

I

Birth and Childhood

1860–74

ROSAMOND BALL—“Rose” to the family—was born on 6 October 1860 into a family whose men were torn between their allegiance to finance and their allegiance to art.¹ The only constant was ambition. Rose’s grandfather, Isaac Ball, had been an ironmonger; her maternal grandfather, John Good, a hairdresser turned bailiff.² But Rose’s uncle, John Ball, was one of the founding members of the Institute of Accountants (later the Chartered Accountants). The accounting profession was crucial to finance in an age of capital and industrial as well as imperial expansion. John Ball not only helped draft the institute’s rules and regulations in 1870 but also presented an edition of Dr. Johnson’s dictionary (in “four quarto volumes”) to inaugurate the institute library. He and his business partner, William Quilter, have been credited with raising the standards of “the profession morally and intellectually.”³

Rose’s father, Benjamin Williams Ball, followed in his brother’s footsteps but achieved less professionally, perhaps because his ambitions took a slightly different turn. Born in London in 1816, he was an accountant’s clerk at twenty-five, living with ironmonger Thomas Ball (his older brother, presumably); Thomas’s wife, St. Mary Ball; and their children at 61 Coleman Street in the city of London, just south of the old London wall.⁴ In 1841 he temporarily settled in Brighton as a bank’s clerk and met Sylvia Good, born in Brighton in October 1817 and then living with her family in Barcombe on the Sussex downs. Benjamin

and Sylvia wasted no time. They married in the Barcombe parish church on Christmas Day 1841, and a mere eight months later (rather than the customary nine), their first child, Sylvia St. Mary, was born in London, her second name a tribute to the woman the newlyweds doubtless inconvenienced when they moved back in with Thomas and St. Mary Ball on Coleman Street (though the premises were large enough to house two servants in addition to the family).⁵

Benjamin Ball moved his family often, a common pattern in the nineteenth century. When John Ball Ball (named for his uncle) was born on 16 December 1844, the family was living in Shoreditch just off Finsbury Square, at 17 Earl Street. Benjamin was by then a full-fledged accountant rather than clerk. At the beginning of the next decade the growing family moved to Hackney, then a haunt of clerks as well as manufacturers, bankers, doctors, and teachers. More to the point, Benjamin's brother John owned extensive rental properties in the area. During their residence at 21 Retreat Place, Sylvia gave birth to two more sons, Arthur Edmond Ball on 7 April 1851, and Wilfrid Williams Ball on 4 January 1853. On their birth certificates Benjamin identified his occupation as "gentleman," perhaps reflecting a sudden rise in income (or pretension).⁶ Perhaps, too, Benjamin sought to distinguish himself from John, whose achievements cast the younger brother in the shade.

A financial setback may have prompted the family's next move. In 1858 they lived on Homerton Row in Homerton, a Hackney neighborhood developed around the same time as the Retreat Place neighborhood but considered "less desirable" because of "poorer housing" and the presence of "two workhouses and a smallpox hospital" nearby; Benjamin was again listing himself as "accountant" on official documents.⁷ The Ball family was still living on Homerton Row when Rose was born in 1860, six days before her mother's forty-third birthday. From their home the Balls could see Homerton College, built in 1823 to educate dissenting ministers but a teacher training institution by midcentury. Directly west of Homerton Row, on the other side of Lower Clapton Road, lay the large gardens of Sutton Place and Sutton House itself, the oldest surviving house in Hackney, first built as a privy councillor's home in 1535. Perhaps young Rose glimpsed its dark oak paneling or played in its gardens, since antique furnishings and gardens were such delights to her in later life. She certainly entered the huge St. John's Church, which novelist George MacDonald described as "the ugliest church, save one, in Christendom"; Rose was baptized there on 19 April 1861 by curate J. E. Waldy. Hackney had other literary associations besides the ugly church so offensive to MacDonald. Poet Katherine Philips, the "Matchless Orinda," was educated at "Miss Salmon's School, Hackney" in the seventeenth century; Edmund Gosse, who would befriend the adult Rose, was born there in

1849; and popular novelist Anthony Hope, best known for *The Prisoner of Zenda*, was born in 1863 less than a mile from Rose's first home.⁸

Rose left no memoir or diary behind, but her journalism hinted at a happy childhood punctuated by sensuous impressions and passionate longings. In the 1894 *Pall Mall Gazette*, for example, she looked back to recall

the strangely odious practice much in vogue thirty years since of filling or bordering a staircase window with alternate oblongs of orange and blue glass. Such windows had a horrible fascination for the childish mind. It attracted while it repelled to behold the outer world now under an unspeakably dreary winter glamour of blue, and now through a different, but equally unlovely, sallow tinge. You could not choose but loiter and look (enticing others when possible to do likewise), always, however, with the same dismal sensations, the same sense of having yielded to an unhallowed curiosity.⁹

Another time she recalled her mother's firm upholding of standards of taste in their suburban home:

“Any ornaments for your fire-stoves?” . . . is still among the summer street-cries to be heard in remote suburbs and the obscurer quarters of the town. . . . Perhaps you wave away their meretricious charms with a sneaking, unreasonable fondness that reaches back to childish days and childish attraction towards artificial atrocities. Even now there comes to mind a secret aspiration, a never uttered regret, for an arrangement in white crinkled paper, silver tinsel, and pure white water lilies with green leaves, that was dangled for five long minutes by its persuasive vendor before unappreciative parental eyes—in vain. A veritable idyll it appeared, to the powers that were not, and eminently to be desired. But the aesthetics of the nursery and the drawing-room were at variance on this point, and the symphony in white and silver was ravished away to grace some more poetic home. (*PMG*, 5 July 1894, 5; rpt. *AH*, 45–46)

Perhaps, too, she was remembering an actual incident rather than posing when she alleged her own childhood naughtiness in putting her elbows on the table, “one of those darker offences against nursery etiquette (nearly on a par with drinking tea out of your saucer) to be committed recklessly, with the lurid joy of despair, when you were so deep in disgrace that nothing mattered any more, and the whole world was darkened to your ken” (*PMG*, 5 October 1893, 5; rpt. *AH*, 50–51).

If these vignettes suggest a child of unusual receptivity to color, shape, and texture, this, too, was part of the family legacy (along with ambition). A decade

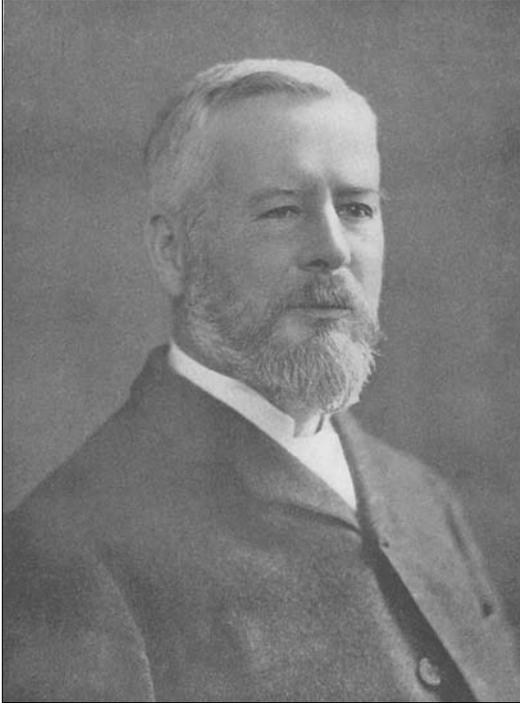


Figure 1. John Ball Ball, The Accountant, 11 July 1908. Courtesy the Lafferty Group and Library of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, London

before Oscar Wilde as the apostle of culture made it fashionable, the Ball family combined suburban living and careers in finance with a passionate love of art. Besides creating a well-stocked library of poetry that included avant-garde writers like Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelites, Benjamin was himself an amateur poet who left a privately bound volume of poems (now lost) at his death.¹⁰ His two eldest children, it is true, seem to have been untouched by aesthetic impulses. Sylvia St. Mary and her husband, Francis Theodore Lewis, were the mainstays of the family, as indicated by Francis's signature on family death records, marriage settlements, and wills. John Ball Ball followed his namesake and became an affluent accountant prominent in the Institute of Chartered Accountants. The uncle died in 1879, before he could ascend from the vice presidency to the presidency of the institute, but the nephew served as president from 1908 to 1909 (fig. 1), leading a delegation to the Congress of Accountants in America as part of his duties.¹¹

The three youngest children shared their father's aesthetic bent. Arthur attempted a career as a painter before his early death from intestinal inflammation at thirty-four. In 1871 (when he was nineteen) he was working as an accountant's clerk and living at home with his family; five years later—still at home—he ex-

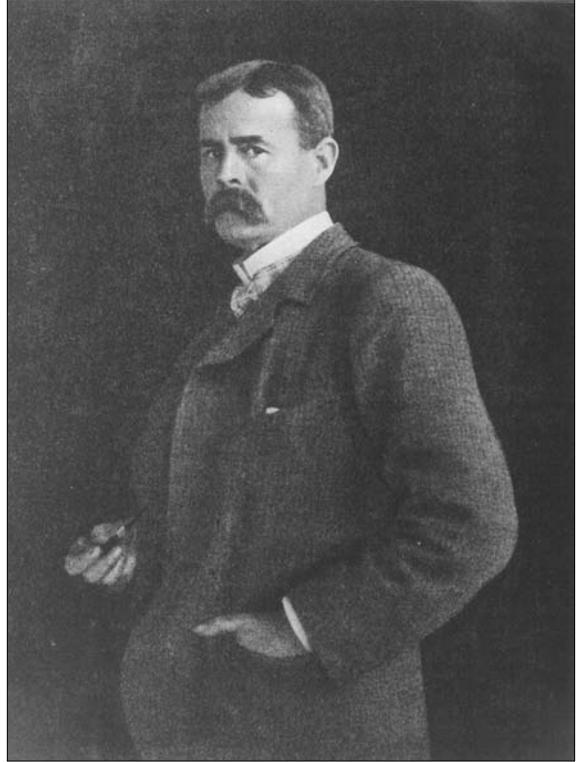
hibited *A Cottage Interior* with the Royal Society of British Artists. In 1881, now twenty-nine, he listed his occupation as “Artist/Painter” on the census return and was still exhibiting paintings at the Royal Society of British Artists shows. But by 1882 he had moved back in with the family and abandoned his art career; and on his death certificate (1885) he was identified as yet another “Chartered Accountant.”¹² Her brother’s pathetic failure and early death may explain why Rose was so receptive to another, more successful painter named Arthur the same year she separated from her husband and her brother died.

Wilfrid Williams Ball (fig. 2)—“Wilf” to his sister—achieved a reputation of some substance, and entries on him appear in standard reference works on Victorian painters. Wilf’s career was to play an important role in Rose’s life. In the first place, he proved to her that an accountant’s offspring could succeed in art even when no one cared to offer much encouragement. Second, he introduced her to her most important publisher. He may well have introduced her to her first husband and to her lover Arthur Tomson as well. Third, his dark good looks (which he shared with his sister) and athletic prowess seem to have influenced her own taste in men. According to *Studio* magazine, Wilf was “a noted member” of the London Athletic Club, “the winner of quite an array of prizes for running, walking, rowing, and other sports of the same type” (February 1899, 8). But he inspired no accolades from his father when he decided on a career as a painter. Wilf was the only child not mentioned in Benjamin’s will, and hints of family rancor also surfaced in the February 1899 *Studio*:

The pursuit of art was by no means the one originally mapped out for him, nor did it, indeed, become possible to him until after he had spent some time in an occupation of a very different kind. His earlier years were given up to work in the City, where he was engaged in an accountant’s office, a curiously inappropriate place for a youth who felt inclinations towards practical aestheticism. But he had the courage to try, in the intervals of his City drudgery, to acquire a certain amount of knowledge of art matters, and night after night, after he left the office, he betook himself to Heatherley’s School of Art to draw from life and the antique. In this way he received the only art instruction that was ever possible for him to get. (7)¹³

Wilf began to exhibit his work in 1877, when he was still living at home, and first made his mark in the early 1880s, when his Thames view etchings of 1881–82 “drew from Mr. Whistler a warm . . . eulogy and was the means of an introduction to him.”¹⁴ After this crucial introduction Wilf’s etchings accompanied those sent by James Whistler and other artists to the Anglo-Australian Society of Artists exhibition in Sydney in 1889 (*Academy*, 26 January 1889, 64).

Figure 2. Wilfrid Ball,
 photographer unknown.
 Courtesy the Witt Library,
 Courtauld Institute of Art,
 London



For another two decades Wilf enjoyed success as an etcher and watercolorist, and he and his sister sometimes rubbed shoulders, as it were, in contemporary periodicals. Her poems and one of his drawings, for example, appeared in *The Yellow Book*, and a favorable mention of his work appeared next to one of her *Pall Mall Gazette* essays on interior decoration in 1894 (22 February, 4).¹⁵ But there was little public acknowledgment that the two were siblings.

Nonetheless, Wilf provided crucial assistance to Rose through his membership in Ye Sette of Odd Volumes, a dining club formed in 1877 by antiquarian bookseller Bernard Quaritch. Originally a threesome that met over lunch to “talk books,” the group adopted a new name and expanded its ranks to forty members drawn from the worlds of literature, art, and book collecting in 1878; thereafter it met once a month “to form a perfect sette” of “eminently representative men,” its “object, conviviality and mutual admiration.” Usually the men dined at Limmer’s Hotel, a menu designed by one of its members announcing the fare; and after dinner a member read a formal paper subsequently published privately and distributed to “Brethren” (*ILN*, 9 May 1891, 614). Attaining membership was

a mark of professional distinction and relative affluence. As the 12 December 1891 *Black and White* observed, the “Sette” was “one of the most difficult clubs, and certainly the most interesting, to enter” (774); and the requirement that members pay for their own dinners and publication of their “O.V.” (Odd Volumes) talks excluded all but the affluent from membership. Wilf, an active member of the Sette at least by 1885,¹⁶ was often mentioned in published reports of Sette dinners and produced an “O.V.” talk on “Mezzotint Engraving” for the brethren. He also designed the menu for the Sette’s April 1891 dinner, an etching of Red House, the home originally built for William Morris and at the time occupied by “O.V.” member Charles Holme. The same year Wilf was elected vice president of the club (*BW*, 26 March 1892, 398; *Star*, 12 March 1891, 3).

The Sette not only conferred recognition on its members but also gave them access to a network of influential figures in London’s artistic and literary circles. For the purposes of this story, Wilf’s most important contact through the Sette was a man who became his close friend and his sister’s publisher, John Lane, proprietor of the defining journal of the 1890s, the *Yellow Book*, and publisher of poets from Oscar Wilde to Alice Meynell. Members could bring guests to the monthly dinners, and Wilf could have met Oscar Wilde, another future friend of his sister’s, at an 1887 Sette dinner. Painter Alma Tadema, *Athenaeum* editor Norman MacColl, poets Theodore Watts and Austin Dobson, and publishing magnate Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe, founder of the *Daily Mail*) also attended Sette dinners from 1891 to 1892.¹⁷

All this was still far in the future when, in 1871, Rose moved along with her family to Wandsworth, another rapidly growing suburb “recommended for modestly off clerks employed in offices in the City of London and Westminster”—though Benjamin was by then secretary of a bank, a position carrying considerably more responsibility and income than that of a mere clerk. Rose, her parents, Arthur, Wilf, and a servant named Mary Pincham lived in Stanhope Villa at 19 Charlwood Road; Rose’s older sister, Sylvia St. Mary, and Francis Lewis (a surveyor) lived just four doors away in Ashford Lodge (15 Charlwood Road), along with their four children and three servants. Other families nearby included commercial travelers, a Scottish widow with money in the funds, and an Irish commercial warehouseman.¹⁸ It was a step up from the family’s Homerton Row home but not particularly distinguished otherwise. Yet Wandsworth, too, had literary associations. The highwayman Dick Turpin made Wandsworth’s Plough Inn his headquarters in the eighteenth century. George Eliot, a sexual “outlaw” herself, living in unhallowed union with George Henry Lewes in Holly Lodge, Southfields, wrote *Mill on the Floss* in Wandsworth. Thomas Hardy briefly resided in Tooting, at 172 Trinity Road; and the most famous sexual outlaw of the 1890s,

Oscar Wilde, was sent to Wandsworth Prison in July 1895 after his conviction on sodomy charges, before his transfer to Reading Gaol.¹⁹

At Wandsworth the first major event of Rose's life occurred, her mother's death from uterine cancer at age fifty-six on 30 January 1874. Sylvia had been diagnosed with the disease in late December 1872 (Rose was then twelve), which must have made that Christmas a time of foreboding and Christmas 1873 a dreadful day. If the terminal uterine cancer of Ada, Lady Lovelace (Byron's daughter) was representative, Sylvia would have had a year of harrowing pain before she died. How closely Rose was involved in the nursing we cannot know. Probably she was spared the worst of it, since her sister Sylvia St. Mary was eighteen years older and lived nearby; indeed, Sylvia St. Mary may have moved into Stanhope Villa during her mother's final months.²⁰

Sylvia Ball's death inevitably had a profound impact on Rose, even if it did not amount to psychological trauma. The thirteen-year-old, deeply impressionable girl had seen illness and death up close, in grim and at times ugly detail. As a poet one of her abiding themes was to be the transience of youth, beauty, and life; and while it was a common topic at the fin de siècle, its psychological urgency in Rose's adult work can be traced to her witnessing presence at her mother's deathbed. Rose was also learning that the body could betray a woman when her childbearing years were over, and this knowledge may have heightened her own fears of aging, lest she should suffer the same fate as her mother—as indeed she did. Sometime during the final years of her own life she wrote “To a Child,” a poem that inscribes a mother's terror at what her young child will experience after the mother's death. That vision, I suggest, had its sources not only in her own body's treachery but also in the memory of nightmares that had visited her after she watched her mother die.

Her mother's exit from life also had a practical effect, for if Sylvia's death deprived her adolescent daughter of a mother, it also gave Rose the solitude and freedom to develop her mind, widen her reading, and pursue her will relatively unchecked. The point has often been made that heroines in Victorian fiction are orphans because only when freed from a mother's oversight could a young woman *have* experiences worth narrating. For Rose, too, the principle applied. At some time, moreover, perhaps much earlier, possibly later, Rose must have learned about her mother and father's own break with sexual propriety in the form of their hasty marriage and eight-months' baby. Rose was to pursue an entirely decorous course into marriage to a handsome, wealthy young man at age nineteen. But the discovery that her family legacy included transgressive sexuality, combined with some of the reading she was now free to pursue, may well have put in train ideas that eventually led to the sexual rebel she became.

In 1905 Rose told poet Nora Chesson (better known as Nora Hopper) that the predominant experiences she associated with childhood were time alone and endless reading and writing. No records of Rose's education have come to light; she may have been educated at home, though by the late 1860s and early 1870s educational reform had led to more rigorous, systematic education for girls in new institutions that burgeoned at this time.²¹ Later in life she indicated her favorite childhood books: *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, by Mme. la Comtesse de Ségur; tales by Hans Christian Andersen; Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; *The Princess and the Goblin*, by George MacDonald; and fairy tales of all sorts, from Charles Kingsley's accounts of Greek mythology in *The Heroes* to Mary Frere's *Old Deccan Days* (1868), which she thought superior to *A Thousand and One Nights* (*Daily Mail*, 30 October 1901, 4). These beloved books are refreshingly free of heavy-handed moralizing. Sophie is attractive precisely because she is a naughty child who generates comic havoc each time she has "une idée" (usually resulting in the untimely end of a pet—even the turtle her mother imagines proof against Sophie's "ideas"). Other stories offered Rose models of brave, intrepid, intelligent girls and wise, strong-willed women.

Old Deccan Days, little known today, was just the thing for a girl with a rich imagination and unconventional views. More than a century before Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (or Disney's *Mulan*), *Old Deccan Days* presented a woman warrior in the figure of Seventee Bai, a vizier's daughter and second wife to a rajah exiled for marrying this wife of lower birth. When the rajah gets lost and runs away because he can no longer bear to see his wives suffer, Seventee Bai immediately dons her absent husband's clothes and proceeds to provide for the first wife, going on quests requiring incredible bravery. Each heroic deed is rewarded with wealth and the hand of the local ruler's daughter, until Seventee has several wives in tow. But when the first wife yearns for their long-lost husband, Seventee Bai finds him, restores him to mental and physical health, and, now dressed as a woman, presents him to his father in court and arranges for all her wives to be married to her husband instead. As her father-in-law declares, "My noble daughter, you have rescued my son from misery, and done more wisely and well than woman ever did before."²² At the end of the tale, the rajah and his eight wives retire to their shared home and live amiably and happily—testimony to the possibilities of multiple marriages.

In addition to children's books, Rose immersed herself in works of the poets, storing apt quotations for later life and falling under the spell of the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne (who seems to have offered important literary—and sexual—possibilities to more than one woman poet).²³ If her father gave her the run of his library, he did prohibit one desire, however. Rose hoped to attend art

school—as Wilf had done after hours when still toiling as an accountant—but this Benjamin forbade. She would find a way to enter the art world years later by running away with a painter, then maneuvering herself into a position as an art critic. When the marriage ended and she lost the art critic position, she lavished her sense of color, form, and design on the layout of her garden and turned to journalism devoted to gardening and interior decoration.

Her 1905 letter to Nora Chesson remains the most authoritative account of her childhood, and, since it also forecasts her literary career, I quote it in full:

It is so difficult to write things about oneself, and I don't feel as if I had anything interesting to tell. I was born in London, and have read poetry and written verse ever since I can remember. I had naturally rather a lonely childhood as all my brothers and sisters were so far older than myself. From my father, who was a very brilliant personality, an ardent bibliophile, (and a very graceful versewriter) I owe a fairly wide acquaintance with prose and poetry, more especially poetry, in which he had a fine taste. He had a large and well-chosen library in which I spent my happiest hours.

In spite of all this, however, my dearest ambition was to become a painter; but, as an art education did not come within the range of practical politics, I had to give up the idea. As for the influence of poets upon one's work, it is hard to distinguish when one has read and enjoyed so many—but for sheer intimacy of thought and feeling I think the two Rossettis, Swinburne, W. Morris, and (in earlier years) Jean Ingelow, were nearest and dearest. But I am too catholic to be precise.

As for one's debut—the American periodicals were first and kindest to a quite unknown versifier—and then Mr. Lang—well, I owe him more than I can say in the way of sympathy and encouragement, to say nothing of a most kindly laughing at one's faults and *faibleses*, which was infinitely helpful. Mr. Henley's friendship and encouragement too, I always like to remember. My literary life has been a *very* happy one.²⁴

Three features in this account are notable. One is the silence Rose maintains about her mother. Even her distant siblings come in for mention, but not the woman who gave birth to her. From the vantage point of 1905, Sylvia's thirteen years with Rose may have seemed too slight to have made a difference. On the other hand, this may be one of those audible silences that indicate memories too painful to be expressed in a letter to a casual acquaintance. Another notable feature is the poet's reluctance to speak about herself and, more especially, about her family's emotional history or relationships—though this may derive as much from the fact that a twice-divorced woman was speaking as from any suppres-

sion of childhood memories. As a poet Rose was always to favor obliquity over confession, a preference that enabled her to anticipate modernist conceptions of impersonality. Finally, the letter's prose gathers strength and sparkle when it mentions first her father, then Andrew Lang and W. E. Henley. Rose clearly adored her father, whose "brilliant personality" was the likely source of his daughter's wit and personal magnetism, both of which struck everyone who knew her. As a widely read, charismatic poet, her father was a far more attractive model than her mother, whose life was shaped by childbearing and vulnerability to illness. Rose's strong sense of identification with her father was paralleled by her later relationship with Lang, the attractive older man so prominent in the world of letters, who served as her first mentor. But male identification would not entirely define Rose as an adult. Once she had broken the middle-class rules of a male-dominated society, she would discover how important female friendships could be and learn how to identify with the female principle so markedly absent from her sole act of autobiography.