematical Papers*'. His unfinished book '*The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences*' was completed by his pupil Karl Pearson. Sir Frederick Pollock who, with Leslie Stephen, edited Clifford's papers after his death wrote in the Introduction to '*Lectures and Essays*' these words

*Clifford's patience, cheerfulness, unselfishness and continued interest in his friends and in what was going on in the world, were unbroken and unabated through all that heavy time. Far be it from me, as it was from him, to grudge any man or woman the hope or comfort of sincere expectation of a better life to come. But let this be set down and remembered, plainly and openly, for the instruction and rebuke of those who fancy that their dogmas have the monopoly of happiness, and will not face the fact that there are true men, and women, to whom the dignity of manhood and the fellowship of life are sufficient to bear the weight of both life and death. And this is the witness of his ending; that as never man loved life more, so never man feared death less.*

Fortunately for those who would know more of Clifford's last hours of life we can find, in the *Letters and Journals* of William Cory, some account of his conversations with Clifford. William Cory, poet and teacher, Fellow of King's and Master at Eton was staying in Madeira at that time. He wrote of Clifford's decline from being able to sustain a vivacious philosophical conversation to when, just days before he died he wrote this

*The last time I saw Clifford he could not speak ... but his wife said that he would like to see my little girl in her ball dress ... I saw that although he tried to listen to me his eyes were fixed on a bright head and a pale blue dress, his last bit of sweetness. It was as if one had put a flower on his counterpane.*

Clifford had requested that he should not be buried on foreign soil and his body was returned to England. One of the newspaper correspondents writing on April 5th 1879, reported the arrival of the boat with Clifford's body on board. He gave a very full report and spoke of Clifford in this way

*Had he lived he would have won a name second to none in the Mathematical world. As it was there were only two or three living men who could be mentioned in the same breath. He was equally at home in Space of 3, 4 or  $x$  dimensions;*

Here, from the Dictionary of National Biography, is part of Leslie Stephen's entry for his friend William

*As a mathematical writer Clifford was marked by a keen power of imagination, ... he was a standing example of the fact that a true man of science, especially a Mathematician, is a man of speculation, of tested theory, of keen albeit disciplined imagination. His 'Canonical Dissection of a Riemann's Surface', his theory of 'Biquaternions', and his unfinished memoir 'On the Classification of Loci', belong to the Classics of mathematical literature. As a mathematical teacher Clifford did much (and his influence is still working) to revolutionise the teaching of elementary mathematics; he introduced into England the graphical and geometric methods of Mobius, Culmann and other Germans. His uncompleted textbook on 'Dynamics', his fragmentary 'Common Sense of the Exact Sciences', and the 'Lectures on Geometry' represent especially the direction and novelty of his elementary teaching; its aim was not to teach a student the analytical solution of a problem but to force him to think for himself.*

William Clifford's death was a tragic loss and his young wife was left with their two daughters to support. George Eliot and others managed to secure

an award of £200 from the Royal Literary Fund which, added to the income of £90 from the Testimonial Fund, would allow them to live a simple life in London. Following a period of recuperation with her family Lucy began to take up the threads of the writing career she had abandoned when she had married five years earlier. She wrote articles for magazines and journals and became a regular contributor to *The Athenaeum*. The 'At Homes' which she held on Sunday afternoons kept her in touch with William's old friends and allowed her to cultivate new ones. Her former editors and literary connections helped her to find publishers for her children's stories. Then, in 1885 she wrote a best seller ...

But, I must break off from the story and tell something of how this research about William Clifford's wife began. Lucy's friendship with Henry James is recorded in Leon Edel's *Life of Henry James*. In his will he left Lucy Clifford one hundred pounds – quite a substantial sum in those days. I was intrigued to know that William Clifford's widow had become famous in her own right and I wanted to know more about her. There is no biography to consult and so I began searching in libraries, looking through old newspapers, reading biographies and letters of anyone who might have been connected with the Cliffords. I traced and obtained copies of over 200 letters written by Lucy and preserved in collections in England and the United States. I wrote a short and, what now seems a woefully meagre biographical study of Lucy which Professor Jamie Keller generously offered to publish in his journal *Advances in Applied Clifford Algebras*. It was through this publication that I met Marysa Demoor of the University of Gent in Belgium. Later I was fortunate enough to be given sole access to a treasure trove of letters from well known literary and other celebrities who had corresponded with Lucy and whose letters she had saved. Lucy lived for 50 years after William's death. She was not a conventionally beautiful woman, but there must have been something specially attractive about her personality for she inspired close friendship from a wide variety of eminent people. Three well known and highly respected American men of that time sought her company.

The three were Henry James, one of the greatest of American writers, Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior the Supreme Court Judge, spoken of by some as 'the greatest American', and James Russell Lowell, Harvard poet, essayist and diplomat. Let me begin with Henry James.

*In heaven there'll be no Algebra  
No learning dates or names  
But only angels playing harps*

Fig. 4. Lucy Clifford 1846-1929

*And reading Henry James.*

I smiled as I read this for the first time. From Clifford Algebras and the search for Lucy I had come to Henry James' house, *Lamb House* in Rye, where the ditty linking the two hangs framed on the wall of one of the rooms. Lucy met Henry James when she was already a widow and they became friends at once. He was the same age as W K Clifford. His brother William James had known and respected William Clifford as a philosopher referring to him as '*that delicious enfant terrible*'.

Henry James enjoyed female company and the comfortable world of 'At Homes', and luncheons, theatre visits and leisurely European travel suited him down to the ground. Edith Wharton the wealthy American writer invited him to travel in both Europe and the States. Elizabeth Robins the colourful actress and writer was a close friend. Jessie Allen his 'lady bountiful' to whom he wrote more than 200 letters was always on hand. And of course there was his mysterious relationship with Constance Fennimore Woolson which ended in her violent suicide in Venice. But Lucy Clifford, who James wrote to as '*my beloved girl*', always held a very special place in his affection. He would write of her as, '*one of the finest, bravest creatures possible*'. He went often to her Sunday teatime 'Salon' and, along with her young literary protégés and older established figures, she would briskly organise him, make suggestions about his writing and sort out his domestic problems. Henry James would take Lucy to the West End Cinema and walk back through Hyde Park to her home in Marylebone. What on earth does one talk about while walking home from the cinema with Henry James? Luckily for us the writer Somerset Maugham has recorded in his memoirs exactly how Lucy did behave with Henry James. He writes of an evening at the Aldwych Theatre when 'The Cherry Orchard' was being performed. Maugham was there with Henry James and with Lucy. He tells us

*Henry James was perplexed by 'The Cherry Orchard', and in the second interval he set out to explain to us how antagonistic to his French sympathies was this Russian incoherence. Lumbering through his tortuous phrases, he hesitated now and again in a search for the exact word to express his dismay; but Mrs Clifford had a quick and agile mind; she knew the word he was looking for and every time he paused immediately supplied it. This was the last thing he wanted. He was too well-mannered to protest, but an almost imperceptible expression on his face betrayed his irritation and, obstinately refusing the word she offered, he laboriously sought another, and again Mrs*

*Clifford suggested it only to have it again turned down. It was a scene of high comedy.*

Lucy was clearly not in awe of Henry James.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. – famous son of a famous father – was a very close friend of Lucy's. This most eminent judge whose book on Common Law is still known as one of the great sources of inspiration to English speaking lawyers, was one of the greatest intellectual and moral forces in America. He met Lucy through his life-long friendship with Sir Frederick Pollock, Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford. Oliver Wendell Holmes loved to visit Lucy when he was in London. They corresponded over a period of seventeen years. They discussed literature, politics, philosophy, gossip – everything! Lucy was no intellectual lightweight, and the quality of her friendship lasted through the years and across the miles.

Many of James Russell Lowell's letters to Lucy are included in the edition of his '*Collected Letters*'. This Harvard poet, essayist and diplomat met Lucy during the years that he held the post of US Ambassador to London from 1881–1885. He was at the centre of a glittering array of top people but always had time for Lucy. They became firm friends and kept up a correspondence till his death in 1891.

Lucy worked hard and became a successful writer. Her first book after William's death was published in 1882 and titled '*Anyhow Stories for Children*'. In 1885 when she was 30 she produced her first full length novel, this was her best seller, '*Mrs Keith's Crime*'. She published it anonymously. It hit the headlines and ran to five editions before she was revealed as the author. Robert Browning thought it 'splendid', Thomas Hardy admired it, Lord Morley thought it 'revolting' – it was a literary sensation. '*Mrs Keith's Crime*' deals with the tragic life of a 30-year-old widow. Left with a son and a consumptive daughter she turns to portrait painting to earn her living. The son dies from scarlet fever and she seeks a warmer climate for the health of her daughter. In Malaga her own frail health breaks down. When she knows that both she and her daughter are terminally ill, she decides to kill her daughter rather than leave her to be cared for by others. It is a tragic tale, but apart from all else the vividly described infanticide episode ensured that it was book of the year when it was first published.

Another book, '*Aunt Anne*', told of a woman of 68 who loved and married a man of 27. Again, this is a controversial story. Arnold Bennet admired it greatly and mentioned it in the preface to "The Old Wives Tale" as "*Mrs Clifford's most precious novel*".

Of her plays, '*The Darkness of the Night*' played to packed houses in London

and the provinces. She wrote 10 novels, 7 collections of short stories and many plays and articles. Lucy loved to travel. In many of her books, and especially in '*A Flash of Summer*' her characters set off for foreign parts. Much of Lucy Clifford's writing would not survive modern critical appraisal, and her books are difficult to find even in the more important libraries. However, to us, an interesting recurring theme in her stories is the simple philosophy of her beloved husband that the only really important thing in life is for each of us to strive to do what we can do best as best it can be done.

Lucy Clifford wrote many hundreds of wonderful letters. She supported her friends in their troubles and congratulated their successes. She was loved. A mass of correspondence remains. Over one hundred letters remain for example from Lord Fitzmaurice who was an Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office during Gladstone's government. He and Lucy exchanged letters over a period of ten years. She was a sympathetic and lively correspondent and somehow made time in her busy life as a working mother to maintain her links with old friends. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, writing to Lucy from his Psychic Bookshop near the British Museum, was a close friend and suggested, after William's death, that she should consider taking up Spiritualism offering to lend her books on the subject.

Thomas Hardy wrote many letters. His clear regular handwriting at eighty reflecting his training as an architect. George Bernard Shaw wrote to her, bursting off the page saying

*You were lucky enough to be married to a clever man – cleverer than anyone except Einstein – cleverer even than ME!*

... and then going on to tell her in no uncertain terms what mistakes she had made in the play she had sent him to read.

In spite of working tremendously hard at her own writings she always had time to write and support or sympathise with her friends. Of course letters reveal relationships and it is no surprise that letters from more than 200 of her friends illustrate the special place that she held in their hearts.

She had a good eye for new writers and Sir Frederick Macmillan respected her judgement as a reader for Macmillan's the publishers. A friend had sent her from India a shabby looking book of short stories. She instantly recognised the high quality of the writing and when in 1890 the young Rudyard Kipling arrived in London she befriended him, introduced him to the influential people who could help him get his work published. He was always at her house and they were the closest of friends. Lucy was no stay-at-home. It was popular in Victorian and Edwardian times for writers and artists to travel and spent

time in Europe. Lucy had first travelled to the Mediterranean with William. They had also visited the Alps seeking, like so many sufferers at that time, the mountain cure for William's tubercular weakness. After his death she regularly spent time in France, Italy, Switzerland and Spain using those trips abroad to set the scene for her books and plays. In 1912 Lucy visited America. She carried with her letters of introduction from Henry James. The New York Times reported on her visit and she took the opportunity to voice her grievance, that the lack of copyright laws there had caused her to lose money since her books had been pirated and sold in thousands with no profit to her.

Throughout her life we have evidence of her undying love and reverence for her husband. Even as late as 1913 when asked by her publishers for biographical details about herself she wrote

*If you can say a few more words about my husband I would love it – how brilliant he was, how witty and what an adorable nature he had; he was so gay and simple and light-hearted, and had an indescribable charm. He doesn't count next to Darwin dear Mr Sladen, that was not his line. At the time of his death he was said to be the third mathematician in Europe, Cayley and Sylvester being the first two. He was the most brilliant Fellow of Trinity of his day; the youngest Fellow of the Royal Society. There was nothing that he couldn't have done or wouldn't have done if he had lived, for there was no side of life that did not appeal to him. I love what you say about my house being one of the Meccas of Literature. But you should have come here in his time, people of every rank and of every shade of thought came, and no matter how little they agreed with him, they were always hypnotised for the hour: for one thing he had such wonderful dark-lashed blue eyes (he gave them to Ethel) and a wonderful soul seemed to be looking out of them.*

We can count William Clifford as a lucky man – he got the wife he deserved. Lucy died in 1929. In her obituary in 'The Times' she was described as

*... distinguished as a novelist and for many years an honoured figure in literary London.*

She is buried with William in Highgate cemetery near to Herbert Spencer and their beloved George Eliot. From their grave the imposing monument to Karl Marx can be seen. When Dr Ruth Farwell visited the grave some time ago she took some clippers and a trowel and cleared away some of the overgrowth to reveal the headstone.

The words of the tombstone inscription for William Clifford, which he composed, and which were the last trembling words he ever wrote, is uncompromising – a statement of his belief.

*I was not, and was conceived:  
I loved and did a little work.  
I am not, and grieve not.*

However, although he of course would have none of it, I keep my own image of him – up there somewhere, hanging by his toes from some celestial steeple, his blue eyes twinkling as he looks down and smiles at the idea that even he could not have conceived of nearly 150 years ago – the E Mail Clifford Bulletin Board which, silently and instantly, is beaming up the latest Clifford Research news on the screens of his followers all over the world.

But I intend to leave the last word with Lucy for it is through her that I began my research and it is she who gave her husband unending love and reverence. For her memorial she asked for a simple addition to the headstone. No mention of her own success as a writer only

*and Lucy his wife, died April 21st 1929*

and then these words

*O yes, such silver currents when they join,  
Do glorify the banks and bound them in.*

A moving and fitting epitaph for the two exceptional people we are honouring in this year, the 150th anniversary of William Clifford's birth.

Fig. 5. Picture of grave stone