WHO WROTE *MY SECRET LIFE*? AN EVALUATION OF POSSIBILITIES AND A TENTATIVE SUGGESTION

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My Secret Life is an invaluable source of information on sexual activity in the last part of the 19th century. It tells about prices of prostitutes, homosexual encounters, age of consent, and other similar information not available anywhere else. Scholars have long sought to identify the anonymous author. Gershon Legman, who wrote the introduction to the latest reprinting of *My Secret Life*, identified the author as Henry Spencer Ashbee, but most who have studied the manuscript do not accept this identification. The problem then is to find someone else. This paper examines various candidates, one of whom seems more likely than the others. No final solution is offered but it is hoped that, by laying out the facts, additional data will surface, which will better enable us to identify the author of not only the longest sexual autobiography in English history but probably the longest autobiography ever published.

Introduction

This study was originally conceived of as a chapter in a book that the late Gordon Stein and myself were writing on myths and mysteries in human sexuality. He died in 1998 before completing the chapter, and his notes as well as a partial draft were sent on to me when his estate was settled. Stein was a bibliophile and bibliographer almost without peer in his lifetime. For the last decade of his life he spent much of his time gathering together a massive collection of books on free thought and agnosticism for the Center for Inquiry in Buffalo, NY. He was also interested in what might be called bibliographical problems, i.e., who wrote anonymous books, how many editions there were, and where they were located. One of his major projects was to identify the author of *My Secret Life*.

While I lack some of the expertise that Stein had, I felt it important to try to bring together the data he had collected as sort of a posthumous memorial to him. Thus I am the author, but without Stein there would be no article, and so I let Stein speak when I know what he believed. While Stein was unable to identify with certainty the real author, it is my hope that this comprehensive survey of what is known about the author and potential candidates be widely publicized and others can take up the quest where we leave off.

About the Book

My Secret Life is one of the most valuable sources of information on sexual attitudes and practices in the last part of the nineteenth century in the English speaking world. It is an anonymous work. Most critics and historians believe the book is an actual autobiography, but the issue is clouded by the fact that the author has never been identified. If it is an autobiography, it is, I believe, the longest one ever published (over 4,000 pages in the original edition and over 2,300 larger pages in the 1966 reprint edition). The original was published in eleven volumes probably between 1888 and 1893, perhaps in Brussels. Many studies of sexuality in the nineteenth century have utilized it as a major source, even if the author was anonymous.

Steven Marcus held that *My Secret Life*

> is a record of a real life in which the pornographic, sexual fantasy was acted out. That the writing is both authentic and pornographic at the same time tells us something again about the stage of intellectual and sexual development that Victorian culture had reached. (Marcus, 1964, p. 196)

Still, its authenticity would be enhanced if the author could be identified. This essay is an effort to summarize what we know about the author and, in the process, examine various candidates, none of whom as yet can be positively identified as the author. We do know that, whoever the author was, he would be quite pleased that no one as yet has been able to identify him. In a sense, he tried to have his ideas disseminated and widely read, yet not to reveal who he was.

All sorts of things are in dispute about the book including where *My Secret Life* was printed. Holland, Belgium, and France have been offered as possible sources but most probably it was printed

in Brussels, and it was the author's stated intention to have a limited edition of five copies (although later he says six). While there were at least three British publishers of erotica at this time who did quality work, namely Lazenby, Smithers, and Nichols, this project was so time-consuming to print and so openly sexual that Stein felt that none of them could have handled it. The decision to print on the continent might also have resulted from a question of cost or secrecy. Most commentators on the book agree that the book seems to have been typeset by someone who had French as his native language. The best evidence for this is the nature and high number of typographical errors in the first edition, which indicate that the typesetter was not very familiar with English although he was with French (Farrell, 1981; Fryer, 1966; Kearney, 1989; Kronhausen and Kronhausen, 1967; Legman, 1964; Marcus, 1966).

The volumes were originally published unbound, but covered in a colored paper wrapper which varied with the volume number and seems to have been selected merely on the basis of what wrapper paper was available at the time. Although the author's intention was to have only five or six copies printed, most evidence points to an original printing of about twenty additional copies—and all the copies Stein could trace had the same colored wrappers and the same typestting as the original. Although the various bindings in which the known copies of the first edition now exist are completely different from set to set, the bindings seem to have been added by the owners, and remnants of the original colored paper wrapper are clearly visible on many copies. Some of the type ornaments that appear at the beginning of chapters can definitely be traced to a print shop used by Auguste Brancart, a contemporary publisher of erotica, who operated largely from Amsterdam and Brussels (although also France). Brussels, Stein felt, was the most likely site of publication.

Assumptions About the Author

All the information we have about the author is what he reveals in his pages, and this means that we have to assume that the autobiographical data contained there is true—except, as he says, for names and places which were at least partially disguised. This poses

a major difficulty in identifying the author, since it is never clear how much is disguised even though the author of *My Secret Life* (hereafter simply referred to as "author M.S.L.") swears they are true. Some of the attempts at obfuscation are easy to unravel. Steven Marcus, who did the first serious scholarly study of the work, agrees that the "chief conscious or explicit intention in *My Secret Life* is to be honest" (Marcus, 1966, p. 163) and points out that the historical details running throughout the book can be and have been independently verified. In fact, the whole purpose of someone having spent so much time and effort in compiling, editing, and publishing this huge mass of material disappears if the book is not basically an accurate account of the author's "secret life." The entire book, Stein felt, had a "ring of truth" to it which would not likely have occurred if it were not at least largely true. The author M.S.L. often shows his own weaknesses and failing in equal standing with those times when he triumphed. No one who has seriously studied the book has suggested, at least in the scholarly literature, that it is a work of fiction. The author M.S.L. usually tells us which parts are accurate and which have been disguised. If he is lying about this, then it is not possible to trust any other parts of the narrative, and this is something that no commentator has been willing to do.

The matter is further complicated by what might be called the disingenuous comment contained in the brief introduction (*My Secret Life*, p. 5), where the writer claims to be only the editor, and not the author, of the memoirs. This claim, according to all those who have examined the book in detail, is just a feeble attempt to further conceal the authorship (Legman, 1966; Kronhausen and Kronhausen, 1967; and Marcus, 1966). That the work is not fiction, and that perhaps ultimately the author can be identified from the contents, is the premise of this paper.

Facts About the Author of *My Secret Life*

The author M.S.L. tells us that his father died when he (the author) was sixteen (*My Secret Life*, vol.1, ch. 2, p. 32, hereafter indicated as 1:2:32). He had at least one brother and two sisters (1:12:188 and 3:7:496), and we can deduce from what he tells us that he might well have been born in 1820–1821. This birth date

seems to be crucial in trying to identify the author, and requires some explanation as to how it was arrived at. Marcus (1966, p. 88) estimates that the birth date of the author M.S.L. was between 1820 and 1825. He based his claim on data presented by the author M.S.L. himself. In one passage, the author M.S.L. writes that he was twenty-six (2:15:362) and then, three years later, reports it was the year of the great cholera epidemic in London (2:17:388). The epidemic occurred in 1849, and by subtracting 1849 - 3 - 26, we arrived at 1820, or at least 1821, as a birth date.

Whether the author M.S.L. was really born then is perhaps debatable, but the date is consistent with the age bracket that he attempts to convey throughout the book without actually saying so. For example, in another passage in *My Secret Life* (8:13:1703-1704), the author talks about a large woman he had known ten years previously and now has met again. According to him, the woman was nicknamed "The Great Eastern," a term derived from a large steamboat which had been launched in 1858. This puts the date of this second meeting in 1868 (or ten years later). This passage occurs a few pages after the author M.S.L. says he is a "man not far from fifty." This is ambiguous but, if he was between forty-seven and forty-nine (which would fit), we come close to the years 1820–1821. There are several additional places confirming these dates. In 6:15:1274, he reports that, two years after the Battle of Solferino (1859), he was "just entering into middle age." The author had written at various times in the text that he considered forty to be middle aged. By subtracting forty from 1861 (two years after Solferino), we arrive at 1821 again.

One other key date can be set by accepting 1820–1821 as the birth date, namely, the date on which the author M.S.L. says he lost his virginity and began his "amatory career." He reported this happened when he was sixteen (1:5:67), which would imply the years 1836–1837. Obviously, the author was consistent in correlating his dates, but it is important to emphasize that he might well have deducted a number of years from his life or added years to it and kept these deductions consistent throughout the book, since he did do some editing and changing before he sent the book to press. Still, these estimates about dates have in the past been used to try to

identify the author M.S.L. The question is just how much the author M.S.L. distorted them.

Calculating the date of death of the author is a rather convoluted process and depends in part on when *My Secret Life* was published. It was believed by Stein, and no one has claimed differently, that the year 1890 is the midpoint in the publishing schedule, and it has been estimated that it would have taken six or seven years to complete the typesetting, printing, and binding. Apparently, the volumes were not proofread either by the printer or the author (Marcus, 1964), as there were numerous typographical errors. The author, however, did go over the volumes after they were printed and did make comments in later volumes about the earlier ones. Taking these factors into consideration, one can speculate that the printing of the first volume was completed in 1888 and the last in 1893. There is no indication that the book was published posthumously. In fact, if a will requiring this had existed, it would have been almost impossible to preserve the author's desire for anonymity. That the author was still alive as the printing neared completion appears from a personal note in the preface to the index at the end of volume 11 (p. 2316), where he writes that he was alive and completing this, the last volume, after the earlier ones had been printed. He adds that only six copies (not the five he mentioned earlier) of the previous volumes had been printed, after which the type had been broken. Earlier, he had commented on the number of typographical errors in the first two books (3:2:442), adding that some of the events in the book can hardly be recognized because they have been so greatly abridged. The importance of such statements is to emphasize that the author was alive and active in the publication of his book and it was not some posthumous editor at work (as claimed in the Preface).

Although the author clearly states that only five or six copies (both figures are given) were printed at his direction, the printer or someone else printed others. Today, twelve complete sets can be traced, all printed from the same setting of type, as are the copies of a number of broken sets (C. J. Scheiner, personal communication), and the best estimates are that there were twenty-five copies originally published. This implies that the publisher

retained the additional sets until the death of the author, after which they were offered for sale on the erotica market. This sounds logical, but the question then is when the first sets were offered for sale. Legman (1964, p. 27; 1966, p. 6) believes this was in an 1894 prospectus issued either by the publisher or by Charles Carrington (Paul Ferdinando), a leading publisher as well as seller of erotica. No copy of this prospectus has survived but there is a rare handbill in the *Bibliotheca Carrintoniensis* in the Kinsey Institute Library (Marcus, 1966, p. 80) offering a number of sets of *My Secret Life* for sale that apparently predated the 1902 brochure in which Carrington again offered sets for sale. The handbill might well date from 1894. Since it might be assumed that the author M.S.L would have been upset at having the work offered for sale, the plates for which he believed to have been destroyed, he would have reacted strongly. Since there is no indication of any such reaction, it can be argued he was already dead. On the other hand, since the 1894 prospectus, if it existed, apparently had a carefully controlled distribution, it might have been possible to exclude the author from knowing about it, providing the seller knew who he was. This would not have been the case with the 1902 advertisements. The deductions from these dates lead to the assumption that the author might possibly have died before 1894 but certainly was dead before 1902. As soon as it was safe to do so, the publisher could publicly advertise for sale the surviving copies with no fear of reprisal. The author apparently had some hesitation about having others read his musings since he clearly states that he wrote for "my pleasure alone, and if I print, shall print for my pleasure alone" (5:3:882). Still, he might well have been contented with only having one copy of his work and leaving the rest to be sold after his death when he would no longer fear about his identity being accidently discovered. Legman felt that the author actually wanted others to know and that the extra copies "were perhaps simply to be left behind, after the act of authorship and private publication, as the ostrich is said to leave its eggs in the desert sands to be hatched by the hot sun"(Legman, 1966, p. lviii).

What Else We Know

Besides his possible birth dates and death dates, there are several other things about the author M.S.L. we can find out from the text. He was, he says, an English man, born into a fairly well-to-do family in the North of England. He certainly had relatives there (2:15:363 and 2:19:411-412). The towns of Sheffield, Bradford, and Darlington figure in his youth (5:5:916, 5:7:934, 5:9:950). He had at least two sisters and a brother. His father died when he was sixteen years old (about 1836?), after going abroad to manage a relative's plantation (1:2:32). His mother died when he was over twenty-five (i.e., after 1845). He was married at least once, first at the age of twenty-six (i.e., about 1846), to a woman who had a lot of money, enough to replenish his own family fortunes which were in decline. The marriage was not a happy one, and the wife died (apparently childless) in about 1861 while he was on the continent. He apparently grew to hate his wife before she died (2:16:34). Though he had no legitimate children, he did have some by a mistress (4:14:762). As far as physical descriptions go, we have only minimal information: the author had smooth skin and a moustache (3:12:526 and 9:13:1934), and was slim and lithe in middle age (8:3:1559), although he says "I was never what could be called thin" (5:14:1007). He spoke French fluently, and possibly Italian as well. His financial condition varied considerably over time, as he spent several inheritances on women, and lost money speculating, but managed to recover and died rich. He traveled extensively in Western Europe, as well as Turkey and Russia. Quite possibly he visited America and the West Indies as well. He had a cousin, "Fred," a professional soldier who was killed in battle at a young age in 1848–1849, possibly in India, but probably in the Crimean War (2:15–360). He had a middle name, since a woman whom he was bedding said she knew about him and that his names were *** **** and ***. Although the number of asterisks might not correspond to the actual number of letters in the author M.S.L.'s name, it seems to imply that he sometimes at least used all three names. He lived in London for many years, part of it at "34A – Street" (7:7:1402–1403).

Throughout the book he refers to himself as Walter, but few believe this was his real name, and he claims he thought of giving up his promising career to pursue his amatory interests (4:14:762). Both Legman (1962) and the Kronhausens (1967) state that the author M.S.L. was a former employee of the "War Ministry," but the text in *My Secret Life* is ambiguous. He simply says (1:9:45) that "My long promised appointment came from the W*** Office . . ." There is one too many asterisks for war but both Legman and the Kronhausens agree that this was probably not his true occupation.

Late in life (that is, after age fifty) he had a long, close relationship with another woman, possibly marrying her. His knowledge of erotica, he says, was minimal, and he reported that he was somewhat naive about collecting other erotica. He wrote, for example, that he had difficulty in procuring a relatively common book such as an illustrated edition of *Fanny Hill (Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure)* (3:18:595) and thought it was written by a woman (Author's preface written about 1886), although anyone acquainted with erotica would have known that John Cleland was the author. It is only towards the end of his autobiography that an increasing interest in reading other erotic books becomes apparent (11:2:2193). Such statements, however, might have been inserted simply to mislead others seeking his identification.

He wrote his autobiography, he says, because he wanted to tell others what he had learned about sexual physiology, anatomy, and practices, and to justify his lifetime of activities if only to himself (Second Preface, p. 11). He justified concealing his identity because he did not want to hurt his present true love ([perhaps his second wife?] 7:6:1388), he was in a critical position and discovery would mean ruin for him (8:11:1673), and some of the things he did (i.e. his homosexual experiences) would cause his own reputation harm (Preface, p. 9).

One of the peculiar things about the text of *My Secret Life* is that there are no dates in it. Not a single year is mentioned. The author has not concealed or altered them, he simply eliminated them. Yet there are about ten events mentioned that enable the diligent researcher to plug in dates for these events, and then use the dated events to fill in the dates for almost every event in the book (see Table 1). This chore is eased by the fact that the author M.S.L is in the habit of saying

TABLE 1

A Dating Key to External Events in *My Secret Life*

EVENT	CITATION	YEAR	NOTE
Railway (London to Brighton)	4:10:729	1841	"Well known, healthy, but not fashionable Seaside town"
Cholera epidemic in London	2:27:388	1849	
Opening of the Argyle Rooms	4:12:747	1850	London
Railway (Paris to Avignon)	4:16:782	1851	France
Great Exhibition of London	4:21:823	1851	"A year of national importance"
Crinolines first appear	6:6:1154	1857	England
Crystal Palace Opening	7:2:1311	1873–1874	London
Battle of Solferino	6:15:1274	1859	Italy: led to founding of the Red Cross two years after = 1861
The Great Eastern Steamboat	8:13:1704	1859	Ten years after =1869
First railway sleeping cars	7:2:1311	1873–1874	England

"two years later," or something similar, instead of giving the year in which something happened. The ten key dates thus available can be used to calculate dates for virtually the entire text. In addition, although place names are concealed by using only the initial and final letters of the place, the author has usually been meticulous in supplying the correct number of asterisks for each name's omitted letters. Thus, with the help of a gazetteer and street atlas of the time period, virtually all place and street names can be ascertained.

In using these dates, it is well to keep in mind that there can be at least a one year margin of error in all inferred dates, as it is not possible to be certain whether adding a year or two to a given year will push us into the first half of a new year or still leave us in the last half of the year concerned. In addition to the ten dates listed on the table, there is a rape trial mentioned (1:14:346), which I believe is of such great importance in identifying the author MSL but which has been neglected by most commentators. It receives a special section of its own.

TABLE 2

A Dating Key to Internally Datable Events in *My Secret Life*

Phrase and Notes	Citation	Date
Author MSL's Date of Birth	2:15:362, 6:15:274	1820–1821
"A Man Not Far From Fifty ..."	8:12:1699	1869–1870
Cousin "Fred" is Killed in Battle	2:15:360	1853–1856
"She was in London & still exercising her occupation the other day, 31 years after I first had her" in the year of the great Exhibition (1851)	4:21:825	1882
"I have written in a narrative of the amours of nearly 25 years." (Add 24 to 16 [age of first sex], then add to birth year)	6:10:1195	1861–1862
"It was a full quarter century since ..." (Add 25 + 16=41; add to birth year)	7:6:1391	1862
"When about 24 years old ... strange that I should again ..." 30 years after (30 + 24 = 54, add to birth year)	9:7:1855	1875

In addition to the external events listed in Table 1, there are a number of what can be called "internally datable events," that is, events for which a date can be calculated from other information given in the book. These internally datable events serve to double check the dating done by the externally datable events in Table 1. Table 2 gives a list of some of these internally datable events.

Possible Candidates

Using the temporal clues, it becomes possible to examine candidates, although it must be kept in mind that it is impossible to conclusively prove who wrote *My Secret Life* until someone finds a signed confession by the author or a signed contract between the author and a printer or publisher.

Henry Spencer Ashbee

Of the candidates for authorship, the one who so far has received the most attention is Henry Spencer Ashbee. He is a candidate put

forth by Gershon Legman in his introduction to *My Secret Life* as well as elsewhere (Legman, 1964, 1966, 1970). Ashbee, who was a writer, was rich, well traveled, and very much interested in sex, as his *Bibliography of Prohibited Books* issued under the pseudonym of Pisanus Fraxi (reprinted in 1962) indicates. Legman, in making his identification, felt that Ashbee was such an obvious candidate that he did not bother to match any of the biographical content in *My Secret Life* with that of Ashbee's. He did state, however, that he had two independent sources of information to confirm his identification. He stated that he had been told that Ashbee was the author by St. George Best, who in turn said he had learned it from Charles Carrington (Introduction, Section 7, p. xlvii). Even if Carrington had said this, it does not mean his word should be trusted. Stephen Marcus wrote:

> Charles Carrington was a thoroughgoing rogue, and there is no reason to accept anything he said or wrote, except under one condition. Like most publishers, he was chiefly interested in making money, and it is impossible to believe that he would go to such lengths in advertising [i.e., the brochures that he published about having sets of *My Secret Life* for sale] if he had not had possession of at least a few of the sets. (Marcus, 1966, p. 80)

Best is even less reliable. He was a bookseller whose main occupation was smuggling Carrington's publications into the United States and other countries. He also "drummed up" business for Carrington in the form of new customers for his publications. If attributing the authorship of *My Secret Life* to Ashbee would help increase the demand for copies of the set, neither Best nor Carrington would have hesitated to do so, although Legman calls Best "a very nice person" (Legman, 1964, p. 34).

The additional "evidence" that helped persuade Legman of Ashbee's authorship was the fact that Carrington did not publicly advertise the books for sale until 1902, not too long after the death of Ashbee. Legman himself is contradictory on this point, since earlier he had found evidence of an 1894 prospectus mentioned above, perhaps by Carrington, but he ignored this or forgot about it in his attempt to demonstrate that Ashbee was the author. Legman was convinced that if the book had been advertised before Ashbee

died, he would have attempted to intervene either by buying up the copies (he was very wealthy) or by dealing with the printer who was cheating him, or both.

Ashbee, in a sense, is a logical candidate since he had a very large collection of erotica which he willed to the British Museum (Kearney, 1981). There was, however, no annotated copy of *My Secret Life* in the donation, and none that can be traced to him. Legman uses this lack of a copy to argue that Ashbee had in fact written the book. He hypothesized that Ashbee, who had been living in Spain, had a copy or a number of copies in his home library in England, and that when he was stricken with influenza at his village in Burgos, Spain, and fearful that he might die, struggled back to his home in England in order to recover and burn the book shortly before his death, in order to avoid any association with it and keep his authorship secret (Legman, 1964, p. 41–42). Such a scenario seems unlikely but it does not mean that Ashbee did not write M.S.L.

Moreover, there are other reasons why there is no copy of *My Secret Life* in the Ashbee collection, and its absence does not prove or disprove Ashbee's authorship. Quite simply, libraries at the end of the nineteenth century were not as thorough in their record keeping as those at the end of the twentieth century; this was especially true in matters of erotica, which were handled gingerly and sometimes destroyed. We simply do not know the full extent of Ashbee's bequest to the British Museum Library, and the bequest can only be pieced together from examination of existing books, references to books, and so forth, but even with such painstaking study, it is estimated that more than one hundred items of the original collection have disappeared. Some of these were destroyed by the museum as duplicates, others given to Oxford University, and the ones that we know to have been destroyed were works of the later nineteenth century. There is, in fact, a copy of *My Secret Life* in the British Museum Private Case (Kearney, 1981, p. 262) listed as the Dawes copy and dating from a later gift than Ashbee's. This fact makes it seem unlikely that there was a copy in the Ashbee collection, as the Dawes copy would be more likely to have been destroyed or given to other libraries.

If the two conjectures made by Legman on which he based his identification of Ashbee as the author are rather tenuous, how does the

rest of what we know about Ashbee conform to what we know about the author M.S.L.? Ashbee was born in London in 1834, the only child of Robert Ashbee. His father died in 1867, when Henry was 33. None of this agrees with the biographical information in *My Secret Life.* Ashbee married Elizabeth Lavy, daughter of his employer Charles Lavy, in 1862. His wife was still living when he died in 1900, although he disinherited her in his will. Ashbee had three children by his wife. One was Charles Robert Ashbee, an architect and author of some renown (Ashbee, *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement 1, 79). Ashbee's address from 1865 to 1884 was 46 Upper Bedford Street (Boase, 1908, p. 173), while the author M.S.L said he lived at "34 A—" in 1864–1865 (7:7:1403-03). Ashbee was a bibliographer of some repute, both under his own name and under his pseudonym of "Pisanus Fraxi." He was thoroughly familiar with the literature of erotica in a number of languages, as his bibliography of erotica in English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Latin indicates. This *magnum opus* was originally privately printed in three independent volumes (250 copies of each) at three different dates: vol. 1, *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877); vol. 2, *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* (1879); and vol. 3, *Catena Librorum Tacendorum* (1885).

Ashbee is described in the *DNB* article as an "excellent linguist." The author M.S.L. was fluent in French (5:1:861 and 5:14:1008 and 6:2:1102), but was very poor in German (9:11:1912 and 5:14:1008) and Spanish (10:6:2034, 2037). His Italian was only fair (6:2:1106). Ashbee spent his winters in Spain (his favorite country) for many years. Again, in contrast, the author M.S.L seems to have visited Spain only once (possibly twice), at least as far as he tells us in the text of *My Secret Life* (10:6:2034). Ashbee was a lover and collector of erotica while the author M.S.L., as indicated earlier, seems to have had little interest in collecting it (5:4:900) and was not very knowledgeable about it. In short, almost nothing we can gather from the author M.S.L coincides with anything we know about Ashbee. This, however might be deliberate obfuscation on the part of the author M.S.L. and imply that most of the hard gained facts about the author M.S.L. are simply designed to mislead us. Moreover, if he is not the author, who else could be?

A number of possible candidates have been advanced. Mostly they have been put forth as candidates because some of their dates correspond with what has been known about the author M.S.L. and because Stein, among others, explored almost every possible person listed in the *Dictionary of National Biography* whose dates correspond with the data reported above or who are suspected for other reasons.

Captain Edward Sellon

Legman suggests (and then rejects) as a candidate Captain Edward Sellon (Introduction, p. liii). Sellon has a couple of similarities to the author M.S.L. He was a "Casanova," as his autobiography *The Ups and Downs of Life* (1867), published secretly and anonymously, demonstrates. This is a highly erotic work and includes erotic illustrations by Sellon himself. But why would anyone want to write two erotic autobiographies? Sellon spent a good deal of time in India, a place that is not mentioned in the text of *My Secret Life.* Sellon was called "Captain" for his army rank, a term also used to describe the author M.S.L. in the Albin-Michel (?) Sales catalogue of 1905, which includes a copy of *My Secret Life* (item 783). The datalogue copy reads "most extraordinary of all modern works. It is the autobiography of an English captain who, day by day, noted his gallant prowesses since his youth."

Where the information for this catalogue came from is unknown and just adds to the confusion about the author M.S.L. The fatal objection to considering Sellon as the author of M.S.L. is simply that he killed himself in 1866, much too early in terms of the incidents given in M.S.L to even be considered. If someone else was merely acting as an editor (11:7:2248) of a Sellon manuscript, then the editor had to add a vast number of pages to the document, in fact as many as the author, and this seems highly unlikely. If Sellon was the author, and someone else the editor, the editor had to do more than edit and there is no change in tone to suggest this possibility. Those who have argued for Sellon point out that most of his manuscripts were donated to Ashbee when he died and, if *My Secret Life* had been there, it would imply that Ashbee was the editor who added later information. But, even accepting the

possibility of an editor, there are problems: the author/editor M.S.L. says in his introduction that three years have passed since he received the manuscript but the internal dating indicates this statement was made in about 1885, long after Sellon died. In short, there are just too many negatives and too many events taking place long after Sellon died to make him a viable candidate.

George Augustus Sala

A third candidate whom Stein investigated was George Augustus Sala (*DNB*, 1901) who wrote much about the seamy side of London and is best remembered today as a journalist friend of Charles Dickens. It was the subject matter of his books (Sala, 1859, 1895) which led to his consideration as a candidate. His birth and death dates are close to those estimated for the author M.S.L., namely 1828 and 1895, although the later birth date is a problem. His mother's father owned a plantation in Demera (British Guiana), and this has some similarity to the story that the author M.S.L. tells (1:2:32) in which he says his father went abroad to manage some of the family's plantations. Sala's father died when George Augustus was just an infant (not when he was sixteen, as was the case with the author M.S.L.). Sala had four siblings who survived infancy (similar but not the same as the author M.S.L.); he spoke French fluently, having learned it from his mother; he was a prolific writer, turning out reams of material mostly for the newspapers. He published numerous poems and a book on flagellation under his own name, although his writings about London's underworld were under pseudonyms. If Sala was indeed a flagellant (and no evidence on this point is given by Legman or others), that, in itself, might rule out Sala as a candidate for the authorship of *My Secret Life*, since the author M.S.L. makes it quite clear that flagellation has no charm for him.

Although Sala was a world traveler, and went to many of the places that the author M.S.L. did, and had his ups and downs financially (as did the author M.S.L.), he differed from author M.S.L. in that he had two wives, the first of which he married in 1859 and after her death in 1885 married for a second time in 1891 to a woman who survived him, and the dates do not correspond with what we know of author M.S.L. He is not a strong candidate.

Richard Monckton Milnes

Legman's "second choice" after Ashbee as the author M.S.L. is Richard Monckton Milnes, first Baron Houghton (*DNB*, 1901). The only son of Robert Pemberton Milnes, he was born in 1809 and died in 1885, neither date corresponding to what we estimate for author M.S.L. He married for the first time in 1851 at age forty-two, and his wife died in 1874, having borne three children. Monckton Milnes' father died in 1858, when Monckton was forty-nine. Although Milnes was rich, and traveled extensively, he has been described as short and rather ugly. Legman describes him as a sadist who tortured prostitutes and enjoyed flagellation (Legman, 1964, p. 115), neither of which seemed to interest the author M.S.L. He certainly was involved in the collection of erotica, and he has three names, but he has to be considered a rather unlikely candidate.

Other Candidates

Another candidate who was suggested to Stein by his correspondents was John Walter (1818–1894) (*DNB*, 1901). He apparently was suggested simply because his birth and death dates are similar to what those of the author M.S.L. might be, and because his last name was Walter, the pseudonym used by the author M.S.L. His marriage dates are in fair agreement with those of the author M.S.L. but he does not seem to have had any financial reverses and his father was the wealthy editor of the *Times*. Working against his candidacy is his personality. He is usually described as having a "serious temper and retiring disposition" and "more scholarly tastes than his father." He does not seem to have traveled very extensively. Perhaps most serious of all, the drowning death of his eldest son in 1870 seems to have depressed him greatly for years.

William S. Potter was also suggested as a possible candidate. He was a wealthy businessman who traveled extensively and published a four volume pornographic novel entitled *Romance of Lust* (1873–1876). He was born in 1805 and died in 1879, and these dates alone make it unlikely he was the author M.S.L. John Stephen Farmer was also proposed to Stein but his life is

almost a total mystery. He was probably born in 1845 and probably died in 1915, dates which make him an extremely unlikely candidate. The only qualities that caused some to suggest him was that he was a sexual libertine and was the probable author of the erotic work *Suburban Souls,* which may be autobiographical, and if it is, that is all we know about him.

Another suggested candidate is August John Cuthbert Hare (*DNB*, 1910). His dates (1834–1903) are not especially favorable to his candidacy but more serious objections exist. He was born in Rome of British parents, and was raised in Sussex until he was eleven, when he was adopted by his godmother, Maria Leycester, Hare's uncle's wife. His real parents renounced all further claim to him, and he then went to live in Shropshire. During 1857–1858 and 1863–1870 he lived in Italy, where he authored a number of travel books. He never married and was attached to his adoptive mother. All of this is very discouraging information if Hare is to be considered as a candidate for the author M.S.L. He is perhaps best known for his six volume *The Story of My Life* (1896).

This exhausts the list of all the people who have ever been proposed in print or in correspondence as a possible author of *My Secret Life*. None of them seem to be particularly attractive candidates. In fact, many of the names proposed have been brought forward without an even superficial examination of their backgrounds, and certainly not with a concern for the information given in *My Secret Life*. Is there any other kind of data that can be considered? Overlooked so far is perhaps the most critical piece of data put forth by the author M.S.L.

The Trial

The critical piece of data is the mention of an unusual court case in *My Secret Life.* As usual, the author has taken pains to conceal the exact identity of the case. He gives no dates, places, or names, yet Stein came to believe it was the case of *Regina v. Richard Clarke*, a case which is a classic in legal annals, and which he felt gave the best clue as to the author of M.S.L. The case is described by the author M.S.L. as follows:

> Just at that time a case filled the public journals. It was a charge of rape on a married woman against a man lodging in the same house. She was the wife of a printer of the staff of a daily paper, who came home extremely late; she always went to bed leaving her door unlocked, so that her husband might get in directly when he came home. The lodger was a friend of her husband's, and knew the custom of leaving the door unlocked—in fact he was a fellow printer.
>
> She awakened in the night with the man between her thighs, had opened them readily, thinking it was her husband. It appears to have been her habit, and such her husband's custom on returning home, or so she said. The lodger had all but finished his fuck, before she awakened sufficiently to find out that it was not the legitimate prick which was probing her.
>
> Then she alarmed the house, and gave the man a charge for committing a rape. The papers delicately hinted that the operation was complete before the woman discovered the mistake—but of course it left much to the readers' imagination.
>
> Fred [the author M.S.L.'s cousin] read this aloud. I knew more, for the counsel of the prisoner was my intimate friend. He had told me that the prisoner had had her twice; that she had spent with him; that he often said that he meant to go in and have her, that she had dared him to do it, and that she only made a row when she thought she heard her husband at the door on the landing, although it was two hours before his usual time of return ... (2:14:346)

Since the case involved several important legal technicalities in defining what constituted rape, it was widely reported not only in newspapers of the time but in the legal literature. This was because there was no threat, no resistance on the part of the victim, and no intention to use force or violence on the part of the perpetrator. We know that in reality the man was convicted of rape by the jury, but the judge, noting that no element of force was present, referred the case to the Court of Criminal Appeal before issuing a sentence. The four-judge appeal panel unanimously agreed that the elements required for a rape conviction were not present and they quashed the conviction. The case was reported in the *Times* of London on 22 July 1854 (p. 11). The trial had actually been held at York Assizes on 16 July, and the crime itself had occurred in the village of Rawdon, five miles north of Bradford (or possibly at Guiseley, see later). The appeal was heard on 11 November 1854 (Cox's, 6:412–

13). The case is a mine of potential information. It gives a hard date, 1854, on which to base some of the other speculations in this article. It places the author M.S.L. in Yorkshire as a youth, something that backs up other information known internally about the author. We also know the name of the counsel of the prisoner, "the intimate friend" of the author M.S.L. He was simply identified as Overend in the *Times,* and subsequent research indicates that he was William Overend, later Queen's Counsel. William Overend was born in Sheffield in 1809, became a barrister in 1837, a Member of Parliament in 1855, and Queen's Counsel from 1855 as well. Once it is known who William Overend's "intimate friends" were, the trail to the possible author of M.S.L. furnishes further possibilities for the author M.S.L.

In checking the detail of the *Regina v. Richard Clarke* case in a Yorkshire paper, the *Leeds Mercury,* some slightly different details emerge. Both Clarke and the husband of the woman raped were clothiers and not printers. The newspaper reports also that the crime occurred at Guiseley, not Rawdon (*Leeds Mercury*, 22 July 1854). Does the discrepancy in occupation invalidate the association with the author M.S.L.? I think not. It is simply the author M.S.L. using a slight change in occupation to help avoid identification. No other similar case appears in the literature that I have been able to check.

Who was William Overend's friend? There are two distinct possibilities to consider as the author for *My Secret Life*. One is Charles Stanley, born in the same year (1809) as Overend, in the same town, and in fact almost next door. Hall Overend, William Overend's father, lived at 21 Church Street in Sheffield, and Richard Stanley, Charles Stanley's father, resided at 4 Church Street in Sheffield as of 1822 (*Sheffield Directory*, 1822). Stanley and Overend were involved in joint real estate transactions as late as 26 January 1883, two years before Overend's death (*West Yorkshire*, 1883). A large part of Overend's estate was left to Charles Stanley when he died on 24 December 1884 (*Somerset House*, 1884).

The other possible "intimate friend" of William Overend is his nephew, Thomas James Overend (1822–1895). The son of Richard and Sarah Overend, he was baptized at Manchester Cathedral on 20 October 1822. The most attractive aspect of Thomas James Overend are his dates, which are very close to those suggested

earlier for the author M.S.L. Unfortunately, T. J. Overend is a person about whom little can be learned. He was married 12 March 1845 at the Parish Church of Eccles County, Lancaster, to Alice Abbott, the daughter of George Abbot, a brewer. T. J. Overend's residence is listed as Eccles and his father is described as Richard Overend, a weaver (*Marriage Register*, 1845). He is not, however, a likely candidate since he never lived in London for any extended period, and died in Greengate in 1895, with all indications that he was still a resident of the Salford district. He also does not seem to have had the financial means required of the author M.S.L., as Overend's death certificate says that his occupation was still "silk weaver"(*Death Register*, 1895).

There are also some difficulties with Stanley. He was born too early (1809) to meet all the criteria we set forth. His death date, however, seems appropriate. He was married to Anne Staniforth in 1851, when he was forty-two. The author M.S.L. was married at the age of twenty-six. It is quite possible this was a second marriage, since marriage for the first time at age forty-two was quite unusual at that time. Unfortunately, there is no mention of a first marriage. Anne Staniforth was the daughter of William Staniforth, a business associate of Stanley's father, and thus close at hand. She was listed as his wife on his death certificate. His address was listed as 9 Lancaster Gate, Middlesex, a commutable distance to work in downtown London.

Stanley founded the firm of Charles Stanley & Co., registered stockbrokers, and in 1990 the company still existed with an office in London on Finsbury Circus. There is a record of the transference of a share in a house called "Westbourne" in Sheffield, from Charles Stanley and Anne Staniforth Stanley to John Walter Staniforth (probably Anne's brother) in 1883. The interesting thing about this document is that it refers to Stanley residing at 9 Lancaster Gate, as a "barrister" (*Sheffield Archives*). It is quite possible that he was both a barrister and a stockbroker, since there was a Charles Stanley admitted to the Middle Temple as a Barrister. The various editions of the *Law List* indicate he was called to the bar on 5 May 1843, his address is listed as 10 Farrar's buildings, northern circ., West Riding Area (now in Temple London EC4). In 1846, he was in Sheffield, and then moved to London by 1847. After 1852 his

name no longer appears on the *Law Lists*, an indication that he had probably left the practice of law.

In London, he looked after the business of the family bank, known as Walkers, Eyre and Stanley, and by 1851 had become a stockbroker exclusively. He died in 1897 (Anonymous, 1967). While Charles Stanley is in many ways an attractive candidate, he was born much too early (in 1809) to meet the outline provided by the author M.S.L. As far as it is known, he had only one sister. How much we can discount from the reality of Charles Stanley and the information provided by author M.S.L is debatable and becomes a crux of the debate. The author MSL states "I have mystified family affairs, but if I say I had ten cousins when I had but six, or that one aunt's house was in Surrey instead of Kent or in Lancashire, it breaks the clue and cannot matter to the reader" (Preface, p. 10).

But if they are disregarded for Stanley, should they also not be disregarded for Ashbee? The main difference is that more clues within the manuscript connect Charles Stanley to authorship than they do Henry Spencer Ashbee. We do know that the author M.S.L. was absolutely paranoid about being discovered (7:4:1359) and that he burned large amounts of manuscript (7:13:1505) to avoid any possibility that he might be recognized. So far, little additional is known about Stanley's personal life. All we know is that Overend and Stanley were boyhood friends, and that this friendship extended throughout Overend's life. When Overend died in 1884, his will appointed Charles Stanley as one of the executors and trustees of his will (*Somerset House*, 1885).

We know that the author MSL made a long trip abroad in the 1862–1863 period (MSL 6:9–6:14,) and we know that the Public Record Office has a record of a passport issued to a Charles H. Stanley on 24 March 1862. This information also emphasized that Charles Stanley did have a middle name, which helps fill out another similarity. Stein believed his middle name was Herbert. The author M.S.L. says he had a cousin "Fred" who was a professional soldier who was killed (2:15:360). There was a David Stanley of the 17th Lancers severely wounded at the battle of Balaklava (War Office 369, para. 774, page 37), and it is likely that he died. Stanley, however, is a common name and there are several other Stanleys

listed on the casualty lists as well. David, however, seems the most likely because he belonged to the 17th Lancers, which were more or less professionals, and because of the severity of the wounds.

Gordon Stein was convinced that further research on Charles H. Stanley would reveal even more clues documenting that Stanley was the mysterious Walter who wrote *My Secret Life.* He died before he could find the additional supportive data.

My belief is that if Ashbee was not the author M.S.L. then, in spite of Legman's statement, Stanley is the best alternative. The final answer is still to be found. Neither candidate fully conforms to all the supposed clues offered by the author M.S.L., but both have to be considered serious candidates. Hopefully this essay will serve as a guide for other investigators to follow. It might also inspire some to read *My Secret Life,* the book that gives the most complete picture of sexual practices in the last part of the 19th century that I know. Unfortunately, the final proof for the acceptance of *My Secret Life* as an authentic autobiography and not fiction is to identify the author.

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