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Welby, Victoria Alexandrina Maria Louisa, Lady Welby (1837–1912), *philosopher*

Welby [*later* Welby-Gregory; *née* Stuart-Wortley], Victoria Alexandrina Maria Louisa, Lady Welby (1837–1912), philosopher, was born in England on 27 April 1837, the last of three children of Charles James Stuart-Wortley (1802–1844), and his wife, Lady Emmeline Charlotte Elizabeth Stuart-Wortley, *née* Manners (1806–1855), poet and traveller. James Archibald Stuart-Wortley (1776–1845) was her grandfather. She had little formal education aside from some private tuition, and from 1848 to 1855 she travelled widely with her mother in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Spain, Morocco, Turkey, Palestine, Syria and many other countries. In 1852 she published her travel diary. After her mother's death she lived with a succession of relatives before being taken in by her godmother, the duchess of Kent, mother of Queen Victoria. In 1861 she was appointed maid of honour to Queen Victoria; she spent almost two years at the royal court before her marriage at St George's Church, Hanover Square, London, on 4 July 1863, to William Earle Welby (1829–1898), military official, MP, and high sheriff, who with his father's death in 1875 became fourth baronet and assumed the additional surname Gregory. Consequently Victoria Welby's surname became Welby-Gregory. Alternatively to a series of pseudonyms or recourse to anonymity, she mainly published under her full name until the end of the 1880s, under the name of Hon. Lady Welby from 1890 to 1892, and as Victoria Welby from 1893 onwards, although she continued signing all official and business documents with her full name.

Welby's children were Victor Albert William (1864–1876), Charles Glynne Earle Welby (1865–1938), assistant under-secretary of state at the War Office and MP, and Emmeline Mary Elizabeth (Nina; 1867–1955), painter, sculptor, and writer, who wrote Welby's biography and edited her correspondence in two volumes, under her married name, Mrs H. Cust. During the first years of her marriage, Victoria Welby founded the Royal School of Art Needlework.

Not at all attracted to life at court, after her marriage Welby retreated to Denton Manor, Grantham, where she soon began her research, with her husband's full support. Initially her interest was directed towards theological questions and in 1881 she published *Links and Clues*, which expressed her sympathy at that time with evangelical movements. It was unorthodox and unsuccessful and its poor reception caused her to reflect on the inadequacies of religious discourse, which was, she came to believe, cast in outmoded linguistic forms. She was drawn into an examination of language and meaning, and found a pervasive linguistic confusion which stemmed from a misconception of language as a system of fixed meanings, and which could be resolved only by the recognition that language must grow and change as human experience changes. She also made a serious study of science, believing that important scientific discoveries supplied the new experiences by which religious discourse could be transformed into something more meaningful.

Central to Welby's philosophy was her analysis of meaning into three components: sense—‘the organic response to environment’ (Hardwick, xxii); meaning—the specific sense which a word is intended to convey; and significance—which encompasses ‘the far-reaching consequence, implication, ultimate result or outcome of some event or experience’ (ibid.). This triadic relationship relates closely to that established by Charles Sanders Peirce between immediate interpretant, dynamical interpretant, and final interpretant (ibid., pp. 109–11). Peirce read her 1903 book *What is Meaning?* and reviewed it for *The Nation* alongside Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*, to which he compared it in importance. A flourishing correspondence developed between Welby and Peirce, which was crucial to the development of his thought. She has been regarded as the ‘founding mother’ of semiotics and her continuing importance is illustrated by the publication in the 1980s and 1990s of editions of her work and volumes of commentary on her thought. She contributed significantly to modern theories of signs, meaning, and interpretation, and introduced, in 1894, the neologism ‘significs’ to denote the science of meaning. Significs examined the interrelationship between signs, sense—in all its signifying implications—and values.

Besides numerous articles in newspapers, magazines, and scientific journals (notably *The Spectator*, *The Expositor*, the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Open Court*, *Nature*, *Mind*, *The Monist*, the *Hibbert Journal*, and the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*) Welby published a long list of privately printed essays, parables, aphorisms, and pamphlets on a large range of subjects in numerous spheres: science, mathematics, anthropology, philosophy, education, and social issues.

As her research progressed, Welby increasingly promoted the study of significs, channelling the great breadth and variety of her interests into a significant perspective. Shortly after the publication of two fundamental essays—‘Meaning and metaphor’ in 1893 and ‘Sense, meaning and interpretation’ in 1896—the Welby prize for the best essay on significs was announced in the journal *Mind* in 1896 and awarded to Ferdinand Tönnies in 1898 for his essay ‘Philosophical terminology’ (1899–1900). Important moments of official recognition for significs are represented by the publication of the entries ‘Translation’ (Welby, 1902), ‘Significs’ (co-authored with J. M. Baldwin and G. F. Stout, 1902), and ‘Sensal’ (with G. F. Stout, 1902) in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology in Three Volumes* (1901–5). However, the official recognition Welby had so tenaciously hoped for came only after approximately thirty years of ‘hard labour’, with the publication of the entry ‘Significs’ in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1911. The signific movement in the Netherlands, which developed in two phases from 1917 to 1926 and from 1937 to 1956, originated from Welby's significs through the mediation of the Dutch psychiatrist, poet, and social reformer Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932).

From 1863 until her death in 1912 Welby was a friend and source of inspiration to leading personalities from the world of science and literature. She wrote regularly to over 450 correspondents from diverse countries including Great Britain, the United States of America, France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. It was largely through such correspondence that she developed her theories. She began writing to politicians, representatives of the church, aristocrats, and intellectuals as early as 1870 and created an epistolary network which expanded rapidly from 1880 onwards, both locally and internationally. She used this network for her own enlightenment, as a sounding board for her own ideas, and as a means of circulating her own ideas and those of others. Thanks also to her social position and court appointment as maid of honour to Queen Victoria, she counted friends and acquaintances among the aristocracy and government officials. Because of her interest in religious and theological questions she corresponded with leading churchmen of her day and subsequently with eminent scientists, philosophers, and educationists, whom she welcomed into her home where they met to discuss their ideas. Her correspondents included Michel Bréal, Bertrand

Russell, C. K. Ogden, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley Benjamin Jowett, F. H. Bradley, Henry Sidgwick, H. G. Wells, and William James. None the less, in spite of general awareness of the importance and originality of Welby's work, she did not for many years receive the recognition she hoped for, at least not publicly. In an attempt to avoid flattery, she either published anonymously or signed her work with pseudonyms, various combinations of initials, or simply as Victoria Welby. The only honour she valued was 'that of being treated by workers as a serious worker' (Hardwick, 13). Though she had no institutional affiliations, she was a member of the Aristotelian and Anthropological societies and was one of the original promoters of the Sociological Society between 1903 and 1904.

Welby was an open-minded female intellectual in the Victorian era despite—or, perhaps, thanks to—her complete lack of a formal education, which led her to search for the conditions which made her theoretical work possible. She highlighted the importance of her extensive travels as a child with her mother, which often took place in dramatic circumstances and ended with her mother's tragic death in the Syrian desert, leaving Victoria all alone until help came from Beirut. In a letter of 22 December 1903 to Peirce, who fully recognized her genius (as testified by their correspondence), Welby suggested that her unconventional childhood

accounts in some degree for my seeing things in a somewhat independent way. But the absence of any systematic mental training must be allowed for of course in any estimate of work done. I only allude to the unusual conditions of my childhood in order partly to account for my way of looking at and putting things: and my very point is that any value in it is impersonal. It suggests an ignored heritage, an unexplored mine. This I have tried to indicate in 'What is meaning?' (Hardwick, 13–14)

Welby's scientific remains are now mainly deposited in two archives: the Welby collection in the York University archives (Downsview, Ontario, Canada) and the Lady Welby Library in the University of London Library. The latter includes approximately 1000 volumes from Victoria Welby's personal library and twenty-five pamphlet boxes containing pamphlets, reprints and newspaper cuttings, religious tracts, sermons, and published lectures by various authors. Four boxes without numbers contain duplicates of most of Welby's own publications. The main part of her scientific and literary production is to be found at the York archives. Half of the collection consists of Welby's as yet mostly unpublished correspondence covering the years 1861–1912. A large part of the remainder comprises notes, extracts, and commentaries on a variety of subjects—biology, education, ethics, eugenics, imagery, language and significance, logic and significance, matter and motion, numbers theory, philosophy and significance, signification, and time. There are also speeches, lessons, sermons by other authors, numerous unpublished essays and a collection of poems by Welby, diagrams and photographs, translations, proofs, copies of some of her publications, and newspaper cuttings.

Suffering from partial aphasia and paralysis of the right hand owing to bad blood circulation caused by flu caught at the end of January 1912, Welby died on 29 March 1912 at Duneaves, Mount Park, Harrow, and was buried in Grantham, Lincolnshire.

Sources

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Likenesses

F. Dicksee, double portrait, 1880 (with Sir William Earle Welby-Gregory), [priv. coll.](#); repro. in Schmitz, ed., *Essays on significs* · E. Taylor, watercolour miniature, repro. in V. Welby, *Significs and language* (1911) · portrait, repro. in Cust, ed., *Echoes of larger life* · portrait, repro. in Cust, ed., *Other dimensions*

Wealth at death

£1192 9s.: probate, 15 May 1912, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*