

Chapter

‘Nothing More Precious’: the changing emotional registers of an inherited hair locket

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The generational gift of a hair locket

In 1873, Lady Marion Bell (1787-1876), the widow of the renowned surgeon Sir Charles Bell (1774-1842), wrote to her youngest nephew on the occasion of his birthday, enclosing a hair locket.¹ The letter, while loving, included a firm instruction:

My dear double nephew John David Bell, this is not an ornament, but a memorial of your uncle Charles and me – as you see – and as I have nothing more precious for a birthday offering, you will take it in the spirit of love & best wishes, from your
Loving Aunt, Marion Bell aged, 86.

Having written this, Marion turned the page and wrote down its left side: ‘Can you place hair of your Father & Mother, there?’

The locket is simple and unassuming, round, with a gold frame and silk backing, topped with a ring through which a blue ribbon is tied in a bow. Its glass front covers two pieces of hair. The darker hair is more substantial, furled on itself along the lower circumference of the circle, and fanned out across its upper section. A few strands of light-coloured hair, perhaps white, are arranged at the top of the locket. A note is inserted on paper cut in a circular shape to give visibility to the hair on which is written ‘1842 Charles Bell. Marion Bell 1811’. The dates were deeply significant. Marion wed Charles in 1811, when she was 23 and he was 37; 1842 marks his death at the age of 68.²

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Lady Marian and Sir Charles Bell Hair Locket

We tend to think of hair jewellery as intimate. The loved one's hair could symbolise romantic entwinement or, transformed into a relic by death, become a physical artefact that helped those left behind to remember their beloved.³ Yet, as we see from Aunt Marion's command and question in her gift to her nephew, hair jewellery, like most embodied inheritances, can serve multiple purposes, most notably when those who bequeath and receive them construct its significance and meaning. As Christiane Holm points out, 'these jewels functioned not as the material media of memory, but also within various acts of memory.'⁴ Marion performed such acts of memory with her hair locket. Whether the locket began as mnemonic of romantic love, and then a symbol of mourning, it acquired two additional meanings. For Marion and the Bell family, it came to embody the extremely close familial bonds between two brothers who married two sisters. By the 1870s, it was also an artefact that memorialized Sir Charles Bell, the eminent surgeon, an act of memory to which Marion had devoted her widowhood.

Hair as a repository of love and grief

It is unclear whether the locket was assembled when the couple were first in love or later in grief. The style of locket was fashionable from the 1820s to midcentury, rather less elaborate than those that followed. Dating the hair in locket to early or late in their relationship is difficult since portraits indicate that Charles' hair was fine and blonde in youth, and, later, white.⁵ Certainly, the couple were famously uxorious. Their devotedness was celebrated in biographies of Charles, as well as in the obituaries of Marion on her death. In 1860, Amédée Pichot published a 'Life' of Sir Bell, which noted when he escaped to the country to go fishing, 'that he might leave no affectionate member of his family to regret his absence, he

was accompanied by his wife and dog'.⁶ The *Record* rapturised in 1876 that the Bells 'married life was so complete a union of heart, mind, and sentiment, that it might be doubted whether even a family, which they never had, would have rendered their happiness more complete'.⁷ In the boxes containing the letter and locket is an extract copied from a private letter of Lady Bell's friend that reported that Marion died peacefully "among her pictures" (Sir Charles Bell's original sketches, which she dearly prized, and hung all round her room).⁸ It is possible that the hair locket originally embodied the couple's romantic involvement, the slip of paper inserted after Charles' death, thereby transforming it into a piece of mourning jewellery. What is clear is that the entwined hair was intended to bind the spouses together beyond their lifetimes.

A 'double nephew' and a double family

Marion's inquisitive addendum to the letter, 'Can you place hair of your Father & Mother, there?' was a further act of memory, encapsulating her desire for the hair locket to represent the longstanding bond of the Bell and Shaw siblings. Her description of John as her 'dear double nephew' conveyed a very special meaning. He was literally a double nephew, since his mother, Barbara Shaw (1786-1827), was Marion's sister, and his father, George Joseph Bell (1770-1843), was Charles' brother. Adding his mother and father's hair to the locket, which presumed he had access to their hair several decades after their deaths, would reproduce in death what they had enjoyed in life.⁹ The Lawyer George married Barbara Shaw in 1806, and her younger sister Marion lived with them on several occasions in both Edinburgh and Ayr. She fell in love with Charles when he visited his brother from London, and they married in 1811. This bound the two brothers even more closely. In his memoranda notes, written up later by his daughter Barbara, George repeatedly recollected that he and

Charles were united together against the rest of their siblings who he described variously as feckless, selfish, cruel, and cold. Touchingly, George described one of Charles' visits in 1809: 'and now I have in the house with us the things whom of all the world I like the best. My wife & my two little girls Charles & Marion and aunty'.¹⁰

Marion and Charles had no children, while George and Barbara had ten children between 1807 and 1825. The last was John, born in 1825. It is not immediately clear why John was the beneficiary of the locket. There were other possible recipients in the Shaw family, whose younger siblings had close relationships with Charles Bell. Marion's brother John (1792-1827) was Charles' pupil from age 15 and much-loved assistant who lived with his sister and her husband until his sudden death.¹¹ After that Marion's younger brother Alexander (1804-1890) took over John's teaching duties. Marion lived with him in London after Charles' death. Alexander married in 1856, but his only son died as infant, which might mean that by 1873, Marion knew that it was unlikely he would be able to bequeath it to the next generation.¹²

Perhaps double nephew John was selected because he was only two (1825-1880) when his mother died, and thus had a particularly close relationship with his aunt. Marion returned to Edinburgh in 1836 when Charles was appointed Professor of Surgery at the University and was, perhaps, able to spend time with him as a youth.¹³ He followed his father George into the law, practicing in Calcutta for most of the 1850s, and then as a Professor of Indian Jurisprudence, 1864-1865, at King's College, London, and as Lecturer at University College London, 1869 to 1872.¹⁴ As such, he resided in London when Marion returned following her husband's death.¹⁵ John married in 1852 and had several children who survived him, perhaps in Marion's eyes a safer bet for the continuing legacy of her gift.

Memorialising Sir Charles Bell

When Marion instructed John that the locket ‘is not an ornament, but a memorial of your uncle Charles and me’, it is likely that she was positioning it in the public domain as much as the familial and personal. Sir Charles Bell was perhaps the most celebrated British physiologist of the early nineteenth century and the author of numerous well-received works. Was Marion even situating herself as fundamental to this memorialisation when she referred to ‘and me’? After her death, the *Lancet* noted that she had ‘devoted herself as her husband’s amanuensis on the “Anatomy of Expression,” “Animal Mechanics”, and “The Hand”’. These subjects being suited to her taste’.¹⁶ In her ‘Recollection’ of her husband, appended to a publication of his letters in 1870, she explained that it was following the ‘great loss’ of his pupil John, Marion’s brother, that he gave her the ‘occupation’ of writing for him.¹⁷ Another obituary of Marion in *The Clinic*, declared that she had lightened the professional burdens on Charles in this way.¹⁸ As noted in the *Lancet* obituary, following Charles’ death in 1842, Marion worked with her brother Alexander to bring out ‘successive editions’ of each of these works with the ninth edition of *The Hand* published in 1874.¹⁹ She clearly was not subordinate in this activity. *The Record* noted, for example, in 1876 that ‘Alexander Shaw, since the death of his distinguished brother-in-law, Sir Charles Bell, has aided his widow in her cherished employment of promoting his posthumous usefulness and fame by publishing improved editions of his work’.²⁰ *The Clinic*’s obituary commented that unlike other women who have been ‘helpmates of men distinguished in science or art’ who then fall into obscurity as widows, she returned to London following Charles’ death and continued in the society of scientific men.²¹ It concluded: ‘She regarded women’s proper mission as that of a reasoning helpmeet to man; as no inferior to him, but as no supplanter of him. She was essentially feminine in her feelings and tastes; every hour of her life, her devotion to her husband while he lived, and her devotion to the perpetuation of his memory, demonstrated it.’²² Marion,

therefore, also sought to secure the hair locket as a relic of and testament to the public reputation of her eminent husband.

Intimate and public hair stories

The Inheriting the Family project activities brought to the fore how difficult hair is as an embodied inheritance, especially when it is inherited without the structure of jewellery to contain it, since inherited objects need a coherent family story to convey meaning through the generations.²³ Indeed, a hair inheritance needs to be narrativized in order to ensure its survival and secure its role in passing on familial memory across generations. When Marion gifted her hair locket to her nephew in 1876, she did just this. She imposed a family story that ensured its value as an inherited object: not only a love token, or a vessel of grief, it also told the story of two Bell brothers who saw themselves as siblings united in adversity and joined in marriage to the Shaw sisters. The fourth layer of significance was attached at Marion's insistence. Having spent the decades following her husband's death editing three of Charles' major works, and a collection of his letters, she wanted the locket to embody his national public reputation; perhaps assuming, even, the mantle of the celebrity relic.²⁴ The locket only realised its journey from the intimate to the public in the twenty-first century, when the Bell descendants deposited it permanently with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Even now, accessioned to the Royal College of Surgeon's of Edinburgh's archive collection, which is made available to the public, it retains multiple intimate and public meanings. Indeed, the College Archivist has indicated that in recent years the family have visited to view the collection.²⁵

¹ Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh [RCSEd], GD 82/2/4, Bell Family Archive. For more on Charles Bell, see Carin Berkowitz, *Charles Bell and the Anatomy of Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Michael Brown, *Emotions and Surgery in Britain 1793-1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

² ‘Charles Bell’, National Records of Scotland,
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/hall-of-fame/hall-of-fame-a-z/bell-charles>,
accessed 12 November 2023. L. S. Jacyna, Bell, Sir Charles
(1774–1842), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [ODNB]* (Oxford, 2004).

³ Deborah Lutz, ‘The Dead Still Among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 39, no. 1 (2011): 128.

⁴ Christiane Holm, ‘Sentimental Cuts: Eighteenth-Century Mourning Jewelry with Hair’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38, no. 1 (2004): 140.

⁵ *Letters of Sir Charles Bell: Selected from his Correspondence with his Brother George Joseph Bell* (1870), Frontispiece, by Anthony Stewart, 1804; National Portrait Gallery, Sir Charles Bell, by John Stevens, oil on canvas, circa 1821. In her ‘Recollections’, Marion described the ‘white hair’ of her ‘radiant’ husband in 1841, *Letters of Sir Charles Bell*, 422.

⁶ Amédée Pichot, *The Life and Labours of Sir Charles Bell* (London, 1860), 154.

⁷ RCSEd, clipping from GD82/3, collected testimonials to Lady Marion Bell.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ There appears to be only two types of hair in the locket, not four, suggesting that John was unable to answer his aunt’s question.

¹⁰ RCSEd, GD82/1/2 Handwritten notes and memoranda by George Bell, 18 front.

¹¹ For an insight into Charles and John’s relationship, see Michael Brown, ‘Wounds and Wonder: Emotion, Imagination and War in the Cultures of Romantic Surgery. *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*’, 43 (2020): 239–259.

¹² M. H. Kaufman, 'Genealogy of John and Charles Bell: their relationship with the children of Charles Shaw of Ayr', *Journal of Medical Biography*, 13 (2005): 220. See also J. B. Bailey, revised by B. A. Bryan, 'Shaw, Alexander (1804–1890)', *ODNB (Oxford, 2004)*.

¹³ Jacyna' Bell'.

¹⁴ 'John David Bell', Kings Collections, <https://kingscollections.org/victorianlives/a-c/bell-john-david>, accessed 12 November 2023.

¹⁵ Kaufman, 'Genealogy', 220.

¹⁶ RCSEd, GD82/3, collected testimonials to Lady Marion Bell.

¹⁷ Bell, 'Recollections', 406.

¹⁸ *The Clinic: A Weekly Journal of Practical Medicine*, 13 January 1877; Extracted from *Medical Times and Gazette*, 1 November 1876, 21 in RCSEd, clipping from GD82/3, collected testimonials to Lady Marion Bell.

¹⁹ RCSEd, clipping from GD82/3, collected testimonials to Lady Marion Bell.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *The Clinic*, 21.

²² *The Clinic*, 22.

²³ Nancy K. Miller, 'Family Hair Looms', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1/2 (2008): 167.

²⁴ Lutz, 'Dead Still', 129.

²⁵ Email communication.