

'TREASURING THINGS OF THE LEAST': COMPANION EXTRAORDINAIRE, MARY HOPE GREG

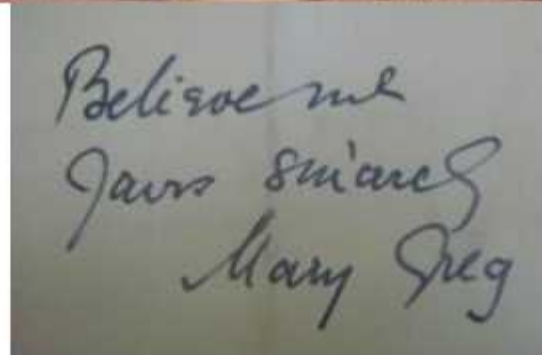
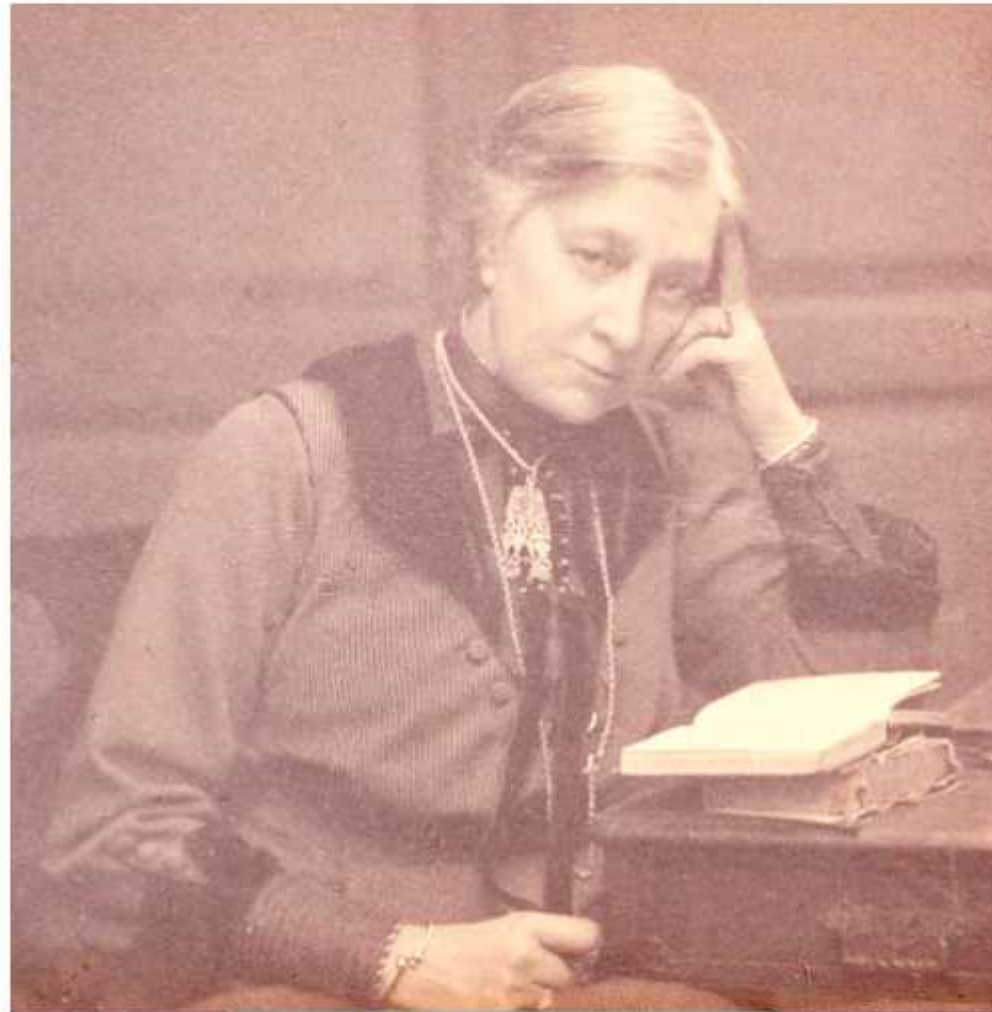
Liz Mitchell

Mary Hope Greg (1850-1949) may be best known to members of the Guild as the benefactor who, in the mid-20th century, bequeathed substantial property and land in the Hertfordshire village of Westmill. In 1935, she first wrote to the Guild's Master, setting out her lifelong interest in Ruskin's teachings, explaining that 'I am anxious to do what I can to further the work but at the outset I must tell you that I am very nearly 86 years of age, and that I am rather out of reach of the younger people who ought to be interested'.¹ She went on to become a Companion Extraordinaire, donating artworks, books and furniture, contributing financially towards the distribution of Ruskin's writings and finally, on her death in 1949, leaving to the Guild the remainder of her Westmill estate, including ten properties.

What may be less familiar, however, is the extent of Mrs Greg's wider philanthropic and educational interests. In 1922 she oversaw the gift of her late husband's renowned collection of English Pottery to Manchester City Art Gallery. Thomas Tylston Greg's collection had been on loan to Manchester since 1904. With his unexpected death in 1920, at the age of 62, it was left to Mrs Greg to determine its future. Over the next thirty years, she gave over 3,000 objects to Manchester City Art Gallery: her husband's pottery, but also some 2,000 items of domestic life, archaeology and handicrafts. The Greg collections at Manchester include a vast array of material; pottery, cutlery, keys, writing materials, scientific instruments, novelties and souvenirs, coins and medals, tobacco and snuff-related objects, seals and documents, clothing, textiles, sewing implements, books and children's toys. Much of this material had been acquired by Mr and Mrs Greg together during their married life. Both had antiquarian interests and family connections with other well-known collectors. However, what began as a fairly straightforward gift of a private collection to a public museum, quickly became a passionate and active commitment to education and the development of museum collections that lasted for the rest of her life.

As well as to Manchester, Mrs Greg gave collections of objects to nearly thirty museums and related institutions, across Britain and as far afield as New Zealand. She established her own small museum in Westmill, devoted to preserving aspects of rural life. She championed the development

of museum collections for children, acquiring, donating and even commissioning toys, dolls and model houses specifically for museums in poor urban areas. As a result, she developed close and enduring friendships with



Mary Hope Greg (date unknown) and detail from a letter to Manchester City Art Gallery.

curators in several major institutions, including Arthur Sabin at Bethnal Green in London, Philip Entwistle at Liverpool and William Batho at Manchester. An inveterate letter writer, she maintained a lengthy and regular correspondence with all three, documented in the archives of those institutions. The surviving letters (of which there are several hundred) provide a fascinating insight, not only into the character of this indomitable and passionate woman, but also into the workings of the museum, and interwar attitudes to philanthropy, politics, class and gender. They form an invaluable historical document for the history of museums and collecting in Britain in the early 20th century.

Mrs Greg was interested in all aspects of museum work, offering suggestions, opinions and occasionally instructions, in everything from display and interpretation to conservation and museum staffing. In the preface to the 1922 *Catalogue of Handicrafts*

of *Bygone Times* for Manchester she explained the philosophy that lay behind her enthusiasm:

... we owe it to those who have preceded us and have left us those specimens of their painstaking and

beautiful work and to those who will come after us to do likewise, to treasure good work and produce something into which we have put our best, our love, our intelligence, our power ... Machine-made things can never take the place of hand-made ones. We cannot put our love of beauty or true worth into a machine-made article. We can make useful, true, accurate things but the higher, nobler satisfaction is only to be found when we work with our head and hands and heart.²

Mrs Greg was then 72 years old. For the next 27 years, until her death shortly before her 100th birthday, she devoted considerable time, energy and money supporting this ideal. Yet prior to this moment, very little is known about her life. It

would seem as if the death of her husband, Thomas, precipitated a late flowering of philanthropic zeal and energy. To some extent, she was putting things in order; aware of her own advanced age and with no children to inherit the family estate, she was keen to underwrite the legacy of her husband's and her own lifelong interests. But more than this, she was clearly motivated by a strong sense of duty and passionate commitment to improve the lives of others; to support progressive-education initiatives, and to share the benefits of her own comfortable position. As well as the Guild bequest, she also left sums of money to several charitable bodies, including the Governesses' Benevolent Institution, The Societies of Women Students at Oxford University, the London Homeopathic Hospital, the London Association for the Blind, the Pontypool Educational Settlement, Hostels for Invalid and Crippled Women Workers and the RSPCA.

Her guiding inspiration appears to have been the lifelong commitment to the teachings of John Ruskin that she described to the Master of the Guild in 1935. Ruskin's concept of the 'great entail', that 'belongs as much to those who are to come after us, and whose names are already written in the book of creation' (8.233), runs throughout Mrs Greg's writing, in her letters, her diary and in her only published text, the catalogue



preface quoted above. Her interest in museums and her particular focus on the everyday things of domestic life and childhood were inspired by Ruskin's conception of the museum as a place of education and inspiration. In 1880 Ruskin had written that a museum

is only for what is eternally right, and well done, according to divine law and human skill. The least things are to be there—and the greatest—but all *good* with the goodness that makes a child cheerful and an old man calm; the simple should go there to learn, and the wise to remember. (34.260)

Echoing these words, Mrs Greg wrote to fellow amateur museum curator, Eleanor Adlard, in 1929: 'I feel the work of treasuring things of the least is most important'.³ She deliberately set out to collect the ordinary, the homemade and the handmade, following Ruskin's assertion that in a museum one should find nothing 'that

vanity has invented for change, or folly loved for costliness; but all that can bring honest pride into homely life' (34.262). As an amateur maker herself (the Manchester collection includes her own embroideries and homemade toys), she also believed firmly in what she described as 'the humanising and developing power of handwork'.⁴ She hoped, through her contribution to museums, to inspire the same in others, writing to Manchester curator William Batho in 1928:

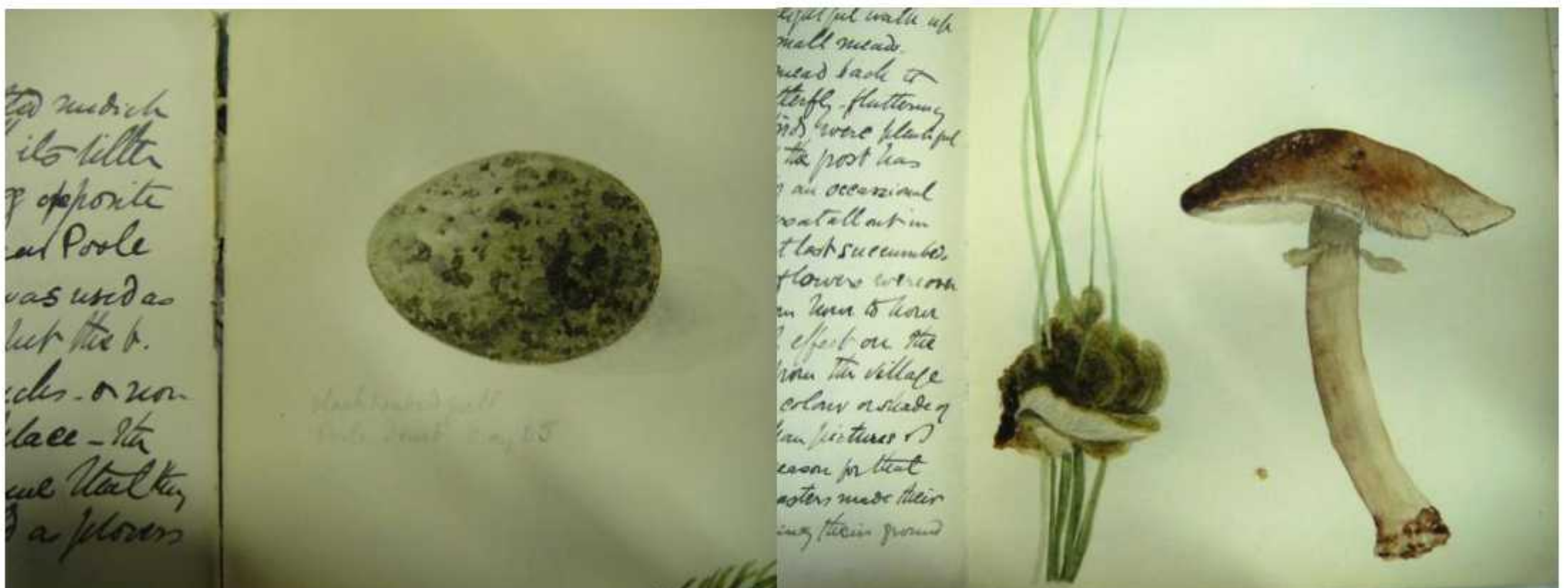
I am glad to hear so many visitors have seen the collections. How glad I should be—we all should if we could know if any of them ever make a single thing as a result which will be a delight to themselves or their children and also those who come after. We must leave the answer to the future!⁵

So what was the origin of Mrs Greg's appreciation of Ruskin? Given the paucity of documentary evidence for her early life, it is hard to be certain. However, recent

research has opened lines of enquiry that may yield further insight.

Mary Greg, née Hope, was born in 1850 to a large, wealthy and well-connected family of Liverpool bankers and landowners. Her grandfather, Samuel Hope, was a Liberal non-conformist, noted for his philanthropic work in the city. Mary was the seventh of thirteen children born to Samuel's son, Thomas Arthur Hope, and his wife, Emily Hird Jones. The family owned land in Cheshire, Flintshire and County Tyrone; they lived in a succession of properties in Liverpool, the Wirral and London. They are known to have associated with other prominent Liberal families including the Rathbones of Liverpool and the Gregs of Styal in Cheshire.

Mary and her two older sisters, Rebecca and Harriet, remained at home well into adulthood; years later, in 1923, Philip Entwistle of Liverpool Museum wrote to Mrs Greg: 'I well remember yourself and your sisters years ago when you were in



(Above and top): pages from Mrs Greg's nature diary, 1905-1922, given to the Guild in 1940.



Carved bone fish, probably a lucky charm: one of many donations to Manchester City Art Gallery.

Liverpool'.⁶ However, in 1895, at the age of 45, Mary married Thomas Tylston Greg, great-grandson of Samuel Greg, the founder of Quarry Bank Mill in Cheshire. The Gregs were a wealthy and influential family of cotton manufacturers, with involvement in Manchester's political and intellectual circles. Thomas, however, did not go into the cotton business, instead managing the family estate at Westmill, to which he and Mary moved after their marriage.

Mary's early life was rooted in the industrial North West, informed by a Liberal non-conformist philanthropic outlook. Her early adulthood coincided with the period in which Ruskin's influence reached its height, not least because of the work of the regional Ruskin societies. Between 1879 and 1896 nine Ruskin societies were founded in cities across Britain, including Manchester, Liverpool and Birkenhead. Stuart Eagles's meticulously researched book, *After Ruskin*, notes the particularly close ties between the Liverpool Ruskin Society and the Guild of St George.⁷ Edith Hope Scott (no relation), first historian of the Guild, was a member of the Liverpool Society. It seems reasonable to speculate that the Hope family were at least aware of the Liverpool Society's work, although no evidence has so far been found to connect either Mary or any of her family directly to it.

A more promising lead comes from that first letter to the Master of the Guild, written in December 1935. Mrs Greg writes: 'For years Ruskin has been an inspiration to me. I was for a time at a school in Cheshire where he I believe chiefly organised the education and where he visited and for which he wrote *Sesame and Lilies* (sic)'.⁸ If we assume she meant *Ethics of the Dust*, this suggests that she may have been a pupil at Winnington Hall, Northwich, a

small progressive private school for girls, with which Ruskin was closely associated in the 1860s. During this period he spent much time at the school, teaching art, divinity and other subjects, playing cricket, and writing his weekly 'Sunday letters', both to individual girls and the school as a whole. Several of the Winnington girls later became early members of the Guild. More research is required to determine whether Mary Hope was in fact a pupil there, but in 1939 she gave the Guild a number of 'Ruskin letters', which are so far untraced in the Sheffield collections. The following year, she gave two notebooks, her nature diaries for the years 1905 to 1922, modestly explaining that

They are ... amateurish, I had no lessons. I tried to paint little things which I thought of interest or beauty—this Ruskin had taught me to aim at!⁹

Did Ruskin actually teach her, at Winnington, or does this simply refer to her reading of his works? The diaries are indeed amateurish, in the sense of being done out of love; they are charming, and reveal a deeply spiritual connection with the natural world. Her entry for June 1914, the first for some years, draws on Wordsworth to express her depth of feeling, in spite of failing to keep up her diary,

... not because I care less for what I see and learn – in this world so full of beauty and interest[,] but because I have not the same leisure or strength to go about in the sweet wild places – my joy in it all is indeed far deeper, more reverent, more spiritual – for 'I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts' as I look at the sky and stars and sun and moon, birds, flowers, trees, everything!¹⁰

What is clear is that Mary Hope Greg, towards the end of her life, found an opportunity to put into action the inspiration that she had long found in John Ruskin's teaching. She did so with all her energy, determination and belief. She was a

pioneer of museum education and a champion of those who advanced its development. She laid the foundations for some of Britain's most significant collections in the fields of decorative art, craft and social history, yet remains remarkably absent from the historical record. My interest in Mrs

Greg began with the Greg collections at Manchester Art Gallery, where I was for many years a decorative art curator. However, as my research into the collections continues, I find myself increasingly fascinated by Mary herself, a woman who, as her memorial plaque in St Mary's Church, Westmill states, 'strove to the end of her life to alleviate and make more beautiful the lives of others'.¹¹

With thanks to Sharon Blakey, Hazel Jones and Alex Woodall.



Memorial tablet at St Mary's, Westmill.

NOTES

1. Letter to the Master of the Guild of St George, 22 December 1935, Sheffield Archives GSG21.
2. Preface to the *Catalogue of Handicrafts of Bygone Times* (Manchester City Art Gallery, 1922).
3. See Bridget Yates, unpublished PhD thesis, 'Volunteer-run Museums in English Market Towns and Villages', University of Gloucestershire, 2010.
4. Letter from Mary Greg to William Batho, 24 September 1922, Manchester Art Gallery archives.
5. Letter from Mary Greg to William Batho, 23 September 1928, Manchester Art Gallery archives.
6. Letter from Philip Entwistle to Mary Greg, 19 October 1923, Hertfordshire County Archives.
7. Stuart Eagles, *After Ruskin: The Social and Political Legacies of a Victorian Prophet, 1870-1920* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
8. Letter from Mary Greg to the Master of the Guild of St George, 22 December 1935, Sheffield Archives.
9. Letter from Mary Greg to the Secretary of the Guild of St George, 15 June 1940, Sheffield Archives.
10. Mary Greg's nature diary, June 1914, Ruskin Collection.
11. Inscription on memorial plaque, St Mary the Virgin, Westmill, Hertfordshire.

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Images courtesy of Ben Blackall and Manchester City Galleries; The Guild of St George; and Liz Mitchell.