

Family Lost and Found

The Survival Files — Case 61 — ESS = 270

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'Tis an oft-told tale, both sad and inspiring: a woman driven by guilt and worry strives to locate the family she was forced to abandon years before. There's a most uncommon twist to the tale Jenny Cockell tells, however, for when she finally finds her lost children, they are all several decades older than their mother.

From a very young age, Jenny Cockell (pronounced ki-KELL) was plagued by unexplained dreams and visions in which she was a woman named Mary. She seemed to be reliving Mary's life or, more often, re-dying Mary's death. Night after night, Jenny's dreams were filled with the panic of a 30-something woman lying in a hospital bed, racked with pain yet suffering even more from the thought of dying and forsaking her children. During the day, Cockell's visions were of more pleasant times with the woman's numerous children – she could envision at least seven of them, but she felt that there may have been more.

In addition to Mary's children and her final hours, the young Cockell had visions (which seemed like memories to her) of a home and village that, although she had never traveled outside England, she somehow knew were located in Ireland. As a child, she often drew maps of this village and described her home as a two-room cottage, sitting first on the left of a country lane and turned sideways to it. She envisioned where the cottage's windows were and what pictures hung on the interior walls. She felt that Mary had two older brothers who had gone away from the area. Altogether, Jenny Cockell had memories involving scores of minutia about a place far away and a life that ended some 21 years before she was born.

At school, Cockell studied a map of Ireland and felt drawn to the town of Malahide about 10 miles north of Dublin. She longed to travel there and confirm her visions, but it was not until she was 33 years of age and a married mother with two children of her own that she managed to get the money, the time, and the confidence to make the trip. Once she discovered that her inner-knowledge of the town did actually match quite well with current reality, Cockell was emboldened to begin a determined quest to locate and contact Mary's children.

She scoured libraries, spoke with priests, wrote letters to historical societies and orphanages, placed newspaper ads, underwent hypnosis, and even made calls to names found in Ireland's phone books. Her search went into high gear when she located a man who had lived in Malahide as a youth. He had gone to school, he said, with some children whose mother's name was Mary and who had lived with a large number of siblings in a two-room cottage that sat sideways, first on the left from the start of Swords lane. The family's last name, he said, was Sutton. This surname, which Cockell had never been able to recall, was the key that enabled her to locate, contact, meet, and ultimately befriend five of Mary's children.

The story of Cockell's search and the discovery of innumerable bits of confirming evidence is well told in her book.¹ Also, she has appeared, either alone or with Mary's 60- and 70-something children, on several televised programs including, in the U.S., *20/20* with Barbara Walters, *Donahue*, *Sightings* and *The Unexplained*.²

Discussion

As far as the evidence is concerned, the maps Cockell drew as a child are virtually the same as those anyone might hand-draw of the same roads today. Likewise, the largest church in the town could easily be picked out by anyone who had seen her sketches. Cockell's descriptions of her childhood dreams and drawings have been publicly backed up by testimony from her mother.³ And then, we have the downright amazing fact that several siblings have testified that Jenny Cockell demonstrated to them a knowledge of their early home life so intimate and detailed that they are convinced that she incarnates the spirit of their long-dead mother. This despite their lifetime immersion in a religious doctrine that denies any such possibility.

Today, a search on the Net for "Jenny Cockell" will get many thousands of hits, including a few informative videos. Also, of course, there are skeptical commentaries claiming to explain or expose the case, but I have found none of these to be either factual or objective. Just to take one example, an article in the *Skeptical Inquirer* says, in part:

"She turned then to actual research, publishing an ad in a *Mensa* magazine, sending out numerous form letters, acquiring maps, and so on. Eventually she turned up a village (Malahide), a road (Swords Road), and finally a woman named Mary Sutton who roughly fit the target. ... Unfortunately, Cockell's intriguing and no doubt sincere saga does not withstand critical analysis. First, consider the overwhelming lack of factual information provided by the dreams and hypnosis. Unknown were Mary's surname, either maiden or married, or the names of her husband or children. Similarly, the village's name and even its location were a mystery."⁴

Apparently, this critic had not taken the trouble to actually read the book he is denigrating, for it clearly states that Cockell, while still a young girl, had selected the town of Malahide using a map of Ireland in her school atlas. A map that was far too small of scale to allow any matching with the sketches she had made. So, the village was not "turned up" as part of her adult research and neither its name nor its location "were a mystery." Furthermore, while it is true that every name could not be recalled, this critic manages to avoid mentioning the many "unknowable" details that Cockell *did* know about the children and the events in the family's life. The eldest boy was in his seventies when he stated on record that she knew things about his childhood that even his brothers and sisters did not know.

As for possible alternative explanations, clairvoyance and cosmic databases clearly have

¹ Cockell, Jenny, *Across Time and Death*, Simon & Schuster, 1993.

² These program segments first aired on ABC in 1994, on CBS and NBC in 1995, and on A&E in 1998 respectively. Cockell's story was also the inspiration for a made-for-TV movie titled *Yesterday's Children*, which was first broadcast in October 2000.

³ See the A&E *Sightings* on reincarnation, available on DVD from A&E.com.

⁴ "A Case of Reincarnation — Reexamined," by Joe Nickell, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Volume 8.1, March 1998.

no parts to play. Although all of the confirmed information did exist in one mind or another, the idea of super-duper mental telepathy is negated: first, because there was no link between Cockell and any of those minds, and second, because the children had been separated at their mother's death and had little or no contact since – the youngest did not even know she had siblings.

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