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# **Before Eldon House: Lucy Ronalds Harris' background & upbringing**

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Lucy Harris née Ronalds. Western Archives.

**L**ucy Harris née Ronalds, whose married life is depicted in *The Eldon House Diaries*,<sup>1</sup> was a special woman in both her heritage and her character. Several of her forebears were people of note and she was loved and admired by all – except, possibly, her husband. To date little has been published about her childhood, but this upbringing, and the values her extended family instilled in her, provide context for her later diary entries and particularly her growing discontentment with life in London, Ontario. The story also illuminates the personalities behind her family portraits hanging in Eldon House.

**Lucy’s great-grandfathers**

Lucy had a suite of worthy great-grandfathers, indicated in Fig. 1. All four are introduced briefly, but those on her father’s side were the most important for Eldon House as, remarkably, she was their sole great-grandchild. From one she received most of her financial inheritance and through the other she obtained the papers now in Western Archives that enable her history to be written. Her mother, in contrast, was part of a large family and brought little dowry to her marriage.

Great-grandfather **Dominique Francois Godet dit Marentette** (1763-1808) farmed land granted to his father in the parish of L’Assomption, alongside today’s University of Windsor. The area was later called Sandwich Town. He was born across the river in Fort Detroit, his father having been drawn there from Montreal as a fur trader.<sup>2</sup>

When **John Askin** (1739-1815) came to America from Ireland, he resided in various locations, formed geographically-dispersed partnerships and traded a range of commodities, becoming influential in regional affairs. He was also a farmer.<sup>3</sup> He married his second partner in Detroit and lived his last years at an estate he established 6 kilometers east of Marentette’s along the Detroit River.

**Hugh Ronalds** (1760-1833) differed from Lucy’s other great-grandfathers in residing in England, where he ran “one of the very best fruit nurseries in the kingdom” and imported and exported plants across the world.

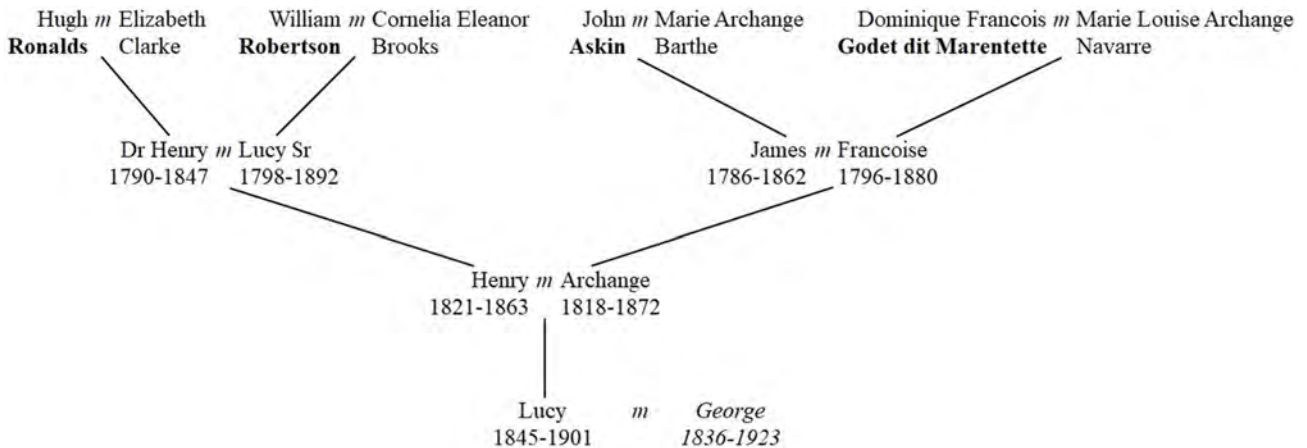


Fig. 1. Lucy Ronalds Harris’ forebears.

His monograph *Pyrus Malus Brentfordiensis* (1831), which describes 300 types of apples he cultivated, is still placed “among the standard works in Horticulture”<sup>4</sup> as “possibly the most beautifully illustrated of all English fruit books”.<sup>5</sup> He died where he was born, in an Elizabethan terrace house in Brentford (a town to the west of London, England), and his youngest son Robert died in the same house in 1880. Since all Robert’s siblings and their children had predeceased him, the estate’s contents were shipped to Lucy. Some of the 18th and 19th century furniture, portraits and mementos can be seen at Eldon House.

The family recorded that Lucy’s other great-grandfather, **William Robertson** (c.1760-1806), grew up at Lower Inver farm in Monymusk, near Aberdeen, Scotland. He followed his older brother to Detroit, who had married John Askin’s eldest daughter. William partnered in several of Askin’s business ventures, including the fur trade and land purchases, although some of the most extensive claims were rejected by the U.S. government. Quickly gaining wide respect, he was appointed to the inaugural legislative council and executive council of the province of Upper Canada. He then spent time in eastern cities, where he married, and their child Elisabeth Lucie (denoted here as Lucy Sr.) was baptised in Montreal. His young wife was “the happiest upon earth”<sup>6</sup> and when she died he was “inconsolable”. Moving to London, England, he resumed “his former ill habit” of drinking.<sup>7</sup>

Robertson was indignant when Peter Lawrie, a business associate in London, confronted him saying he “was a fool”, “always drunk” and “unable

either to manage my own affairs or to provide future sustenance for my only daughter”. “If you have such a great regard for her, pray, extend a little regard for her father? Her father has been repeatedly arreasted, sent to a spongion house, & jail”.<sup>8</sup> Lucy Sr. was aware of the downward spiral, later telling her own children about “the vices of a Father”, but retained fond memories of him nonetheless.

Lucy Sr. was orphaned at age eight. Her name soon came before the courts – and this would recur throughout her life. After the quarrel with Lawrie, Robertson had chosen as his executor the publican of the ale house where he spent his last days. Lawrie filed a suit against him to ensure that Lucy Sr. would become a ward of the court and the estate she had been bequeathed would be protected. Locating and extricating the property proved to be difficult, long-winded and subject to bad debts and dishonesty. There appeared to be over 20,000 acres of land,<sup>9</sup> which had no monetary worth, together with U.S. stocks deposited in various American cities, to the value of at least £20,000,<sup>10</sup> which were gradually transferred to England.

### Lucy Sr. and Dr. Henry’s marriage

The guardian chosen for Lucy Sr. lived in Brentford, and as a result she grew up with her Ronalds neighbours.<sup>11</sup> It is not altogether surprising that she would become attracted to the well-educated and most dapper and gregarious of Hugh’s eight sons.

Dr. Henry, as he is denoted here (seen in Fig. 2), graduated in medicine in 1814 from the University of Edinburgh and published several papers in the medical literature. An 1818 article in which he repudiated the emerging “science” of phrenology (which linked skull shape with character traits) was berated by its proponents. He also wrote on treatments for malignant measles and *impetigo sparsa*, a skin disease that he helped name. Many of his patient services were given gratuitously.



Fig. 2. Dr Henry Ronalds aged 51 (1842). Eldon House, Tara Wittmann photography.

The court was informed as their relationship blossomed, and it ruled when Lucy Sr. came of age that her property be conveyed to the trustees of their marriage settlement. The first trustees included Lawrie, a relative of Robertson’s, and James Montgomery, who was a large manufacturer in Brentford, and also the husband of Dr. Henry’s cousin Jane née Ronalds.<sup>12</sup> The Montgomery family were the primary trustees for 75 years. Their job

in accordance with the indenture was to oversee the capital investment and distribute dividends and interest earned to the couple.<sup>13</sup>

Life in the Ronalds family was directed towards personal betterment and duty to society, in keeping with their Unitarian faith. Hugh, for example, was “careful of every farthing, that he might have wherewithal to meet his just debts & to give a little to those more in need than himself”.<sup>14</sup> Not unnaturally, Lucy Sr. wished for a lifestyle befitting an heiress and Dr. Henry bought a house in fashionable Kensington Gore, opposite Hyde Park. He tried to keep the bequest intact for the children but the lands on the other side of the world were difficult to manage, susceptible to forfeiture and in fact “a continual Drain on the Income” of the family.<sup>15</sup> He wrote to their eldest child Henry while he was still a teenager, sharing his “gratification that you are so properly sensible of the necessity of economy”.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 3. Lucy Sr. Ronalds née Robertson aged 43 (1842). Eldon House, Tara Wittmann photography.

Lucy Sr. (Fig. 3) was an “anxious”,<sup>17</sup> “exciteable”,<sup>18</sup> “active person”, always “running up and down stairs”.<sup>19</sup> She delighted in decorating the home or organising a party. She had poor hearing all her life, which worsened when she was unwell, with the result that she “cannot enjoy her Piano” to calm her nerves.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Henry’s placid nature was an excellent antidote and he played a significant part in bringing up the older children. Henry recorded that “all of us loved him... Oh how amiable!... How good his counsels... no man could have a kinder father, he ruled us all by love”.<sup>21</sup> Lucy Sr. often wore a broach holding Dr. Henry’s hair and their marriage was a happy one.<sup>22</sup>

They had ten children. Approaching the age of 40 Lucy Sr. had two late miscarriages which “weakened her very much both in health & spirits”<sup>23</sup> and her last baby, hastily christened Eleanor Robertson after her parents, died just a few hours after being born.<sup>24</sup> She lamented that “there will not be a nursery again”.<sup>25</sup>

Six years later, Dr. Henry suddenly suffered a stroke and died.<sup>26</sup> She blamed herself for “urging so much” for “him to exert himself” – “I should have soothed him more”.<sup>27</sup> Her head became “so very weak”<sup>28</sup> (in her words) and her Ronalds sisters in Brentford noted that she “has a good deal declin’d since your Fathers death”. They rallied around her, arranging for the children and her to “come to live near us as we all thought it best to draw near together”.<sup>29</sup>

Lucy Sr. did not improve and her eldest daughter wrote that “her delusions were so numerous and her violence so great... We have had so much advice

and all tending to prove how impossible it is for her to live at home. She has now a cottage very prettily situated in the grounds attached to Southall Park [*where a mental health specialist lived*] where she has all the advantage without the association with insane people”.<sup>30</sup> She was officially declared to be “a Lunatic” for the purpose of again placing her estate under the protection of the court,<sup>31</sup> and James Montgomery’s son acted on her behalf for the trustees.

Lucy Sr. stayed in various care facilities for over 40 years, eventually outliving all her children. The Montgomery family continued to visit her, as did her granddaughter Lucy when in England. The first time she was just a toddler and her second trip, when she was 16, was encouraged by her mother with the advice: “prepare her a little first, Lucy is so reasonable”.<sup>32</sup> Biographer Daniel Brock wrote of Lucy Sr.’s father: “If Robertson was unusual, it was for the delicacy of his sensibilities: the death of a loved one revealed his tragic vulnerability and plunged him into a despair from which he never recovered”.<sup>33</sup> It seems his daughter suffered the same affliction.

### The American estate

Henry (Fig. 4) was a model first son, much loved by his whole family for his “good principles, good sence, & refined feelings”.<sup>34</sup> Mature, conservative and responsible, with strong resolve and integrity but a gentle soul, he had a philosophical bent – reading and thinking deeply about religious, political, historical and educational matters – and enjoyed sketching and writing verse.



Fig. 4. Henry Ronalds aged 21, just before he left for America (1842); his mother called it “an excellent likeness”.<sup>35</sup> Eldon House, Tara Wittmann photography.

He determined at a young age that his role in life was to bring the American property into order.<sup>36</sup> He gained experience working on a farm, together with legal and financial skills, and when he turned 21, set sail for the New World. No one wanted him to go and all missed him dreadfully, but they understood that he was doing it to benefit his large family.

On his arrival there, his aunt (unnecessarily) reinforced the family’s business ethos: “whatever you have not the means of buying do without... I should hope you will not expend all the money that you have rec<sup>d</sup> but keep some of it in the Bank & receive the interest of it, there will be a great deal of pleasure in saving up a little... Industry is the parent of wealth & Idleness of Poverty”.<sup>37</sup>

Henry was appointed as the trustees’ agent and attorney for the estate, to whom he reported on the state of the property, its income and expenditure, and strategies for improvement. His first priority was to obtain an overall picture of the lands, which were widely dispersed. The largest concentration was in Kent County, at Raleigh and elsewhere, and there was more to the north around Sombra on the St Clair River. Property to the west encompassed Essex County, including Maidstone and Rochester, and Wayne County, across the border near Detroit. To the east, there were significant lands in Norfolk County and at Grimsby on Lake Ontario. There was also property along the St Lawrence River, 600 kilometers from Raleigh. He was able to account for nearly 16,000 acres.<sup>38</sup>

He then steadily formalised ownership to help overcome the problem of squatters. One example was a parcel of land near Port Dover where a family had taken up residence in 1837. The suit of ejection he started in 1852, after locating Robertson’s patent and title deed, was successful in 1855, as he was against the occupants’ appeal a few years later. After Henry died, they returned to the property and won the right to stay there in 1870. The matter was then taken to the Queen’s Bench in Toronto, which once again ruled in favour of the Robertson estate.<sup>39</sup>

Where ownership had been secured, he surveyed lots and built access roads and sometimes simple houses to satisfy settlement agreements with the Crown and to attract occupants. When purchasers could be found, isolated blocks were sold to help

rationalise the estate, but most settlers became tenants, who he hoped would have the means and commitment to clear, build on and cultivate the land to increase its value and help pay their rent. There was also the work of drawing up legal documents, collecting the rent, and suing for damages if agreements were violated or there was trespass for logging purposes. Henry inspected all his properties each year but later employed agents at the more distant locations for day to day activities. He cared for his tenants, who were often quite poor, by providing credit, accepting rent in kind or foregoing it if they were suffering hardship, and visiting them when they were ill.

### Henry and Archange's marriage

Henry decided to live in Raleigh Township (Fig. 5), which contained 4,400 acres of the estate. He selected 400 acres of "wild" land of middling quality and arranged a mortgage to purchase it from the trustees. It was situated 6 kilometers south of Chatham, where he rented part of an office. By September 1843 he had built a "pretty" home with a parlour, drawing room and office on the ground floor and two rooms upstairs.<sup>40</sup> A lean-to contained the kitchen. He already had his sights set on a young lady.

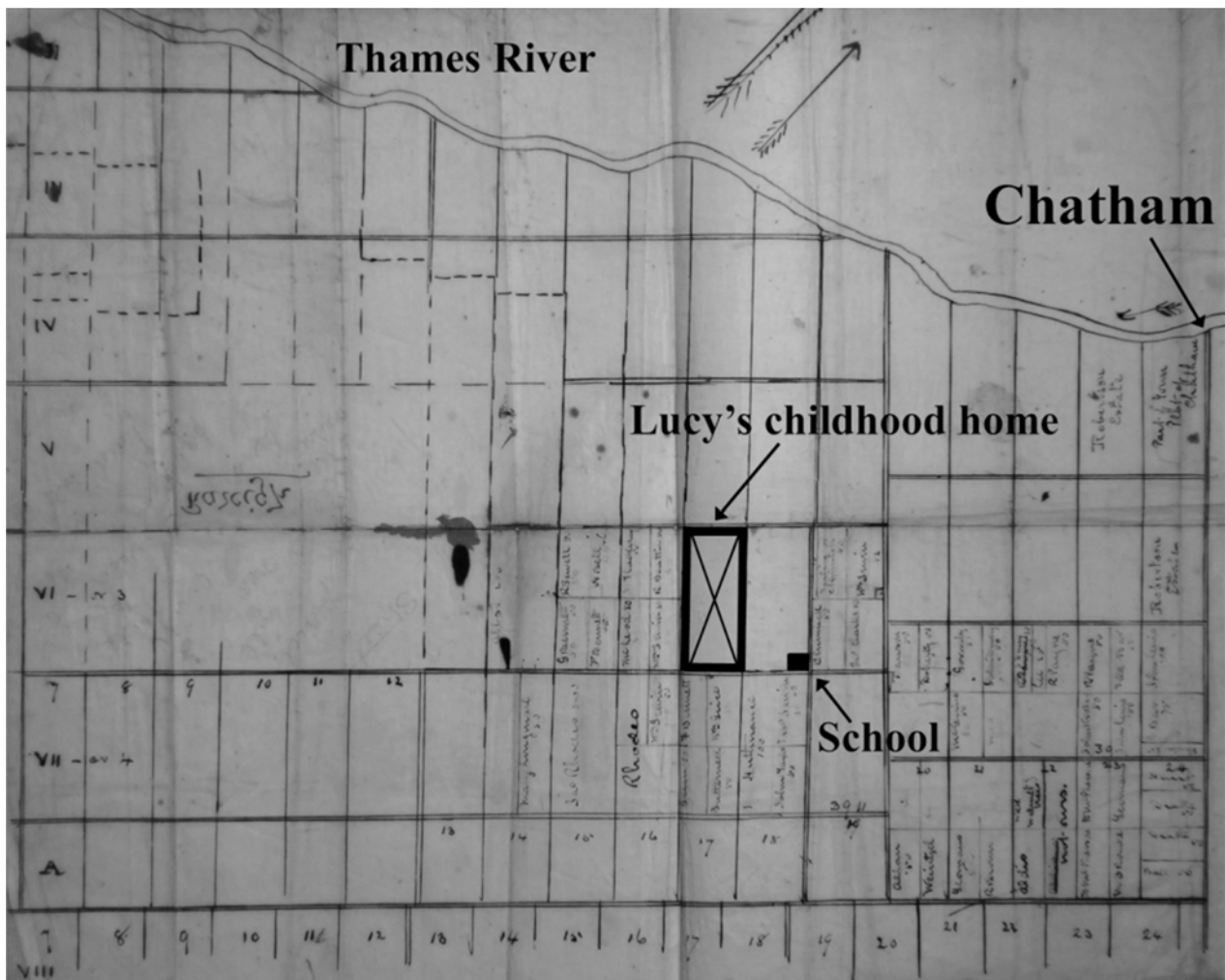


Fig. 5. Sketch map of the north east section of Raleigh Plains, showing Henry's tenants on the Robertson estate. Also marked are his farm and the school he built. Western Archives.



Early on, Henry sought out the Askin family, who had assisted in untangling his grandfather's affairs, where he met John's granddaughter Mary Archange Frances Askin (called Archange). She apparently grew up in her Marentette grandparents' former farmhouse in Sandwich.<sup>41</sup> Archange (Fig. 6) was the perfect partner for the simple country life he would be leading. He described his new fiancée to his family: she was "not by any means attached to gaiety or extravagance";<sup>42</sup> "do not expect any prodigy either of beauty or accomplishments... but as far as good sense goes and amiability";<sup>43</sup> "every body in the district admires her".<sup>44</sup> He loved her dearly and she proved to be a "loving and kind wife", although "she will I fear work herself to death". They grew grain crops, fruit and vegetables and kept farm animals for milk, meat and wool. Archange "bakes the bread and churns the butter" with the help of an elderly family friend and a farmhand.



Fig. 6. Archange Ronalds née Askin. Western Archives.

There was just one problem – her religion. Archange was baptised (and later buried) at the Assumption church in Sandwich. Before the wedding, Henry negotiated that their children would be brought up as Protestants and on Sundays he: "Took Archange and Lucy into town to Church in the Buggy. The former to the R C Church the latter to mine". Henry attended the Church of England in Chatham, although he had been christened as a Unitarian in Brentford. In 1852 he built a school in Raleigh where services were held by the Chatham minister for a time, although he later read the services there himself.

As their community grew, Henry undertook the leadership roles expected of a significant landholder. He was elected reeve of Raleigh numerous times, where he was responsible particularly for initiatives to enhance the amenity of the district, such as new and better roads. His 1857 by-laws for the township are held at the Toronto Reference Library. He "was elected by acclamation" as the county councillor for his ward, and chaired the council's finance committee. He became a magistrate, was president of the County of Kent Agricultural Society for many years, served on the county Board of Education and the Chatham church vestry, and commanded a company of the militia. He also formally nominated John Prince for the legislative council in 1856 and helped lead his successful campaign.

Both parents were utterly devoted to their only child Mary Elizabeth Lucy, whom they called Lucy after her grandmother. Henry wrote regularly in his diary about "our little love Lucy" as well as her mother: "Tis curious how

great a charm the society of a loved child throws round one”; “what a little angel my Lucy is”; and when he was travelling: “My little Lucy you must kiss over and over again for me”.<sup>45</sup>

Lucy could already read and write when she started school at the age of seven in Chatham. She began boarding there two years later and at age 13 spent a year at Woodstock, to the east of London, Ontario. She was a brave girl: having a tooth pulled at that time, the dentist “was unsuccessful... she bore it firmly tho”. With her sheltered upbringing, however, she was naive in the ways of the world and her new headmistress noted that she was quite dependent on her parents. She also recommended dancing lessons as “her carriage & deportment require much care”.<sup>46</sup> Henry later confided to his favourite aunt that other girls “swam thro’ their quadrille – like swans – whilst Lucy plumpt thro hers – like a duck – in rough wheather”.<sup>47</sup>

Lucy (Fig. 7) had become the image of her parents – considerate and sensible, with simple tastes and little care for appearances or elegance. The extended Ronalds family delighted in her company as a child, and their respect only grew over time. Years later Archie Montgomery (James Montgomery’s grandson and Lucy’s third cousin) characterised her as “such a paragon among women and so universally esteemed and beloved”;<sup>48</sup> “it has always been my desire to do all I could for Lucy, she has always been so affectionate”.<sup>49</sup>



Fig. 7. Lucy Harris née Ronalds. Western Archives.

Henry’s poor eyesight deteriorated from 1857 and he struggled increasingly in managing the estate. His formerly neat diary became increasingly illegible and then petered out. In 1861, now quite ill, he took Lucy to England for a year to ensure that she felt part of his family and to sort out financial affairs for Archange. He died not long after their return to Canada at the age of 42. In two decades he had aided his adopted county’s development while consolidating and improving his family’s holdings; these were now bringing in a steady income and promised increasing value as immigration promoted further regional settlement in the soon to be Dominion of Canada. Five years later, Lucy’s new husband became agent for the land, which he valued at \$200,000. He was able to acquire the estate from the trustees in 1875 for £37,000.<sup>50</sup>

## Lucy and George's marriage

Lucy was bedazzled by the unexpected attentions of the dashing, confident and high-living lawyer George Becher Harris (Fig. 8), who she met at the age of 20. The cultural divide between them was quickly summarised by his mother – “she is only a country girl”.



Fig. 8. George Becher Harris. Western Archives, RC80094.

By then, it seemed very likely that Lucy would be the only heir of both William Robertson and Hugh Ronalds. Upon learning that George “objects to a settlement of Lucy’s property on herself”,<sup>51</sup> Archie Montgomery travelled to Canada to oversee arrangements. He tried to allay Archange’s fears with a nicely-worded letter:<sup>52</sup>

*George had for some long time wished to make Lucy’s acquaintance, and M<sup>rs</sup> Harris had helped Miss Askin to introduce them, thinking it would be a very desirable match for her Son, on account of the little fortune she has... what I know of George Harris now, makes me think that he was at first attracted by the same idea; since he has known her intimately no doubt tender feelings have sprung up in his heart, for who could avoid that in regard to such a dear little girl – and by this time I daresay he loves her sincerely & affectionately, for herself as well as the other.*

They were able to organise a marriage settlement, with the trustees being Archie, Lucy’s uncle John Ronalds and George’s brother.<sup>53</sup>

Lucy’s marriage and her grumbles with George and his family are known from her entries published in *The Eldon House Diaries*. Much of her struggle was that her new life was very different from that she knew – there was a complete mismatch of expectations.

She was accustomed to loving and being loved, but her characteristic attentiveness now seemed to be taken for granted and not reciprocated. Her aging mother-in-law was quite demanding although, over time, did come to appreciate her: “I do not think there is a kinder hearted better woman in the world than Lucy... Her thoughtfulness for all about Her is a marvel to me”.<sup>54</sup> Lucy received very little support in these time-consuming care duties as George

was “selfish”: he “never speaks to me or takes the least interest in what I say or do”. She funnelled her increasing resentment into her diary and those remarks now partially mask her inherent nature.

With Lucy and her father both growing up with doting fathers, she similarly “cannot forgive... [George] not looking to the interests of the children”. Work ethic was another problem. Henry’s view was that “two days *Christmassing* is too much” while “George takes life too easy”, “He gets more fun and less work than most people”.

Many of her issues revolved around her inheritance. She received a regular allowance from the dividends of the British investments intended “for her sole and separate use”, which increased as her Ronalds aunts and uncles died. How was she to use it? When she fell pregnant with her first child, she decided “to buy all I shall require... with my money and then I shall begin to save”. George, meanwhile, played sport: “at times I feel very bitter, fishing and shooting cost so much”.<sup>55</sup> Eighteen months into her marriage, she wrote: “they so often talk of my money as if it were such a great thing... Once I fancied being well off made people happy but ease and happiness are quite different things”. She knew that her relatives had worked over many years to maintain and enhance the estate for future generations and that it was a nurturing family life rather than wealth that underpinned their contentment. The Harrises quite understandably saw a financial windfall as the means to greater luxury and leisure.

Lucy Sr. died when Lucy and George had been married for 25 years. Lucy’s deed of settlement was to continue<sup>56</sup> and she was “convinced that it is a good thing for the children” but George succeeded in 1894 in transferring the money from the English trustees to Canada.<sup>57</sup> Now having access to the capital, improvements were made to the old Harris home, Eldon House, and family members conducted extensive travels. Lucy died early in the new century and George survived her by 22 years.

### Postscript

The primary resource for this article is the century of Ronalds family correspondence and papers in the Harris Family Fonds at Western Archives and associated objects at Eldon House. The assistance of staff at these institutions and particularly Theresa Regnier and Tara Wittmann is greatly appreciated. Henry’s diaries (Ref. 21) are the major source for Lucy’s childhood while all letters quoted are individually referenced. An added value of the collection is that it also offers intimate detail on the extended Ronalds family in 19th-century London, England – a family of scientists, authors, artists, industrialists and social reformers. The achievements of many of these people are outlined in *Sir Francis Ronalds: Father of the Electric Telegraph* (2016).

End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Harris R S & Harris T G, *The Eldon House Diaries*. Champlain Society (1994)
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- <sup>16</sup> WU, Dr H Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jan 20, 1840
- <sup>17</sup> WU, Dr H Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jun 3, 1844
- <sup>18</sup> WU, B Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jun 21, 1850
- <sup>19</sup> WU, H Ronalds to L Ronalds, Oct 22, 1842
- <sup>20</sup> WU, Dr H Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jul 3, 1846
- <sup>21</sup> WU, H Ronalds Diaries, 1851-54, 1854-62
- <sup>22</sup> WU, E L Ronalds to H Ronalds, May 6, 1842
- <sup>23</sup> WU, Dr H Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jan 3, 1841
- <sup>24</sup> WU, L Ronalds to H Ronalds, Jul 27, 1841
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- <sup>28</sup> WU, E L Ronalds to H Ronalds, Feb 15, 1848
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- <sup>51</sup> WU, J Montgomrey to A Ronalds, May 7, 1867
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