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2323 The Tea Merchant and the Goldsmith: A Savory Tale

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The Tea Planter and the Goldsmith: A Savory Tale

What is truth? Truth can be a collection of facts. Actual points in time supported by evidence that they happened. Truth can also be complicated and uncomfortable. Sometimes truth can be about an idea that is believed and accepted as being true. Such as stories passed down from previous generations. After all, if a story is recounted enough times, it can become truth. Such was the case when I discovered the following statement published publicly by a second cousin.

“My mother (Marjory Pretty) was my father’s second wife and she was wealthy, from a family which had tea plantations in India. She was well educated and was brought up by a governess in England. She was crippled, having had polio as a child. I lived with both of my parents in Leyton Road, Parkstone, until they separated in approximately 1940-1941.”

Amazing how much there is to unpack in one paragraph. Little did I realise that by breaking it down into its component parts, I would travel across three continents and explore the lives of several families in search of the connection between Colin George Henderson Savory, Assistant Manager at the *Atale* Tea Plantation, and my great Aunt Marjory.

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Marjory Pretty was born in Chertsey in 1907, not long after her father Thomas William Pretty and his first wife Gwendoline Joyce Savory were married. Thomas worked for Gwen’s father as a groom and came from a family of agricultural labourers. Gwen was the granddaughter of a very successful London silversmith, Albert Savory, of AB Savory & Sons.

Thomas and Gwen’s marriage was not a happy one. It suffered from allegations of adultery and cruelty, culminating in a divorce in 1910. Thomas moved to Australia, remarried and had three more children. Gwen also remarried; Arthur Ralph Stephens, son of the Reverend James Stephens, and the barrister involved in her case. Gwen’s sense of timing incensed one Hampshire Vicar so much he wrote to the newspaper! Apparently it was “scandalous” that she and Arthur were allowed to marry a mere two days after her divorce. At the Hotel Savoy no less, and by the Reverend Hugh Boswell Chapman, a well-known personality sympathetic to a divorcee’s situation.

With all the family upheaval, it is not surprising Marjory was sent away. A year later after her parents’ divorce, Marjory is one of three ‘nurse children’ (foster children) of Mabel Foster Melliar, the daughter of the Vicar of the church her mother attended as a child. Fast forward ten years to 1921 and Marjory is an ‘inmate’ (permanent boarder) at Saint Saviour’s Orphanage while her mother accompanies her new husband on an overseas posting to Zanzibar, Tanzania.

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Colin George Henderson Savory was born in 1887 in South Leith, Scotland to Henry Charles Savory and Janet Mary Henderson. Colin’s father was a wine merchant, and his grandfather and great grandfather were chemists.

After completing his education at the prestigious Edinburgh Academy in 1904, Colin spent the next ten years travelling between England, Canada and Ceylon, finally settling in Ceylon in 1914.

When war broke out, Colin returned to England and enlisted in the Seaforth Highlanders, reaching the rank of Lieutenant two years' later. He was sent back to England in October 1916 after being diagnosed with shell shock as a result of an engagement with the enemy during the Battle of the Somme.

Returning to Ceylon after the war, Colin worked on tea and rubber plantations in the Kelani Valley about three hours east of the capital Colombo. He remained in the tea industry up until his death in 1939.

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I did not set out to debunk what appears to be a trusted family story. Quite the opposite. I thought by researching both families I could find a common ancestor or link. Frustratingly, it appears the only link between these two people is a shared surname, Savory.

While Marjory's family was wealthy – her great grandfather Albert Savory was a well known silversmith in London and left an estate valued up to £140,000 upon his death – they were not tea merchants, tea agents or tea planters. However, it is plausible that with that much wealth, they could have invested in a tea plantation.

On the other hand, Colin George Henderson Savory was involved in the tea plantations of Ceylon as evidenced by the passenger lists of his voyages between England and Ceylon stating his occupation as 'planter', and that both the *Pussella* and *Atale* tea plantations are mentioned in the list of Tea Estates at History of Ceylon Tea (<https://www.historyofceylontea.com>). However, in tracing his family back three more generations, Colin bears no relation to either Marjory or her mother Gwendoline Savory.

That is not to say other aspects of the published paragraph cannot be confirmed. On the contrary. Marjory was Herbert Edmund Norris-Williams' second wife, and they lived on Layton Road, Parkstone, Dorset. Marjory could have contracted polio as a child, although being considered 'crippled' would have been noteworthy for inclusion in the remarks section of the census return, and in Marjory's case, it wasn't.

As for being raised by a Governess, again, plausible given Marjory spent time in an institution that had a Sister-in-Charge and a Matron, and despite being labelled an orphanage, provided her with an education. However, no evidence supporting the claim that Marjory's family's wealth came from tea plantations – either as owners or investors – has been uncovered.

Is it true? Perhaps. There could be a link; I just haven't found it yet.

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