

JEFFREYS, JUSTINA (1787 - 1869), gentlewoman

Name: Justina Jeffreys
Date of birth: 1787
Date of death: 1869
Spouse: George Jeffreys
Child: Louisa Maria Jeffreys
Child: Georgina Jeffreys
Child: Edward Jeffreys
Child: George Jeffreys
Child: Charles Alured Jeffreys
Child: Eliza Justina Jeffreys
Child: Isabella Jeffreys
Child: Susan Jeffreys
Child: Sarah Ann Jeffreys
Parent: Susan Leslie
Parent: Charles McMurdo
Gender: Female
Occupation: gentlewoman
Area of activity: Royalty and Society
Author: Caroline Palmer

Justina Jeffreys was born on 10 September 1787 and baptised in St Andrew's Parish, Jamaica. Her mother, Susan Leslie (1766-1812), was a free 'mulatto' woman, and her father was a Scotsman, Charles McMurdo (1744-1826), Captain of the 3rd East Kent Regiment of Foot, 'the Buffs', and Major of Brigade in Jamaica. During her early years she grew up in Jamaica with her younger brother Charles McMurdo Leslie (1790-1865). It was not uncommon at the time for men stationed in Jamaica to take a mistress for the duration of their postings and the illegitimate offspring were recorded in the baptismal registers as the 'supposed children' of their fathers. At the end of his Jamaica posting McMurdo went on to Canada where he married a well-connected white woman, and started a legitimate family, before returning to his native Scotland. By 1791 Susan Leslie was in another unmarried relationship with a Scottish doctor, John Wright, by whom she bore two sons.

Justina's life must have changed radically at about the age of six when she was sent to grow up as an only child in Wales, in the care of Edward Scott (1752-1842) who probably already knew her since he had been Captain McMurdo's fellow officer in Jamaica. In 1789 Scott had married the widow Louisa de Saumaise (1755-1803), only daughter of Lewis Anwyl (Anwyl family), who inherited the small country estate of Bodtalog near Tywyn in Meirionethshire. Adoption was an informal arrangement in those days. Justina grew up to address him as Captain, and was known as Justina Scott. Both her adoptive parents were of elevated rank. Edward Scott came from a prominent family of courtiers, his mother had been a great favourite of George III and wet nurse to the Prince of Wales. Edward had divided his life between the Buffs and serving as Equerry to the Prince of Wales, later George IV. His wife, Louisa, was the widow of his cousin Count Louis de Saumaise, a proud descendent of the distinguished classical scholar Claude Saumaise, whose royalist tract in defence of King Charles I was published in Latin in 1649, provoking a response from John Milton.

Retired on the income of his wife's estate, Edward Scott followed intellectual pursuits, rejecting Anglican doctrine in favour of Unitarianism and corresponding with James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill, the Welsh lexicographer and antiquary **William Owen Pughe** (who gave him Welsh lessons) and the satirical author Thomas Love Peacock. In this milieu Justina grew up. She is believed to be the model for the accomplished and unconventional Anthelia, and Edward Scott for her father Sir Henry Melincourt in Thomas Love Peacock's 1817 novel of that name. This is Peacock's description of Anthelia's education:

In this romantic seclusion Anthelia was born. Her mother died giving birth. Her father, Sir Henry Melincourt, a man of great acquirements, and of a retired disposition, devoted himself in solitude to the cultivation of his daughter's understanding; for he was one of those who maintained the heretical notion that women are, or at least may be, rational beings; though, from the great pains usually taken in what is called education to make them otherwise, there are unfortunately very few examples to warrant the truth of this theory.

In 1814 Justina married, at Tywyn, the newly enriched George Jeffreys (1792-1868) and they embarked on the construction of Glandyfi Castle, a Regency gothic castle overlooking the Dyfi from above the toll road from Aberystwyth to Machynlleth. The Jeffreys family wealth was centred upon Shrewsbury and the selection of this site on what was formerly an industrial holding, suggests the influence of Justina's attachment to Tywyn and Aberdyfi, and of the fashionable ideas about the Picturesque so interesting to her friend Thomas Love Peacock. When Peacock married Jane Gryffydh in 1820 his bride took up residence in Glandyfi Castle, and he also dined at the castle on a number of occasions in the next eleven years.

Justina and George Jeffreys had nine children, Louisa Maria (1815-1873), Georgina(1816-1899), Edward (1818-1888), George (1819-1848), Charles Alured (1821-1904), Eliza Justina (1823-1900), Isabella (1824-1825), Susan (1826-1897) and Sarah Ann (1828-1897). Their granddaughter Louisa Florence, daughter of Charles, who was born in New Zealand in 1854, married Henry William Wynne Ffoulkes of Eriviat Hall, Henllan, Denbighshire and became a poet and theosophist. The American campaigning lesbian Tee Corinne (1943-2006) was a great great granddaughter, descended from Louisa Maria.

Justina and George Jeffreys resided all their lives in their pretty castle: he serving in the gentlemanly offices of magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant of Cardiganshire and she as the matriarch of the family. She died in 1869, a year after her husband, and is buried with him, two sons and a granddaughter near the gate into St Michael's Eglwys Fach. She was a woman of mixed-race, probably the granddaughter of an enslaved woman, who found her fortune as a member of the Welsh gentry.

Author

Caroline Palmer

Sources

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Further reading

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