

Ellen Hutchins

Letter from Dr Robert Scott to Dawson Turner

19 March 1808

Extract:

Now with respect to Miss Hutchins — all my information must be drawn from her friend Mackay who has the honour of having been her tutor in Botany — you may recollect that I mentioned to you that previous to McKay setting out on his Kerry etc tour I had recommended it to him to examine as well as his time would admit the shores of Bantry Bay as from its site etc I had not a doubt it would amply repay the marine botanist. McKay made nothing of the business as indeed his stay there would not admit of it but having made a recommendation to Miss Hutchins he instilled into her breast a passion I should not assert for himself but what is nearest & dearest to him — Botany. She is he admits not very beautiful nor is she very young I understand verging to 30 but she is very accomplished & ingenious, reading & speaking he says French & Italian & being able from her knowledge of these to understand your characters of the mosses. Her family is a respectable one. I have seen & been in company with her elder brother who had been bred a lawyer. He is reckoned a man of abilities. He had however adopted principles which were at that time too prevalent. He is a man of I believe of ample fortune & resides in England while his sister I understand & some younger brothers inhabit the family seat. I hope Mrs Turner will not look over this minute report to your minute inquiries with a jealous eye. My paper will admit no more but to wish her & you to pass hand in hand through this life with accumulating health & happiness. I do not wish you observe increase of wealth. (I never I assure you wished it to myself) farther than to give independence & a moderate share is sufficient for that. I sincerely congratulate you & Mrs T on a recent event & hope it will induce you to visit us early in the summer. Adieu my esteemed friend & believe me
sincerely yours R.S.

19th March 1808

Notes:

Ellen was born on 17th March 1785, so had just had her 23rd birthday when Dr Robert Scott wrote this letter (and she had been 20 when Mackay visited her at Ballylickey in the summer of 1805). 23 is not exactly verging to or verging on 30! Admittedly, women's ages were a closely guarded secret. Her older (eldest) brother, Emanuel, born in 1769, was 16 years older than Ellen, which may have contributed to Dr Scott and Mackay thinking Ellen was older than she actually was.

Of Emanuel, Scott wrote: 'He had however adopted principles which were at that time too prevalent.' Emanuel had been an undergraduate at Trinity with Wolfe Tone and Whitley Stokes and had been a member of the United Irishmen alongside them. I assume that the 'principles' referred to by Scott were Emanuel's political views - the views expressed by the United Irishmen.

Ellen stayed in Dr Whitley Stokes' household at 16 Harcourt Street, Dublin after falling ill while at a boarding school between Donnybrook and Dublin. The memoir written by Ellen's niece, Alicia Hutchins (1832 - 1915) states that Stokes was a family friend. We don't know how long Ellen was in the Stokes household but know that she is back in Ballylickey by 1804 or 1805. In Ellen's letters she cites Dr Stokes as her friend and instructor in Botany.

Another 'find' in 2023 was a copy of The Works of Edmund Spencer in an edition from 1845 which had belonged to Whitley Stokes and was then given to Alicia Hutchins. It has written in it: 'Alicia Hutchins from Whitley Stokes July 16 1853'. Stokes died in 1845, so the book must have been given by a member of his family to Alicia. Whitley Stokes appears to be written in a different hand to the rest of the inscription. A letter from 1913 to Alicia from her sister, Louisa (who married Florence Nightingale's first cousin, William Shore Nightingale) shows us that the Hutchins and the Stokes families remained friends for at least two generations.

Madeline
December 2023