Chapter 13
Victorian Aftermath

Once Victoria was delivered to publishers in New York and London, I began, even before Uncrowned King: The Life of Prince Albert (1997), a biography of her favorite prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. As the voice of the minority Conservatives in the Commons, and briefly in ministerial office under Tory governments, he had become increasingly close to Victoria and Albert, who distrusted him at first but recognized not only his ambition but his political shrewdness. At Albert’s early death in December 1861, Disraeli mourned the Prince Consort publicly and privately as the greatest of royals. To the Saxon ambassador, Count Vitzhum, a confidant of the queen, he wrote: “With Prince Albert, we have buried our Sovereign. The German Prince has governed England for twenty-one years with a wisdom and energy such as none of our Kings has ever shown.”

The queen knew of his regard, which drew him closer in her years of bleak purdah, and she welcomed his witty, novelistic reports of parliamentary doings. Eventually he drew Victoria out of her isolation and, as her energetic and reformist prime minister, arranged to add to her largely empty titles Empress of India. She returned the compliment when he retired from the Commons to the Lords through her styling him Earl of Beaconsfield.

My work on Victoria had led inevitably to Disraeli. He had run for Parliament three times before winning a seat, borrowing campaign funds he could not repay—then marrying the much-older widow of his late political partner, Wyndham Lewis, to cancel much of his campaign debts. However much Mary Anne’s new husband, he became her lodger at the Grosvenor Gate mansion she had inherited. He would run up many more debts, and, needing a country estate to establish
gentlemanly credentials, he borrowed to buy and furnish Hughenden Manor, near exurban High Wycombe. Compulsion as well as hard currency impelled his continuing to write money-spinning novels, some of them, like *Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred*, deservedly popular. I asked to borrow LaFayette Butler’s complete reprint set (as it was then assumed to be), but he insisted on giving me the books.

Reading a British Airways flight magazine en route to London I chanced upon an interview with Jacob Rothschild—Lord Rothschild—which referred to his role in gathering together family papers for a research archive. Since there was nothing to lose but a postage stamp, I wrote to him about Disraeli, who was almost family to his Victorian predecessors. My *Victoria* precluded any need for further introduction. He replied that I could reach the archive at the Rothschild Bank, still in its original St. Swithin’s Lane address near the Bank of England. I should apply to the archive’s curator, then Simone Mace, who wasn’t actually there. The papers, then being accessed, were in a confidential location among the traditional diamond merchants’ shops in Hatton Garden. I would be given directions. The Rothschild firm from its founding had been wrapped in a veil of secrecy, which made the arrangement symbolic.

From our Barbican flat, Rodelle and I walked past the Smithfield Market and up Saffron Hill, known to Dickensians for Fagin’s wretched criminal den in Field Lane, a southern offshoot, and to Sherlockians as the site of “The Adventures of the Six Napoleons.” Saffron Hill, above broad, bustling Holborn, led into Hatton Garden—no garden as in centuries earlier, but a row of jewelers’ premises. The address, when buzzer-activated, opened into a portal with a guard behind a window and turnstile. Through a narrow slot we displayed our letter. The guard explained that the lift within led up to a corridor with a number of blank doors to pass by before we reached the archive. We had to count the doors. For the supposed security of the diamond holdings, no office was numbered. The Rothschild Archive was rented space in the unmarked setting.

During the quiet Easter weekend in 2015, however secure the Hatton Garden setting seemed, greying thieves disguised as workmen slid down an elevator shaft, penetrated the underground vaults with a diamond-tipped drill, and carried out a brazen robbery. The gang got
away with nearly twenty million pounds sterling worth of cash, gold and gems. Seven were caught the next year. One would die in prison. Another burglar seen on security cameras, known as “Basil,” remained at large until 2018. Most of the takings—the largest heist in British history—were never recovered.

When we rang the Rothschild Archive in more innocent days, and were admitted, an assistant explained the filing system and also that there were no lavatory facilities within. Should the need arise, we would have to recall the sequence of doors there and back. No ball of thread was available for drawing our path back out, as Ariadne had provided to Theseus in the mythical Labyrinth. We would employ the system daily as we worked on Disraeli and the Rothschilds. Later the archive was relocated to opulent yet secure quarters within the Rothschild Bank.

Disraeli’s primary political rival for decades was the brilliant, shifty and cantankerous William Ewart Gladstone. His papers were in the British Museum, where we examined them before its library holdings were relocated to the British Library, then under construction across the street from Victorian-era St. Pancras Station. Also available to explore were Victoria’s correspondence and journals at Windsor Castle. (The queen’s journals as censored by her youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice, have since been digitized and are accessible online.) At Hughenden Manor, David Gordon, then the curator, made copies for me of Disraeli’s annotations in the books in his library—the evidence of his reading and thinking.¹ And in London’s East End, once Jewish but now mostly South Asian, was the Bevis Marks Synagogue, where cranky bibliophile Isaac D’Israeli was a member until he quarreled with synagogue elders, resigned, and purposefully as well as in spite arranged for his children to be baptized into the Established Church. The most desirable occupations in and out of government were only open to professed Christians.

Whatever Benjamin’s religious beliefs then became (if he had any), he did not change his surname other than to excise the awkward apostrophe. Although attacked all his public life as a Jew, he ensured that his utterances and his churchgoing as an elected official were cautiously Anglican. As he could not escape his birth, I wanted to visit the setting of the only Jewish ritual he experienced as a boy, his brit milah. In July 1990, in venerable Bevis Marks in Aldgate, founded by Spanish
and Portuguese exiles, Rodelle and I saw the traditional circumcision seat (kiseh Eliyahu—Elijah’s chair) in which a male infant on his eighth day was shorn of his foreskin. The ornate chair was portable and had a pull-out drawer below for the mohel’s instruments. Almost certainly the kiseh was trundled by wagon to 6 King’s Road, Bedford Row (since renamed and renumbered 22 Theobald’s Road) for the ceremony. Ordained in Leviticus 12:3, the rite was witnessed on December 28, 1804 by ten adult men in black hats and morning coats. In 1852, in the House of Commons, Sidney Herbert had asked, snidely, to roars of ignorant laughter, how any man could “adopt a faith the profession of which must begin with a surgical operation.” The child had not chosen his origins any more than had Herbert.

The only Jewish religious event that Disraeli would describe knowledgeably in his early novels—in Tancred (1846)—was Sukkot, the early autumn Feast of Tabernacles. “The vineyards of Israel,” Disraeli would write poignantly, fifty years before the term Zionism appeared in print, and even longer before grape stock from Rothschild cuttings in France renewed the wine industry in the Holy Land, “have ceased to exist, but eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persists in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards.” In Tancred he related the observance, as was possible to city dwellers of his day, through a devout London Jew

who goes early to some Whitechapel market, [and] purchases some willough boughs … brought, probably, from one of the neighbouring rivers of Essex, hastens home, cleans out the yard of his miserable tenement, builds his bower, decks it, even profusely, with the finest flowers and fruit that he can procure, the myrtle and the citron never forgotten…. After the service of his synagogue, he sups late with his wife and children in the open air, as if he were in the pleasant villages of Galilee, beneath its sweet and starry sky.

His Londoner ceremonially raises his glass of wine and repeats the kiddush prayer, and breaks and distributes the bread, Disraeli continues, “as Jesus must have done as a young man.”

Despite the apparently politically astute reference to Jesus, that episode, and many other equivalents over the years, suggested very strongly to me that, despite the constraints of politics and ambition, Disraeli had not severed his affinity with his heritage. At his end, I found that the Rothschild papers furnished the ultimate, if conjectural, clue. On
April 19, 1881, Disraeli, debilitated by kidney failure, had died. Before one o’clock in the morning on Sunday, April 24, with the crowds of mourners that had gathered each day outside his home in Curzon Street, Mayfair, now gone, Alfred de Rothschild, a son of Benjamin’s late friend Lionel, arrived at the darkened house and gazed upon Disraeli’s emaciated face for the last time. (Since Lionel’s death, Disraeli had been a father figure to the Rothschild sons.) Then Alfred assisted Disraeli’s valet, Frederick Baum, at closing the coffin. If he had gone there also to perform some Judaic ritual over the remains, that may never be known, although it is striking that Disraeli’s body was not removed until the Jewish Sabbath had closed—a day when religious tradition forbade such ceremony. Then Alfred and Baum saw the coffin placed on a special train at Paddington, and Baum remained aboard to Wycombe, where Sir Nathaniel de Rothschild, Lionel’s eldest son, received the body and accompanied it to Hughenden.

On the 26th, Disraeli was interred in Anglican rites in the churchyard at the edge of Hughenden Manor. “I am the blank page,” he had once claimed cryptically, “between the Old and the New Testament.”

I knew that the crucial biographical source beyond the myriad books about him was the Disraeli Project at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Directed then by M. G. Wiebe, the Project, amassing an extensive library of associated publications and microfilms and files of photocopies (and originals) of his correspondence, was annotating and publishing Disraeli’s letters. I arranged a week-long visit and drove north to Canada in May 1986, remaining in mutually useful contact thereafter. To this day no other writer about Disraeli—and there have been many—has ever been in residence at the archive at Kingston, each taking the easy research route of exploiting the burgeoning volumes of letters in print. One biographer published a life of the young Disraeli, inexplicably lauded in reviews, because that was as far as the editions of correspondence had then gone.

When I arrived in Kingston, the Project offices were nearly empty of staff. The reason, I found, was that a formidable, gleaming white yacht was anchored in Kingston harbor. Prince Charles and young Princess Diana had arrived, en route across Canada to the Vancouver Expo. Crowds had flooded in for the spectacle. Privileged elite were going
to a reception for the royals. I had the burgeoning Disraeli files to myself—and pored through them uninterruptedly day after day.

Later, when Mel Wiebe formally retired (but continued on as if he hadn’t) and a replacement was sought for an editorial director, I recommended someone who was a native Canadian and had worked for his doctorate under me at Penn State. Born in Halifax, Michel Pharand had studied and taught abroad, published books of his own and edited others, and become the editor of *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, which I had fostered for many years. (Two successor editors before Michel had followed me. One, the brilliant Fred Crawford, had also been my Ph.D. student. In Michigan one winter, clearing snow from his driveway, Fred was felled by a heart attack. He was only fifty-one.) Without relinquishing the *SHAW*, Michel relocated from Japan to Kingston with his wife, Ginger, and resumed being a Canadian.

In the 1990s, after I had published *Disraeli. A Biography* (1993), I received a letter from John Nevill in England. I did not know of Nevill but I recognized his surname. My book had received front-page coverage in the *Times Literary Supplement*, was widely reviewed elsewhere, and could not have escaped his notice. Unhelpfully, in what seemed a mean-spirited choice, the *TLS* editors had assigned its review to Richard Shannon, the fawning biographer of Disraeli’s lifelong nemesis, the crotchety but no less ambitious William Ewart Gladstone, whom I had pilloried as a religious and political hypocrite. I had referred, on the basis of incontrovertible evidence of his diaries, not only to Gladstone’s unrelenting anti-Semitism but to his moral failings, walking London’s seediest streets at night to find prostitutes ostensibly to redeem, then returning home to flagellate himself to suppress his arousal. And in *Victoria* I had noted that when Gladstone was to visit the queen at Balmoral, she instructed him, apparently aware of his obsession and considering him personally toxic, to bring with him clean attire for his royal audience.

Shannon carped in his critique about my allegedly improbable findings that Disraeli in his sixties had fathered a son and daughter on women other than his failing but devoted wife, Mary Anne. In “Ralph and Kate,” a chapter on Disraeli’s children outside his childless marriage, I had written, on circumstantial evidence, about his fathering Ralph Nevill. Ralph—“Rafe” in UK pronunciation—had never mar-
ried and had been a bachelor clubman and briefly a junior diplomat. Both his reputed and unacknowledged bloodlines were impressive. He had inherited an income from his wealthy legal parent, and from his actual father a bent for writing, producing thirty volumes of forgettable non-fiction. The clues to Ralph’s origins seemed close to unprovable. In his sixtieth year, Benjamin Disraeli was depressed by continued Tory stagnation and the likelihood that his political career was stalled just short of 10 Downing Street. He may have sought more than the affection of his ailing and aged wife, the consolation of his beeches at Beaconsfield and the gratification of his books.

Happily nearby were the accessible arms of Lady Dorothy Nevill, once a lively socialite and at thirty-eight the estranged wife of the dreary yet eccentric Sir Reginald Nevill, to whom she had been married to quash scandal—including a rumored abortion. A Walpole offshoot of the towering political family, and daughter of the Earl of Orford, “Dolly” practiced her passion for horticulture at her gardens in Hampshire, and in town resided across Upper Grosvenor Street from the Disraelis. In correspondence she was to Disraeli his “Dearest Dorothy.” In their urban proximity they rarely had need for letters, but when they did she would often refer to Ben as “Lion” and to herself as “Mouse.” He arranged for a seat in the House of Commons for her undistinguished brother. Her packets of strawberries and other fruits of the season from Hampshire were acknowledged “as fresh, & delicious, as yourself.”

Dorothy’s third surviving son, Ralph, born on March 4, 1865, was almost certainly conceived in London in June 1864, where Reggie Nevill seldom resided. He preferred breeding horses to children, and, at his separate country estate without Dolly, “coaching”—a curious Victorian sport among the wealthy in which gentlemen dressed down as coachmen and raced their own equipages. A granddaughter of Dorothy’s brother “was brought up to believe” (according to Guy Nevill, a cousin) that Ralph, who “appeared to be a cross between his grandfather, Lord Orford, and Disraeli,” was Disraeli’s unacknowledged child. When an elderly and garrulous bearer of memories, Lady Dorothy confided to young Edward Cazalet, “I have seen Dizzy in his night-cap, I have known him ill, I have known him in every possible way.” Yet it would have been political suicide for Disraeli to own up to fathering Ralph, who had, safely, a paper parent. The chronically absent Reggie
Nevill accepted the boy in dutiful Victorian fashion and left him a substantial legacy.

Affairs among the well-placed were often protected by conspiracies of silence. Ralph would recall meetings, from when he was a boy, with Disraeli, who “sat looking at me as if I were some strange little animal, but with no unkindly expression on his inscrutable face.” Young Nevill went up to Oxford in 1883, two years after Disraeli’s death, lived thereafter the life of an unattached gentleman of leisure, lived abroad as honorary attaché in several posts, and did civilian service during the Great War. Nevill would rarely turn up in his mother’s gossipy memoirs, letter-littered volumes he would arrange and edit, or in his own unmemorable books.

Before Nevill died in June 1930, seventeen years after his mother, never managing to emerge from her overwhelming shadow, Sir William Orpen drew the elderly Ralph, long a friend, in pen and ink. John Nevill, who inherited the portrait, wrote, in untimely fashion, as my book was out, to offer a copy of Orpen’s likeness to me. He explained that the late Lord Rupert Nevill, who had died in 1982, had been comptroller, then private secretary, to Elizabeth II’s husband, the Duke of Edinburgh. Nevill’s stately Uckfield House had hosted the Royal Family, and was the setting for the last meeting of Princess Margaret and Group Captain Peter Townsend. Any revelation in Lord Rupert’s lifetime, however belated, of Disraeli’s involvement with Dolly Nevill would have been indelicate. It was only after the death in 1993 of his son and heir, Guy Nevill, who had published *Exotic Groves. A Portrait of Lady Dorothy Nevill* (1983), with its striking inferences about Disraeli and Dolly (“Ralph had decidedly Jewish looks…”), that John Nevill, who had succeeded as head of the family, felt it proper to concede Ralph’s parentage.

At Nevill’s invitation Rodelle and I met with him for lunch at the Royal Automobile Club in London, where he offered us a fine photocopy of the Orpen portrait, to do with as I liked. Had it appeared in *Disraeli* some reviews might have been different, but my publishers were uninterested in including it in a new printing. (The firm of Hamish Hamilton in London was still roiled by the *fatwa* placed by Islamic crazies on Salman Rushdie for his *The Satanic Verses*, and visiting its offices required passing through guards and electronic inspection.)
When we parted amicably from John Nevill, Rodelle and I boarded a train from Charing Cross to Harmer Green, the country home of the Countess of Longford. Lady Elizabeth, a biographer of Victoria who had become our warm friend, had invited us for what turned out to be a second luncheon—or early dinner—and had also invited Nigel Nicolson. Shown the Orpen portrait, Elizabeth recalled that she had been at the obsequies for Lord Rupert, and had long heard gossip about Disraeli and Dolly.

“Frank must see this!” Elizabeth exclaimed. The elderly Earl of Longford, who was just short of doddering, was at a sitting of the Lords. She was to pick him up at the station. At the platform before our train back to London arrived, having left Nigel to return to Sissinghurst, we awaited her husband, who descended rather infirmly and was motioned by Elizabeth to a trackside bench. “Look at this, Frank,” she said. “Stanley has been given a copy of Orpen’s portrait of Disraeli’s son.” Longford scanned the image of the hatted, bespectacled and mustached elderly Ralph Nevill bent over to read a paper. “We have a Jewish son-in-law,” he remarked. “He doesn’t look at all like that!” One of their daughters, Lady Antonia Fraser, had married the playwright Harold Pinter, who was box-office handsome.

Once, as we were walking with Elizabeth toward the Apothecary Garden in Chelsea, a walled, idyllic “physic” garden dating to 1673, she pointed to a tall house at 9 Cheyne Walk, identifying it as the home of an eccentric lady she hoped not to encounter. But we knew her and already had. It was Edomé Broughton-Adderley. Elizabeth, who knew of the ivy-draped former Thatcher toilet, which had been a magnet for television interviewers and had given the eccentric Edomé a number of five-minute episodes of fame, had another Thatcher matter on her mind. “I want to show you the most detestable tree in the garden,” she said, and using her membership pass to let us in, pointed her cane at a recently planted sapling. A plaque described it as the gift of the prime minister.

One thing, so biographers learn, often leads to another. In the year of Ralph Nevill’s birth, a young woman in London—we don’t know who she was—conceived a child who, when she came of age in the late 1880s, after Disraeli’s death in 1881, looked in a surviving photograph strikingly like the young Disraeli. She would be sent out of reach to
Australia with an arranged husband of no great promise and an income of mysterious origin. There she would shed the husband and take up with another spouse, relocating with him to Napier in New Zealand. I found out about Catherine (“Kate”) Donovan—as she was on her birth certificate—from her granddaughter, Catherine Styles, in Auckland. The younger Kate, learning of my research for a life of Disraeli, hoped to learn more about Kate Donovan’s origins, and posted the portrait to me. Unlike the Orpen drawing, it is reproduced in _Disraeli_.

Later I met Kate Styles at a conference on Disraeli and Judaism at the University of Southampton, where I spoke on Gladstone’s lifelong anti-Semitism, and Kate remained a quiet listener—in England to learn what she could. We remained in warm contact. Kate visited us and while I was assisting her on a memoir about the first Kate, _Disraeli’s Daughter_ (2013), we flew to her home in Auckland. Her reconstruction of her grandmother’s life was underway when we visited her and her son, Peter, in 2012. The book’s cover juxtaposed a photo of her grandmother as a young woman with the striking likeness—almost a mirror image—of Disraeli at thirty-five by the early Victorian society portraitist A. E. Chalon.

Of course, skeptics about both by-blows persist, even though Ralph Nevill’s parentage was soon confirmed. Biographers largely prefer to ignore inconvenient realities. Although Kate Styles had only her grandmother’s memories and photographs, conclusive evidence of a second Disraeli child came when Rodelle and I were in London poring through papers in the voluminous Rothschild archive. Disraeli’s death furnished the “smoking gun” clue. On January 19, 1881, a wind-whipped snowstorm kept the aged and ailing Disraeli, then seventy-six, from the wedding of Alfred de Rothschild to Marie Perugia, of a distinguished Italian-Jewish family, at the Central Synagogue, Great Portland Street. Disraeli managed, from his newly occupied home at 19 Curzon Street, to get to the reception at Arthur Sassoon’s mansion at 2 Albert Gate. It was his last venture out.

Toward the end, his physician asked if the former prime minister would accept a visit from a clergyman to broach such parting subjects as Jesus and the Redemption. Disraeli shook the suggestion off. A related story repeated about his close, although he may have been beyond speech, was that as he held the hand of his long-time counselor
Sir Philip Rose he murmured “There is—one God—of Israel!” (the traditional Shema Yisrael that is the central statement of Judaism). If so, Rose typically kept his confidences. He almost did so again—but for a single slip—about Disraeli’s unknown daughter.

On April 26, three of Victoria’s sons—the Prince of Wales, Prince Arthur (the Duke of Connaught), and, as the queen’s personal representative (for protocol prevented her attendance), Prince Leopold—led the aristocratic mourners, including the diplomatic corps, at a traditional Anglican burial rite. Natty de Rothschild represented his family. Another Ralph was present at Hughenden—Dizzy’s brother Ralph D’Israeli, with his son, Coningsby, at fourteen the last of the legitimate family. Coningsby would have no issue, but Disraeli almost certainly had two other young survivors under other surnames, one also christened Ralph—a name not otherwise among the Nevills.

The “smoking gun”—a term coined in the early Sherlock Holmes story “The Gloria Scott” (1893) to refer to unshakable proof and legal liability—was concealed in a letter from Sir Philip Rose, long Disraeli’s attorney and confidant, who drew up his client’s last will in 1878. After Dizzy’s death three years later, Rose, anticipating inevitable probate, wrote privately to Sir Nathaniel Rothschild, the other co-executor of the estate, that the will made no provision for the “infant beneficiary” (“infant Tenant” in a later paragraph). Yet if said minor child brought an action against the estate requiring an allowance for upkeep, Rose thought it would be granted. (The young woman in the portrait sent to me by Catherine Esther Styles claimed that her father, so she told her granddaughter, furnished financial support, however secretively and indirectly, until his death and that her income continued even beyond that.)

Then fifteen, the young woman carefully left out of the will that Disraeli knew would become public was discreetly kept, then, under the wings of his designated trustees. There was no other minor child known to them, as Ralph Nevill had been acknowledged by Reggie Nevill, who knew otherwise, as a son and heir. The Rothschilds burned their most confidential papers and were so assiduous at it that although some legally crucial letters escaped the pyre, trunks of Disraeli’s business correspondence with his close friend Baron Lionel and then Natty, his successor at the bank, and soon to be Lord Rothschild, were inciner-
ated, and Natty’s son Nathaniel Charles was permitted to keep only a Disraeli envelope for his autograph collection.

Sir Philip was the most discreet of lawyers as well as Disraeli’s personal counselor over decades of delicate service. The only indisputable clue that survives about a dependent minor child seems to be his revealing advisory opinion. It seems certain from Rose’s memorandum that Natty, long on intimate terms with Rose, understood the reference to be the daughter known to few as Catherine Donovan yet suspected by even fewer to be far more well-born than her “paper” parents.

According to existing record in London—the birth certificate survives—Kate (“Catherine Mary”) was the child of John Vincent Donovan of Hackney, twenty-one, and his wife Mary, twenty-three, born on March 13, 1866. Given the infant mortality rate at the time—the required paperwork was filed a month later—Catherine may have been formally documented when an appropriate certificate became available on the death of another child, and the parents compensated for the use of the identity. John Donovan, who had no children at the time of Kate’s birth, was convenient and available. Although he and his wife did not live at the address from which the newborn was registered, he was within reach. Donovan was a compositor for Hansard, the parliamentary publisher, and must have been known to Members—like Disraeli—who arranged to have printer’s proofs altered or corrected.

To her granddaughter, Kate claimed to have been well educated and traveled—beyond the resources of the working-class Donovans. It was not uncommon for a well-connected Victorian country family to bring up a ward. Kate would not have been an object of special curiosity. She spoke of—or recalled—her guardian family arranging for her riding lessons and music lessons, and having a town house in London; of meeting the stocky, bearded Prince of Wales, to whom she was “my little Katy”; of being a favorite of banking Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, and of the Rothschilds, especially Natty’s brother Leopold—“Leo” to her. She claimed to have been given small gifts as a child by Disraeli, treasuring a porcelain figure purchased in Germany, linked, apparently, to his attendance at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. She prized it all her life, as would her granddaughter. And she treasured a copy of Disraeli’s Coningsby, which she kept prominently displayed. Kate had little more
than her striking Disraelian features and memories of her curious upbringing to bolster her contention that she was his daughter.

That comfortable upbringing required someone’s money. It may have been that of the secretive Natty Rothschild, with Rose a Disraeli trustee. Certainly, she never knew of what I surmised is the “smoking gun.”

However circumstantial I found the saga of the likely Disraeli daughter whom he concealed at risk to his political reputation, the clues seem compelling. He could not have betrayed his ambitions only two years before he ascended “the greasy pole” in 1868. As she grew older Kate became more secretive about her past; yet she lived into her nineties still claiming to her children a pride of ancestry that became more and more Jewish in practice, although her mysterious mother could not have been Jewish, and Disraeli at twelve had been converted, at his father’s instructions, to the Established Church. Before Kate died, she requested the Reform Jewish ritual at her funeral. In her last months, she confided to a close friend: “There wasn’t one child; there were two children—a boy and a girl. From two different mothers.” How she knew of Ralph, and Lady Dorothy Nevill, is lost in the mists of overheard gossip. But she named her own daughter Dorothy.

Two promotional appearances for Disraeli remain especially memorable. The most prestigious author-interview venue then on television was Brian Lamb’s “Booknotes,” an hour-long weekly program on C-Span. On February 6, 1994, I was filmed in Washington. At the close, Lamb asked me, as he knew I taught biographical writing, whether a course of study like that prepared students to write. “I think you learn to write,” I said,

by writing and writing and writing. I want to be read. I don’t want to be read only by scholars who number perhaps 30 to 300, and that’s it. If I’m going to work very hard to reveal what somebody was really like, and I think that person was a fascinating individual, I want to communicate that. I think that Disraeli was just compellingly fascinating as a human being and as an achiever, and so I’d like people to know that.3

Memorable also was a book-and-author dinner in Pittsburgh, where I was one of five writers to speak briefly as coffee and dessert were served. Just prior to me was the host of TV’s “Animal Planet,” who came to the microphone in bush jacket and boots with his book in hand, a colorful macaw perched on his shoulder, and a formidable-
looking python curled around his collar and dangling down on both sides. (The snake appeared somewhat sedated for safety.) The audience gasped and some diners at the front tables cautiously slid their chairs back. Listeners put down their coffee cups and dessert spoons. The waiters stood by in silence. After ten minutes it was my turn and I was introduced as the biographer of Benjamin Disraeli. Some weak applause followed. The audience continued to stare at the python and macaw. As I began my presentation I realized that no one was listening, and when I displayed my copy of the biography to show the ambitious young Disraeli on the jacket, no one was looking in my direction. I went on for my allotted time with draining enthusiasm, recalling the truism: “Never follow an animal act.”

Inevitably I would turn to the Rothschilds, who were Dizzy’s friends and contemporaries. As a coming politician he had been consumed helplessly in admiration for the beautiful young Charlotte de Rothschild, formerly of Frankfurt, who had married her London cousin Lionel, perhaps the wealthiest man in England. He was heir to his father, Nathan Mayer Rothschild, who had died of an infection in 1836 just days after Lionel’s wedding in Germany, which had also included a conclave of the banking brothers, who directed firms in Vienna, Paris, Naples, Frankfurt and London. In the Rothschild archive I found accounts of the nuptials as well as of the tragic aftermath.

Lionel, working then in Paris for his Uncle James, took the revolutionary new railway to Frankfurt with the plump, amiable, Gioachino Rossini, forty-four, his friend and a banking client at the rue Laffitte. It had been seven years since the once-prolific composer’s popular Guillaume Tell, and Rossini, uninterested in creating another opera, was captivated as well as concerned by his first journey by steam. He had heard that boilers sometimes burst, and that track beds sometimes collapsed. Nothing dire happened, but he was both unnerved and inspired by the experience, composing a satiric piano piece afterwards. Un petit train de plaisir (Comique-Imitatif) mimicked the clatter of the journey and concluded with a “déraillement du convoi”—the deaths of two passengers, the flight of their souls to the beyond, and the sardonically happy close as the heirs of the victims celebrate their legacies. (On YouTube one can see and listen to the famed Italian pianist Aldo Ciccolini play this jeu d’esprit.)
At Hatton Garden I found the three-page marriage contract—*ketubah*—in Hebrew, with the signatures of the witnesses, including a boldly enthusiastic “G. Rossini.” It was a gesture which later seems to have convinced Disraeli that Rossini was a Jew, for in his novel *Coningsby* (1844) the mysterious banker and visionary Sidonia explains sweepingly that many movers and shakers of Europe, as well as its culture heroes like Rossini, were unacknowledged Jews.

The dramas which unfolded in the Rothschild archive included Lionel’s campaign to overturn the religious ban against Jews sitting in Parliament. At one election he was unanimously chosen by the electorate of the City of London to the House of Commons, but denied his seat on refusing to take the oath on a Christian bible. It took until July 26, 1858, after eleven frustrating years, for Lionel to win vindication. As he took his oath on a Hebrew bible, Charlotte observing from the Gallery where she had sat through so many earlier and unhappier ordeals, Lionel could see on the benches his brother-in-law Henry Fitzroy, born a Christian; Ralph Bernal Osborne, whose Jewish father had become an Anglican, making his son’s career possible; and Lionel’s closest friend, Benjamin Disraeli, whose father, while not churching himself, had his son (and his other children) baptized. For the first time an elected Member who had tenaciously kept his faith was there as a Jew.

The hoard of documents on file included relatively few by Lionel, who kept his banking affairs confidential, but hundreds of gossipy and witty letters, often to her children, by Charlotte, who wrote in tiny script and often, as if for economy, across her lines. Rodelle painstaking transcribed the essentials where she could, and ordered dozens of photocopies for rechecking once home. The marriage of Charlotte and Lionel, however arranged by their families, proved on paper to be a love story. Nevertheless, it was punctuated by tragedy. Daughter Evelina—married to her Paris cousin Ferdinand—died in childbirth, the infant stillborn and Lionel was increasingly disabled by arthritis, seeing the financial world from
his chair in St. Swithin’s Lane and seemingly knowing everything beyond New Court.

Charlotte, we found, had not only written a textbook, *Addresses to Young Children*, for girls at the Jews’ Free School at Bell Lane in Spitalfields, in east London, which she had founded and financed, but a second one, about which the archive had not known. The evidence appeared in the printed text of her rabbi’s eulogy at her funeral. The death of Evelina had continued to obsess Charlotte. In 1873 she published, anonymously, with the prestigious house of Longmans, Green, *From January to December. A Book for Children.* (Felix Mendelssohn’s sister, Fanny, whom Charlotte had known when a young woman in Germany, had composed a piano cycle of the months, *Das Jahr*, which she played at her Sunday concerts in the mid-1830s, and Fanny’s piano cycle may have been the inspiration for Charlotte’s literary cycle.) Few beyond the pupils and tutors at the Free School may have guessed at the author’s identity, although Charlotte’s cousin Emma Montefiore wrote to Charlotte that the book had been “my companion” during a journey. Much of the miscellany had been tried out by Charlotte on the Bell Lane children—poems, stories, translations from French and German, and natural history, from birds to the aurora borealis. A poem for April about a “loving fairy” now “far away” in heaven openly identified Charlotte’s “cherished” mother, while the long December fable, “The Precious Jewel,” concealed its origin in her mourning Evelina. The story is Charlotte’s retelling of the brief life of Evelina, the ugly duckling to her beautiful sister Leonora, and Evy’s courtship by the sophisticated Ferdinand de Rothschild. However much the pages from January through November reveal aspects of Charlotte, it is December, the month of her loss of her daughter, which seems the reason for the book. “The Precious Jewel” was her gentle act of exorcism.

Rodelle went to the British Library, which holds copies of all works copyrighted in Britain, to search among anonymous authors for Charlotte’s book. It was brought to her desk in uncut pages. No one had ever opened it. She could have requested that the pages be cut, which might have resulted in a denial, or an advisory referral, which could have taken bureaucratic delays. Rather, she lifted the edges of the uncut pages, and peered within, learning the gist of the text. Having identified the volume, when we returned home we began a book search, turning
up two copies, the cover of one somewhat ragged, the other in fine condition. We gave that one to the Rothschild archive, with the other designated for our own collections at West Chester University.

Increasingly in the Rothschild orbit in the mid-1870s was Disraeli. Long ill, Mary Anne had died, leaving her husband not only bereft of a doting wife but without her inherited income and town house at Grosvenor Gate, both of which went to cousins who were next of kin. At first Dizzy joined Lionel and Charlotte for Sunday dinners at Piccadilly House, then invited himself whenever free of business. His most memorable enterprise in his second ministry was to have Lionel back a purchase of the controlling Suez Canal shares, which Disraeli financed with Natty as intermediary in Paris. (The Khedive of Egypt owned most of the remaining interest.) Four million pounds sterling had to be available immediately—the equivalent of 8.3 percent of the British budget. The transaction could not wait for Parliament to resume its sittings. Lionel took out his pen. To counter French sensitivity at the coup, he arranged to have the Rothschild house on the rue Laffitte, now directed by his nephew Alphonse, Leonora’s husband, participate. “It is just settled; you have it, Madam,” Disraeli informed the Queen happily. John Delane, editor of The Times, and like the prime minister a frequent dinner guest, wrote wryly to the Rothschilds that Disraeli “had set right that little scene with Pharaoh which has so long been owing.”

In papers which the Rothschilds had been loath to incinerate were other remarkable outlays in the national interest. Much of the funding to emancipate Black slaves in the West Indies—to buy their freedom from their owners—was raised by Lionel, who was also the chief benefactor of the charity to relieve the distress of the Irish Famine, and also a major contributor to the financing of Prince Albert’s dream of the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park—the first World’s Fair. A minor New Court investment filed in the archive relates to Albert’s hard-up Bavarian cousin, Prince Ludwig Kraft Ernst von Oettinger-Wallerstein, who asked for the co-signing of a note with the London Rothschilds for three thousand pounds, then a substantial personal sum, against which he would offer his art collection as surety to Albert. Lionel came to Buckingham Palace on May 13, 1847 to explain to Albert what his risks were, but against advice three weeks later
Albert signed. A year later, when it was clear that Ludwig would not be able to clear the loan, Prince Albert tried unsuccessfully to interest the National Gallery in a purchase, which, lacking insight, considered the works mediocrities, forcing Albert to make good on the bargain. After Albert’s death, the Queen, invoking his memory, presented twenty-five unwanted Wallerstein paintings to the Gallery, which could hardly refuse them—fourteenth- and fifteenth-century German, Dutch, Flemish and Italian works, many of which now hang in its Sainsbury Wing. Rodelle and I were escorted on a tour of them by the curator.

Charlotte outlived both her husband and Disraeli, dying in 1884. She had rarely met her contemporary, Victoria, also born in 1819. To pay for the Crimean War, which ended satisfactorily for Britain in 1855 because Prince Albert took charge, over the heads of the incompetent generals who owed their positions only to birth, the government had to negotiate a loan, which New Court arranged. The outcome prompted Lionel’s neighbor at 97 Piccadilly, Viscount Palmerston, who had become prime minister when Lord Aberdeen’s government faltered, to formally congratulate the Queen (rather than Albert) in February 1856 and in effect to further validate the standing of the Rothschild bank. Thanks to the Rothschilds, he wrote to the Queen, the country’s revenues “are not exhausted.” That seemed to prompt family participation in a soirée at Buckingham Palace, where on April 10, 122 young ladies were presented to Victoria in the royal drawing room to be introduced and make their bows. Charlotte escorted her elder daughter, Leonora, about to be betrothed to her cousin Alphonse in Paris. “Nobody very striking,” the Queen noted in her journal, “excepting Mlle. de Rothschild, Baron Lionel’s daughter, who is extremely handsome.”

Lionel was not even present. Charlotte, who accompanied Laury, went unmentioned. The Queen’s many biases were typical of her ilk, but more outrageous because of who she was. When her eldest son, the Prince of Wales, became a university friend at Cambridge of Natty de Rothschild, and later married an obscure Danish princess, she advised the equally haughty Earl Spencer as Master of the Household that her son and his bride “ought only to visit those of undoubted position in society.” They should not attend a ball at Piccadilly House. Although the Rothschilds were “very worthy people,” Spencer conceded, “they especially hold their position from wealth and perhaps the accidental
beauty of the first daughter they brought out.” *Accidental* is revealing. Leonora may have been ravishing, but she was also Jewish.

Charlotte and Victoria were unacknowledged rivals on only one occasion, earlier, in 1844. Charlotte’s early social coup occurred when Phineas T. Barnum, the American showman, came to London to line his pockets at Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly by producing the thirty-seven-inch Charles Stratton, whom he had renamed “General” Tom Thumb. The first offer for a lucrative private view came from Baroness de Rothschild, whose mansion at 148 Piccadilly was nearby. I let Barnum’s penchant for hyperbole flow:

> We were received by half a dozen servants, and were ushered up the broad stairs to the drawing-room, where we met the Baroness and a party of twenty or more ladies and gentlemen.

In his memoirs he described “the glare of magnificence” radiating from the “immense chandeliers, [and] candelabras” in which he and his remarkably short companion basked.

Charlotte “was seated on a gorgeous couch covered with rich figured silk damask” and “several lords and ladies were seated in chairs elegantly carved and covered with gold…. Very likely Tom Thumb put on his well-rehearsed act, singing “Yankee Doodle” in a treble voice, dancing a hornpipe, and closing with a repertoire of imitations, including one of Napoleon. “In this sumptuous mansion of the richest banker in the world,” Barnum boasted, “we spent about two hours, and when we took our leave a well-filled purse was quietly slipped into my hand.” Barnum’s success in London was assured, and Charlotte’s reputation as a salonnière soared. However, reciprocity from social equals of a different faith was impossible. She would not eat or drink at a non-kosher home.

It was no surprise to the ambitious Barnum that the Queen became eager to have Tom Thumb at Buckingham Palace. Outdoing the Rothschilds, she would have the “General” visit three times. And although Lionel would become, as needed, banker to Victoria and soon, more discreetly, banker to Prince Albert, only the baron would visit the palace—and only on business. Through her private secretaries, Victoria would send extremely confidential mail abroad though the good offices of New Court. And her daughter Vicky, once married to future Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia, worried about her letters being read by
the Prussian king’s agents, gave her mail intended for her mother, she wrote home, “to my banker here who sends them to Rothschild in London.”

Realizing Lionel’s eminence in the City of London, the Queen had already offered him, through her prime minister then, Sir Robert Peel, a baronetcy. Weighing pride against pragmatism, Lionel rejected being less than a baron. Had it been up to his spouse, although she would have been diminished to “Lady Charlotte,” the offer would have been accepted with grace. A British rank in one’s own country seemed more significant to her than an empty, if higher, Austrian one conferred on all the Rothschild brothers. Yet a barony meant a seat in the Lords, who were unlikely to accept him short of his taking an oath on the Christian bible. Seeking the impossible distinction, Lionel once asked Prince Albert frankly, yet unrealistically: “You have nothing better to offer me?”

Something better—beyond Albert’s powers in any case—would have risked a confrontation with the Upper House, and with Victoria, who was unready for change. After the Prince Consort’s death, when Gladstone was prime minister, recognizing, despite his unconcealed anti-Semitism, the overwhelming importance of the Rothschild firm at a time when lesser bankers were being titled, pressed the Queen again about a British distinction for Lionel. In her usual third-person she replied that “she cannot consent to a Jew being made a peer—tho’ she will not object to a Jew baronet....” On November 1, 1869, a few months later, she produced a different excuse. “She cannot think,” she charged to Gladstone, “[that] one who owes his great wealth to contracts with Foreign Govts for Loans, or to successful speculations on the Stock Exchange can fairly claim a British Peerage. However high Sr L. Rothschild”—he had no such title—“may stand personally in Public Estimation, this seems to her not the less a species of gambling, because it is on a gigantic scale—and far removed from that legitimate trading which she delights to honour.”

The prime minister dared not reply, I wrote, that could she withdraw all the peerages she had lavished upon men who gambled, bet on races, speculated in shares, or enriched themselves in lending money as bankers, she would empty the House of Lords. Lionel duly sat in the Commons, rarely speaking and soon rarely attending, as severe arthritis was gradually immobilizing him. He would see the world through his ex-
tensive sources of information, while appearing to see it only, during business hours, from his office window at New Court. I was reminded of Sherlock Holmes’s largely immobile brother Mycroft, seven years the great detective’s elder, who understood the outside world from his armchair in the Diogenes Club, in which he helps unravel some of Sherlock’s quandaries—and for whom Arthur Conan Doyle may have borrowed some hints from the almost mythic Baron Lionel.

Eventually the ageing Queen recognized, without ever conceding it, her open hypocrisy about the Rothschilds. In 1885, Nathaniel, now Lionel’s heir—already a baronet and MP for Aylesbury—became the first Lord Rothschild.

**Endnotes**

1. In 2015, aged pipes burst and flooded the library, destroying some of its contents.

2. I hadn’t known as I was writing that a death mask, a nineteenth-century practice, had been made then. It is in the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.

3. An eight-year selection of Lamb’s interviews, published as *Booknotes. America’s Finest Authors on Reading, Writing, and the Power of Ideas* (1997), includes part of this interview about *Disraeli: A Biography* (pp. 115–17).


5. In addition, even under fairly Reform Judaic traditions as practiced in the twenty-first century, a non-Jew is not accepted as signatory on a *ketubah*.

6. 19, rue Laffitte was both the personal residence of James de Rothschild and the home of Banque Rothschild.