

Myra Stapleton buried 26th January 1805. No headstone.

Mira (as she was christened and possibly short for Mirabilia) Stapleton had come to Exeter 'whither she had removed for change of air, and where she was nursed by an amiable and intelligent Unitarian family.'¹ The name of the family with whom she was staying is not available yet, but the accounts register tells us that she was buried in the Reverend James Manning's cave.

We know quite a bit about Mira and her family thanks to Mrs Ann Gilbert (née Taylor), who knew the Stapleton's, in her youth, when they all lived in Colchester, Essex. Ann and her sister Jane are well known for writing the poem 'Twinkle twinkle little star'.²

Mira was born on 10th March 1779 to Joseph Stapleton (1741-1797) and his wife Maria née Dix (Died 1808).³ She was baptised at Lion Walk Presbyterian Chapel in Colchester in May of the same year. She had four sibling sisters and two brothers all of whom were baptised there. Two of her siblings died within a few years of birth and none of the girls would live past their mid-twenties.

Mira's father, Joseph was a surgeon and apothecary practising in Colchester. His parents John and Mirabilia Stapleton were both apothecaries practising in Braintree in Essex and it is possible that that is where Joseph and his seven siblings were born. In 1756 his father died,⁴ and he was apprenticed to his brother Henry, also an apothecary.⁵ We know that Joseph went on to study medicine at Edinburgh, graduating in 1767 with a thesis on consumption.⁶

We know from Ann Gilbert's autobiography that, 'Dr Stapleton was a physician a dissenter a plain good man Mrs Stapleton was every way a superior woman the backbone of the family and maintaining in it a calm and wise authority.'⁷ Ann and her family had moved to Colchester from Lavenham in about 1796 so only knew Dr Stapleton for a short while before his untimely death.

She goes on to describe the family members giving us a clear impression of Mira and her family. 'Four very interesting and in different ways lovely girls and one son composed their family circle Mira the eldest seventeen when we arrived in Colchester was too much our senior at first to become a familiar associate. Her face was beautiful with intelligence and the intellectual pride, which was perhaps her tendency, was scarcely indicated beneath the mild and lovely expression of her features.' At that time Mira taught French and ornamental needlework at a boarding school in Colchester.⁸

The Stapleton girls became pupils of Isaac Taylor; Ann and Jane's father. An engraver by trade he was also the preacher at Bucklersbury Lane, Colchester. A great advocate for education. The group became known amongst themselves as 'The Umbelliferous Society'.

¹'Autobiography and other Memorials of Mrs Gilbert (formerly Ann Taylor)', Ed. Josiah Gilbert, Henry S King and Co, Paternoster Row, London, 1874. Accessed via google books

² *Rhymes for the Nursery* (1806), Ann and Jane Taylor were not identified as authors of the collection or of individual poems. The most famous piece in the 1806 collection is "The Star," more commonly known today as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star", which was set to a French tune.

³ Colchester, Lion Walk Meeting House (Independent), 1764-1785, England and Wales, Non-conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

⁴ John Stapleton's will. England and Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

⁵ UK, Register of Duties Paid for Apprentices' Indentures, 1710-1811, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk.

⁶ Dissert. Inaug. De Phthifi Pulmonari 8 vols Edin. 1767. www.archive.org.

⁷ As notation 1/ibid

⁸ As notation 1/ibid

After Mira's father died the family moved to Dedham and into a property owned by John Constable's father.

In 1800 Mira and her sister Eliza visited relatives in Dublin and it is here that Ann and Jane Taylor felt she and her sisters started to question to a certain extent their religious beliefs and turned to Socinianism.⁹ A single sentence only reached Ann from Mira's last words 'Lord save me in thine own way' which she thought indicated conflicting thoughts.

Mira's links to Exeter seem to be through association. Is it coincidence that another friend in Colchester a Cecilia Susannah Hills married a Richard Duncan Mackintosh M.D. brother to John Mackintosh who lived in Exeter?¹⁰ Mira was a witness at Cecilia and Richard's wedding and in her will Mira names John Mackintosh her executor.¹¹ Was the Mackintosh family the 'amiable and intelligent Unitarian family' she was staying with?

Having seen her sister Bithia die in 1804¹² at the age of 23, it was left to her mother to witness the death next of Mira on 19th January 1805¹³ and then within a week of each other Letitia and Eliza in 1806.¹⁴ She died herself in 1808.¹⁵ Jane Taylor puts this in context when she writes to a friend 'That I, who am certainly delicate, have stood so long, and under many disadvantages, is more than might have been expected; and I hope excites thankfulness. I have for some time felt as if waiting for my turn. To hear only that one of my friends has a cough, alarms me now; and I look round upon them all with an anxious eye—which of them am I next to lose?'¹⁶

Mira's brother Joseph went on to have a career as a Librarian. He died in 1877. Three of his children carried on the 'family' calling. Joseph Whittaker Stapleton¹⁷ and John Hutton Stapleton¹⁸ became surgeons and Cowper Croft Stapleton¹⁹ an assistant surgeon and chemist.

Mira was second cousin to William Hincks the Dissenting Minister at George's Meeting 1818-1822²⁰. Although he was only eleven years old when Mira died they would have known of each other's existence and possibly have met.

John Mackintosh and his mother Elizabeth (née Galloway) are both buried in the Dissenters Graveyard, Exeter.

Anne Amosford October 2018

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socinianism>

¹⁰ See John Mackintosh biography, Ian Varndell 2017 www.edgt.org.uk

¹¹ Mira Stapleton's will 1806, England and Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

¹² As notation 1/ ibid

¹³ Burial Register, Exeter, Bow Meeting (Presbyterian), 1687-1823, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

¹⁴ Eliza and Letitia Stapleton's wills 18 Nov 1807 probate and 21 Feb 1807. England and Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

¹⁵ Mrs Stapleton's obituary, The Evangelical Magazine, Vol 17, 1809
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.ah6lt3;view=1up;seq=406>

¹⁶ *Memoirs, Correspondence, and Poetical Remains of Jane Taylor* by Jane Taylor (1783-1824), Edited by Isaac Taylor, Jr., of Stanford Rivers (1787-1865). From *The Writings of Jane Taylor, In Five Volumes (Volume I, Memoirs and Poetical Remains.)* Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1832.

¹⁷ The Medical Directory 1885, UK and Ireland, Medical Directories, 1845-1942, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

¹⁸ The Medical Directory 1875, UK and Ireland, Medical Directories, 1845-1942, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

¹⁹ Kelly's Directory of Wiltshire, accessed via Ancestry.co.uk

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Hincks sourced 25 October 2018