

The Early Life of John Bright's Father

THE following extract from an autobiographical fragment written by John Bright in 1879 is quoted in G. M. Trevelyan's *Life of John Bright*:¹

"My dear father" (Jacob Bright) "was born in Coventry in the year 1775. His father and mother were Jacob and Martha Bright. My grandfather was in his later days in bad health and in humble circumstances. My father was sent to Ackworth School when about nine years of age, and remained there about five years."²

Trevelyan adds this footnote: "He 'remained there' in the most literal sense. His parents were too poor, and journeys too difficult to permit of his returning to Coventry for holidays. When he first saw his parents again after five years' absence he did not at once recognize them, nor they him. This he told his son John."³

The following letter from Martha Browett (1) of Anerley, Kent, a second cousin of John Bright, to her nephew James Cramp (2) of Coventry, throws some light upon Jacob Bright's early life,⁴ and looks in one place like a direct comment upon the passages quoted above. (Trevelyan's *Life* was published in the year previous to the date of the letter.) The people mentioned may be identified by the numbered references to the genealogical tree which follows the letter. Miss Browett was nearly 90 when she wrote it; she lived almost 10 years longer. Her house in Anerley was named after the Coventry home of her grandfather William Bright (3); the district in Coventry still bears the name "Holbrooks."

¹ G. M. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, 1913, p. 6. A slightly fuller account appears in *The Diaries of John Bright*, 1930, pp. 1-2.

² Jacob Bright of Coventry entered Ackworth 1785, left 1789 (Ackworth School, *List of the boys and girls*, 1879, p. 17).

³ Regular school vacations did not begin until 27th July 1847, when Ackworth broke up for the first time in 68 years (Elfrida Vipont [Foulds], *Ackworth School*, 1959, p. 87). For the discussions preceding this move, see H. Thompson, *History of Ackworth School*, 1879, pp. 246-8.

⁴ "Of this boy's earliest years we know nothing." (J. T. Mills, *John Bright and the Quakers*, 1935, i. 101.)

Holbrook
Feb 27 [19]14

My Dear James

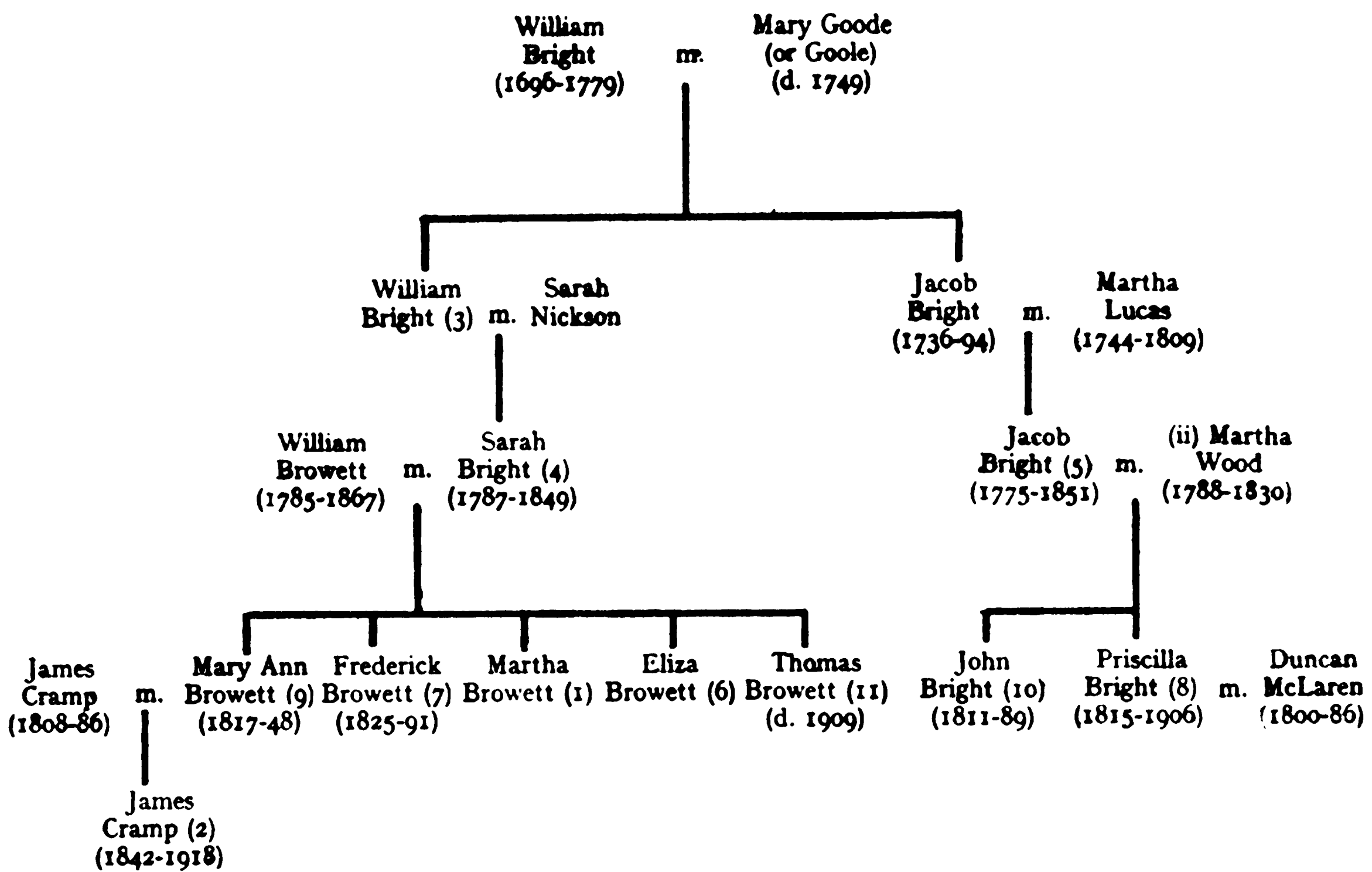
My recollection of what Mother (4) told me more than once about Cousin Jacob (5) is perfectly clear and is the same as Eliza (6) and Fred^k (7) told you—that her Father married rather late in life and took his nephew Jacob with the idea of adopting him. Then he married and Mother was either the first or the second child. They were brought up together until more sons were born—Mother was the only daughter—and Grandfather found he could not do as much for Jacob as he intended and no doubt he consulted the chiefs of the Coventry Friends Meeting and between them it was settled the boy should go to Manchester. The poverty theory is absurd, or that the boy was away for five years previously to going to be taught to earn his own living. Better in support of my memory of Jacob Bright & Mother being as brother & sister I enclose the touching letter he wrote on her death, also the two from his daughter Priscilla (8)—Mrs. McLaren on the death of your dear Mother (9) 1848 and of her brother John (10). In them there is no cursory liking for Mother or dear Mary Ann—Cousin Jacob's breathes of deep affection from near and intimate relationship. It was written three weeks before our beloved Mother's death, when Thomas (11) wrote the Doctors could do no more and the end was near. I shall never forget his devotion. He rarely left her all the last week right up to the end of her sweet life.

The Liverpool Brights—not the ship owners—are the descendants of Cousin William Bright, nephew to Jacob Bright, formerly of London, kindly induced by his Uncle Jacob to come north & set up as a cotton-broker in Liverpool, whose sons succeeding to the prosperous business thus created. The Family Tree dear Eliza so cleverly designed of which she made three copies, one for dear Thomas, one for Jacob, one that was mysteriously taken away of which printed copies were bound up with the first published Life of John Bright, I expect W^m has his Father's & that would tell you all you want to of the family history.

I must leave anything else I may think of till another time as I am tired and supper is ready.

Much love to you all
from y^r attached Aunt Martha.

The family tree, with dates as far as they are known to the writer, is as follows:



The above information comes from various sources, which are gratefully acknowledged: from Charles F. Freeman and Ena M. Lynn, who kindly searched the records of Coventry Preparative Meeting and Warwickshire Monthly Meeting respectively; from Mr. T. B. Bright and Brigadier C. I. E. Rabagliati, both direct descendants of Jacob and Martha Bright; and from Edith M. Carter, the writer's mother, youngest daughter of the second James Cramp, who found Miss Browett's letter among some family papers.

GEOFFREY W. CARTER