

JOE'S WIVES

Peter T. Marsh

Joseph Chamberlain had the good fortune to find a wife well attuned to each stage of his evolving career. That delight, however, turned twice to devastation when he lost his first wife in childbirth and his second wife shortly after giving birth to a baby.



Harriet Chamberlain, née Kenrick.

A rapidly rising metal manufacturer in Birmingham by the age of twenty-five, Joseph cemented his position among the industrial elite of the town by marrying Harriet Kenrick. She was daughter of the heir to a flourishing hollow-ware business in West Bromwich, and her brother was already a close friend of Joseph. There was a religious as well as economic affinity between the two families: both were Unitarians.

On returning from their honeymoon in Cornwall, the young couple found a house in Harborne in which Joseph luxuriated after seven years in lodgings. 'We breakfast in the little room,' Harriet reported happily to his mother, 'dine in the dining room, and pass the evening in the drawing room.' Her father introduced Joseph to the delights of gardening which became his absorbing recreation for the

rest of his life. Their family was doubly extended over the next two years by the birth of their first child, Beatrice, and by the marriage of Harriet's brother William to Joseph's sister Mary.

Death of Harriet

The following year Harriet gave birth to her second child, Austen. The delivery went well, so quickly indeed that the baby arrived before the doctor. But Harriet came down with puerperal fever, lapsed into delirium and died.

Joseph was devastated by her death. 'There is nothing in which I was engaged,' he told her sister, 'none of my actions, hardly any of my thoughts that she did not share & that have not lost with her all present hold & interest.' He fled from their house and took refuge in her parents' home where her older sister could look after the babies.

His staff at work saw that he no longer cared how he looked. But with desperate concentration he threw himself into his business. Over the next four years he and his partners turned their business into the dominant manufacturer of steel rods, wire and screws in Britain and established the pricing practices of the industry worldwide.

These industrial breakthroughs opened Joseph's eyes to the social impact that they were having on the town, not all of them for the better. He saw with alarm that a chasm was being opened by great mass-producing industries like his own between their owners and their workers. But he also perceived that capital and labour could benefit jointly from industrial capitalism by cooperating with each other with reinforcement from local and national government.

Florence Kenrick

At the same time he discovered a new love consonant with his awakened social concern. He was drawn to the youngest daughter of a business associate, another Kenrick, Harriet's first cousin Florence. It was an improbable match. At nineteen she was twelve years his junior; and their difference in temperament was equally great. An avid reader, she was quiet and reflective while he was brash and impulsive.

Both approached marriage apprehensively: Joseph remained insecure after the death of Harriet; Florence was anxious about the responsibilities she would assume as stepmother to two little children, and her health was not strong.

Marriage, however, brought out remarkable strengths of character in her. Suppressing their fears, Joseph and Florence produced a family of their own, beginning with Neville the year after their marriage, followed every year or two by daughters.

Meanwhile Florence fostered Joseph's emergence as a Radical politician. She urged him to stand for election to the town council. She clipped out, bound and indexed press reports of his speeches for future use. She equalled if she did not indeed exceed Joseph in Radicalism. She was committed to the advancement of women. She edited the blasts of new Radicalism that Joseph wrote for national consumption



Florence Chamberlain, Harriet's cousin, 1871.

purpose to his life. This repeated tragedy in childbirth left him utterly distraught. After arranging for the burial but without waiting for the funeral, he fled, this time not only from home but from family and country. He did not say and probably did not know where he was going. Accompanied by an unquestioning friend, he passed through France, ending up in Algiers.

He tendered his resignation as mayor and did not give an address where he could be reached. He returned after a few weeks to Birmingham but stayed just long enough to pick up his brother Arthur and brother-in-law William Kenrick before fleeing on to Scotland. He did not see his children.

He sought eventually to save himself, as after the death of Harriet, through frantic work. Even in tendering his resignation as mayor, he had indicated his willingness to keep up his work on the council and in committee. The council agreed to release him from his ceremonial duties but insisted that only he could carry forward his precedent-setting plans for the transformation of Birmingham. Joseph agreed but without the clear sense of direction that Florence and he had found.

Immersion in public work also kept him away from his children whom he did not know how to face. He did not tell them of their mother's death, leaving that to her twin sister. He wrote to his eldest, Beatrice, during his flight through France; and Beatrice promptly responded, expanding their correspondence to embrace the rest of his children. But it took more than twelve years and another marriage to bring Joseph and his children warmly back together.

The American visit and Mary Endicott

By that time Joseph was once again a rising figure, now on the great stage of national and imperial politics as head of a diplomatic mission to deal with a dispute between Britain and the United States over fisheries. At home in British domestic politics he had emerged as the foremost champion of the Union with Ireland, having led a rebellion against Gladstone's proposal for Irish Home Rule that drove the Liberals from power and installed a Conservative government with dissident Liberal support. Joseph was exhilarated by his experience of North America, impressed by the strong support he received in the United States after its civil war for maintenance of the British Union with Ireland; and he was

in the *Fortnightly Review*. Secretary, editor, hostess and counsellor, she became his closest political partner, closer to him than anyone before or after.

Death of Florence

Seven years after their marriage Joseph stood on the brink of his greatest achievement in civic government. Elected for a second year as mayor of Birmingham, he had persuaded the town council, the ratepayers and the House of Commons to take the gas companies of the town into civic ownership and use the profits of that amalgamation to give the town a healthier and cheaper supply of water.

Florence was expecting the birth of their next child, which turned out to be twins. Despite the strain of the double birth, the doctor reported that she was doing well – when she suddenly fainted and died.

Her death ripped Joseph away from everything that he loved and had given



Mary Endicott, soon to be Mrs Chamberlain, in her wedding dress, 1888.

delighted by the lionising social reception he received in Washington.

There he won the heart of Mary Endicott, daughter of a blue-blooded Massachusetts grandee in President Cleveland's cabinet. Close to Beatrice and Austen in age and close to his British Conservative associates in tastes and temperament, Mary warmed the Unionist alliance and brought his family closely together again.

Slowly Joseph opened up emotionally, able eventually to shed tears when his youngest daughter died. But he never became dependent upon Mary as he had upon Harriet and Florence – until he suffered a stroke that drove him out of active political life. He never turned to Mary for counsel. For whatever reason, they did not have children. And she long outlived him. ●

Peter T. Marsh is Honorary Professor of History at the University of Birmingham.

Further Reading

Diana Whitehill Laing, *Mistress of Herself* [a biography of Mary Chamberlain], (Barre Publishers, 1965).

Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (Yale University Press, 1994).

Peter T. Marsh, *The Chamberlain Litany: Letters within a Governing Family from Empire to Appeasement* (Haus Books, 2010).