

Jenny Cockell (Mary Sutton reincarnation case)

In this contemporary reincarnation case, an English woman, Jenny Cockell, recalled memories of the life of a working class Irish woman in the early twentieth century. The case is unusual for the richness, strength and durability of the memories, and for their close correspondence to the life of a verifiable deceased individual, as was eventually confirmed by this person's grown-up children. The case has, nevertheless, come in for criticism by detractors.



Mary Sutton

Mary Sutton was born in 1895, the daughter of the stationmaster at Portmanock, north of Dublin. She married John Sutton, who worked as a scaffolder. She bore eight children: four boys, Sonny, John, Christopher and Frank, and four girls, Philomena, Mary, Bridget and Elizabeth. The family lived in a hamlet on Swords Road, a mile outside the village of Malahide, north of Dublin. As her husband became increasingly abusive and absent, Mary found herself struggling to make ends meet; the family lived largely on home-grown vegetables supplemented by meat from trapped animals.

Mary Sutton died in hospital of pneumonia and toxæmia in 1932, aged 36.^[1] After her death, Sonny, the eldest, lived with his father; the other children were placed in orphanages.

Jenny Cockell

Jenny Cockell was born in Barnet, Hertfordshire, in 1953. From an early age she had memories of previous lives, both while dreaming and when awake. This article describes her memories of Mary Sutton. For information on Cockell's other past-life memories, see [Jenny Cockell \(Author\)](#).

Spontaneous Memories

The most vivid and persistent of Cockell's past-life memories were of a poor working-class woman in Ireland, whose name she thought of as Mary, who bore eight children before dying at an early age. Her earliest memory, of Mary's death in hospital, came in a recurring dream she first spoke about when she was three years old. Gradually she recalled the deathbed events more clearly and told her mother that she felt a strong sense of guilt for having abandoned her children to an insecure fate.^[2]

Cockell's dreams included her experiences after Mary's death. She knew that she had died and felt as if her consciousness was thrust out of her body, which she viewed from the perspective of about ten feet above and slightly to the side. She saw a nurse rush in and out of the room and someone she initially thought of as Mary's husband but later realized was a priest come in and kneel by her bed. Suddenly she was drawn from behind, sucked backwards up a long, narrow tube, and then into a bright lightly lit space in which she sensed the presence of other spirits.^[3]

Many of Cockell's other memories of Mary presented in the waking state. The most vivid were of the family's cottage, a single-storey building constructed of buff-coloured stone (sometimes appearing to be white), with a solid wooden door and a slate roof that sagged noticeably. The cottage was the

first of several homes along a lane; the opposite side was a boggy meadow; a stream ran nearby. At the rear was a small vegetable patch, then woodland. Within the building itself the chief memory was of a cramped and dark kitchen, where Mary cooked on an unfamiliar looking range, making round flat bread loaves.

As 'Mary', Cockell recalled strong images of the nearby village, where she shopped alone and visited with all the children, possibly to church on Sundays, since they were wearing their best clothes. She recalled the layout of the village in some detail: a shopping street that ran north to south through the middle, where there was also a small church; a railway station was set back from the main road. The village seemed to lie north of a major city, beyond walking distance.

In one persistent memory, she was standing on a small wooden jetty at dusk, waiting for a boat to arrive, wearing a flimsy dark shawl and shivering in the cold wind.

Cockell had clear memories of the children's appearance and characters. They included an older boy who was confident and straightforward; the oldest girl who was patient and helpful; two more boys, one energetic and relentlessly humorous, the other more quiet; and a young girl who was pretty with blonde hair and blue eyes. There were fewer memories of the husband, beyond the feeling that he was something of an outsider, had once been a soldier, and had much to do with large timbers and roof work. She felt he was taciturn and seldom around.

Cockell could not visualize Mary but remembered the clothes she habitually wore: a blouse with sleeves gathered into a band just below the elbow, and a dark long woolen skirt. The memories of Mary's death that occurred in night-time dreams especially seemed fraught with money worries. Mary seemed to have a strong interest in steam trains, although there was no memory of actually travelling on them.

Feelings and Behaviours

As a child, Cockell's behaviours were concordant with the memories in certain ways. She echoed in her play Mary Sutton's actions in cooking and cleaning, and dressed her best on Sundays 'because it was Sunday', although her family were not churchgoers and had no special reason to do so.^[4]

She particularly felt a strong sense of guilt for having abandoned her children by dying:

I wanted to fight death, to avoid that final separation – but death came, inevitably and repeatedly, in my dreams, and I would wake in tears. It was too soon to go, much too soon to leave the children. My sense of guilt was powerful. I was filled with a confusion of emotions that would have been difficult for an adult to cope with. But I kept my tears to myself: a rather withdrawn child, I felt that the grief was too private to speak of, even to my mother.^[5]

When Cockell was six, she selected a doll with blonde hair whose eyes one could change from brown to blue, but which she insisted on keeping blue. She named the doll 'Elizabeth', the name of Mary Sutton's youngest child, the only one of her children who was blonde with blue eyes.^[6]

Beginning between seven and ten, Cockell drew many maps of the hamlet and village she recalled, showing the relations of the streets, the locations of the houses and other buildings, and features of the landscape.^[7]

At about fifteen, she took up the habit of making bamboo flutes, which she handed out to her friends. Later it was learned that Mary's children had done something similar.^[8]

Past-Life Regression

In 1988, when Cockell was 35, she embarked on a series of regression hypnosis sessions in an attempt to recover more detailed memories. New and persistent images emerged of a butcher's shop and a church, although accompanied by a sense that they were not ones that Mary herself frequented.

In one especially vivid incident she recalled the children rushing in one day when she was washing dishes to tell her they had trapped an animal; she went out with hands still wet, saw a hare in the trap, and exclaimed in alarm that it was still alive. On the whole, however, she felt uncertain about what she said under hypnosis. She writes:

The hypnosis was undoubtedly helping, but how far could I trust what it was dredging up? There was a consciousness that, although it was revealing a lot I had not remembered, this new knowledge lacked the fine detail which I believed necessary to a successful search. Each time I was hypnotised I *saw* a great deal, but did not actually record it in words – usually because I was not asked about it, or because I was asked the wrong question.^[9]

In particular, there was a problem with names. The first name she supplied, in response to a request for Mary's surname, was 'Sullivan'.^[10] She hesitated when asked for Mary's father's surname, then heard the hypnotist say that it '*must* be Sullivan', overlooking the fact that she might have given Sullivan as her married name.^[11] Pressed to name her husband, Cockell voiced the name 'Bryan O'Neil', although feeling uncertain about this.^[12]

Investigation and Verification

Identifying Malahide

Cockell describes the way in which she identified Mary Sutton's village as follows:

One day, as a child, I felt sure that if I could look at a map of Ireland I would know, deep down, where the village was located, and could match it with the maps I had been drawing ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil. The only map I could find was in my school atlas; with the whole of Ireland on just one page, the detail was not very great, so I would be unlikely to succeed in my hoped-for match, but I tried anyway. I sat with the map in front of me, then shut my eyes for a few moments to let memory take over. Several times I tried, and each time I was drawn back to the same spot on the map. Mary, I felt sure, must have seen maps, or I would not have been able to draw these maps on my own. The place I had been drawn to was called Malahide, and it was just north of Dublin.^[13]

When Cockell had married and borne a child of her own, a strong need grew in her to trace the family that Mary had involuntarily abandoned. She found the addresses of people named O'Neil in the area and wrote to them, enclosing a map she had drawn from memory, to ask if they knew of a family that matched her memories. This did not yield direct results. However, she searched for ever-more detailed maps of the Malahide area and finally asked a bookshop manager to order a large-scale map of the area. This map turned out to show a close correspondence with her drawings, showing the station, churches, jetty and roads all as she had depicted them, the distances more or less to scale. The name 'Gay Brook' leapt out, and she was able to identify Swords Road, about a mile from the centre of Malahide, as the site of Mary's cottage. She realised that tracing the family's home would be a more certain way of discovering her past-life identity than by a possibly spurious surname.

Cockell now enlisted the help of individuals who might be able to furnish further information. In June 1989, she was at last able to visit Malahide herself, finding the layout – including the jetty, a butcher's shop and church by which Mary had often passed, and other details – 'so familiar that I

was flooded with relief’.^[14] Walking up Church Road she experienced ‘an overwhelming sense that this was a road walked regularly by Mary’, and was struck by the close concordance between it and her memories, both spontaneous and visualized under hypnosis. She writes:

The sight of the church, St Andrew’s, represented a wonderful confirmation of the accuracy of my memories. I found myself trembling with excitement. It proved that all the dreams, memories and images released by hypnosis were based on reality. That meant there was a real chance of my being able to trace the children.^[15]

When she reached Swords Road she identified the stream that had run close to the house, and an old building that might have been Mary’s cottage, although she was unable to identify it with certainty (she later learned that this building had not existed in the 1930s). She did not then see a derelict house that was obscured behind a wall; on her return to England she was put in touch with a local landlord who indicated this hidden building as the only one in the lane that had been occupied by several children, whose mother had died in the 1930s. This man later provided a list of nineteen families who had lived in Swords Road in the 1920s, of which one in particular closely matched Cockell’s memories. He identified the mother as Mrs Sutton, the wife of a British soldier who had fought in World War I, and revealed that following her death the children were sent to orphanages.

Family Contacts

Cockell now started contacting individuals named Sutton in the locality, at first without success. She also contacted orphanages, and eventually received a letter from a priest in charge of a boys’ home in Dublin who had traced records of baptism for six of the Sutton children. She also received a copy of Mary’s death certificate, stating that Mary Sutton of Gaybrook, Malahide, had died in 1932 of toxæmia, septic pneumonia and gas gangrene.

Cockell wrote a public letter of enquiry that was published in the *Dublin Evening Press* early in 1990. On 20 April, in response to her letter, she received an anonymous note postmarked Dublin containing the name and address of a Tom Sutton. This name was new for Cockell, but she wrote to him, and in response was contacted by someone identifying herself as from the family Cockell was seeking. Cockell happened not to be home at the time and her husband took the message, but when she rang back, she found herself speaking to the daughter of Mary’s second son, John.^[16]

John’s daughter confirmed that Mary had had eight children. She agreed with Cockell’s descriptions of her father as ‘mischievous and humorous’, and those of some of the other brothers. She provided contact details for two of the other brothers, Sonny and Frank. It appeared that the four boys had been reunited a few years earlier, but that contact with the girls had been lost.

Cockell spoke more briefly to John himself. She did not hear from him again, but later in 1990 she had a brief telephone conversation with Sonny, Mary’s eldest son, who was then 71 and living in the north of England. This led to a face-to-face meeting at his home, at which he confirmed the accuracy of her memories of his mother: the people, the buildings and environment, the daily concerns and activities, and particular incidents, were all correct. Among other details Sonny confirmed Cockell’s impressions of the cottage, which had been the lodge of Gaybrook House; the colour of the outside walls, which were sometimes whitewashed; the pronounced dip in the roof; the layout of the rooms; the range in the kitchen fireplace, with a hob on either side and a hook down the chimney for pots; and the vegetable patch.

Sonny agreed that the appearance and personality of each of the children was as Cockell remembered them, and with her memory of Mary wearing a blouse, calf-length woollen skirt and shawl. He confirmed Cockell’s description of the incident of the trapped hare, and was shocked by its accuracy. Sonny also helped fill in missing details, for instance why Cockell had visualized herself

waiting on the jetty: As a teenager he had had a part-time job caddying for a golf club on an island in the estuary, and his mother would wait for him in the evening to return home.

Sonny revealed that Mary's husband John Sutton had worked as a scaffolder, which explained the impression that he had to do with large timbers and roof work. John was an outsider in the sense that he was not from the locality, and although he was British, not Irish, he had served in the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and fought in World War I. John, Cockell now learned, had become a violent drunkard, which explained the feelings of overriding protectiveness towards the children, and the sense of caution and fear.

Sonny recalled visits to his aunt, Mary's sister, of whose existence Cockell learned for the first time. The outings took them past a butcher's shop and a church, explaining why these featured strongly in her memories, although she did not recall having actually entered these buildings.

Following Mary's death Sonny went to live with his father, while his younger siblings were placed in local orphanages, the father having been deemed unfit to look after them. He and his three brothers had become reunited a few years before Cockell's first contact, but they remained out of touch with the three surviving girls (the oldest daughter Mary had died aged 24). Sonny quickly accepted Cockell's memories as genuine, and thought of her as his mother reborn. John was more reticent, and died soon after the initial contact, but Frank travelled to Dublin to meet her.

Later in 1990, Cockell heard from Mary's youngest child Elizabeth, whom she was able to put in touch with her brothers for the first time since their separation. She also discovered and met with Philomena (who now called herself Phyllis). There followed a slow but steady exchange of letters. On a second visit to Malahide, Cockell was able to enter the derelict cottage, now about to be demolished, and met with other of the Sutton children. A bond developed between them in the remaining years of their lives. Cockell was able to make contact with all of Mary's children before the publication of *Yesterday's Children* in 1993.

Books and Videos

In addition to *Yesterday's Children*, Cockell has written about her memories of Mary and her search for Mary's children in *Journeys Through Time* and in her most recent book, *Living With Past Lives*.^[17] As well, her story is featured in YouTube videos, including:

- a 2017 [interview](#) for Thanatos TV with Cockell about her past-life memories.
- an [episode](#) of the 1990s British television show hosted by Michael Aspel, *Strange But True*, which features an examination of the Mary Sutton case.
- a [6-minute trailer](#) of a CBS television film version of *Yesterday's Children* starring Jane Seymour in the dual roles of Cockell and Mary Sutton.

Independent Assessment

We are not dependent solely on the account Cockell has given in her books of the verifications of her memories of Malahide and of Mary's life. In 1990, after she had located Sonny but before she had met him, she was interviewed for a BBC documentary about the reincarnation research of [Ian Stevenson](#).^[18] Although in the end Cockell's story was not included in the programme, a researcher interviewed not only her, but also her mother and other witnesses to her childhood memories. The researcher made a nine-page list of Cockell's memories and behaviours that might be related to Mary, comparing them to what she had learned from Sonny, who had already been interviewed, confirming them as factually correct.^[19]

This list of Cockell's memories is important, because it constitutes a written record of her statements before they were verified. When Cockell and Sonny subsequently met, they went over these items, adding further confirmations (as described above).^[20] The list was examined by [Mary Rose Barrington](#), an investigator with the [Society for Psychical Research](#), who deposited it, along with other materials, in the SPR archives.^[21] Cockell plans to include it in a revised edition of *Living With Past Lives*.^[22]

Barrington interviewed Cockell's mother and others who had heard her talk about her memories as a child, as well as the bookshop manager who had ordered the map of Malahide for her and witnessed her comparing her drawing to the map for the first time. Barrington confirmed the topography and layout of the village on a survey map of Ireland and had a colleague take photographs of the town, adding further support to the veracity of Cockell's account.^[23]

Critical Reception

Joe Nickell

In an article for *Skeptical Inquirer*,^[24] American sceptic Joe Nickell, a fellow of the [Committee for Skeptical Inquiry](#), argued that Cockell's description of herself shows traits of a fantasy-prone personality and that her early memories of Mary Sutton could be explained as those of a child fantasizing as a means to escape from reality. Nickell emphasizes the unreliability of memories recalled under hypnosis and complains of an 'overwhelming lack of factual information' provided in the Mary Sutton memories, particularly with regard to names of people, places and dates. He charges that there is a lack of exactness in the details, which could have been 'retrofitted' to the facts. Nickell writes:

She employs circular reasoning. She sent out queries that sought a village with certain sketchy requirements and, when such a village was — not surprisingly — discovered, she adopted it as the one she was looking for. Obviously if it did not fit she would have looked further. Such an approach amounts to drawing a target around an arrow once it has struck something.

Nickell's critics have pointed out that these arguments, of a sort commonly advanced by debunking sceptics, are questionable with regard to Cockell's experiences, and in many respects are at variance with the facts as she describes them. Far from being 'sketchy', many of Cockell's memories of Mary were detailed and specific, and most of the best came to her in the waking state, not under hypnosis.

Nickell's description of how Cockell identified Mary Sutton's village is inconsistent with hers: At an early age she had been drawn to the name Malahide on a small-scale atlas, and had always focused her attention on this locality, finding that her detailed recollections of the streets and buildings matched exactly to what she saw when she went there. The maps she drew in childhood turned out to conform closely to the Malahide that Mary knew.

Moreover, having a fantasy-prone personality does not explain why a child should harbour feelings of guilt for abandoning children by dying; nor is it clear in what sense having such feelings is consistent with a desire to 'escape from reality'. With regard to the absence of factual names and dates, this may simply be a characteristic of past life memory;^[25] it does not of itself weaken the impact created by the abundance of imagistic information Cockell recalled.

Ian Wilson

Ian Wilson, a British writer and strong critic of past life claims based on regression hypnosis, reviewed *Yesterday's Children* for the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*.^[26] Wilson concurs

with Nickell as to

the unreliability of memories retrieved under hypnosis as a means of eliciting hard facts, accurate names, dates, etc.; hence in the case of Mary's husband the totally misleading name 'Bryan O'Neil' when, if Jenny Cockell's findings are to be accepted, his true name was John Sutton. Likewise Jenny's 'hypnotic' names for Mary's children turned out to be moonshine.^[27]

However, Wilson adds:

The fascination of Jenny Cockell's book is its underlying substratum of 'Mary' images and incidents that did check out, and with none other than the son of the Mary who Jenny Cockell believes herself to have been in her previous incarnation. ... [A]ssuming that Jenny's account is not unduly fictionalized, we have a thinly verbal, but more substantially visual and emotional, set of mental impressions which really do seem somehow to have been transmitted from Mary Sutton, deceased Malahide 1932, to Jenny Cockell, present-day Northamptonshire housewife, born 1953.^[28]

Wilson warns against regarding the case as evidence necessarily of reincarnation. He considers that the theory of genetic memory is unlikely, since Cockell's only known Irish relative, a great grandmother, was from Ireland's west coast and had no Dublin connection, but suggests that a form of haunting or possession by a discarnate Mary cannot be ruled out.

Jim Alexander

Jim Alexander is the amateur hypnotist who guided Cockell in five hour-long regressions in 1988. In his book *New Lives, Old Souls*,^[29] he reproduces transcripts of these sessions and then describes his efforts to verify what Cockell told him. Alexander bases his analysis solely on the regressions, without reference to Cockell's spontaneous memories, and in his attempts at verification, he ignores Cockell's experiences in Malahide and the confirmations of her memories by Mary's children. He concludes:

Almost nothing matches. Jenny Cockell was not Mary Hand/Sutton. ...

Many of the things that Jenny remembered may well have fitted a Mary Sullivan somewhere in the south or west of Ireland but there is not enough information to allow research to verify that.

I do not believe that Jenny sought to mislead anyone. She simply got caught up in a story that became much more than it really was. It seems that even the things Sonny told her about can't be relied upon.^[30]

In a detailed rebuttal,^[31] Cockell lays much of the blame for the inferior regressions to Alexander, who asked the wrong questions, in the wrong ways.

Asking too many questions and putting too much pressure on the subject can lead to guessed answers. This can happen as a result of the subject trying to obey and comply with direct questioning, whilst in a vulnerable state, rather than intentionally. ...

[M]any of the questions suggested possibilities that led the imagination to include those suggestions made by the hypnotist. For example, by saying something like 'is that from the west' the reply will almost always be 'yes' because the question suggests that it is from the west. Similarly, when asked 'have they got any other buildings' I would obligingly see other buildings, regardless of what was actually there, because it was implicit in the wording.^[32]

Apparently unwittingly, Alexander has provided an excellent example of why memories of previous

lives emerging during regressions are not to be trusted, illustrating the points made by Nickell and Wilson. Cockell's spontaneous waking and dream memories led to the identification of a past life as Mary Sutton of Malahide, but this would not have been possible with the regressions alone, due to the misleading and erroneous details produced in compliance to questioning under hypnosis.

Robert McLuhan and James G Matlock

Literature

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ The date of Mary's birth and hence her age at death differ from those on her death certificate but are established by her birth certificate, which Cockell received after the publication of her first account of this case in 1993 (Cockell, 2021).
- 2.^ The following account of Cockell's memories and their verification is drawn from her 1993 book, *Yesterday's Children*, unless otherwise noted.
- 3.^ Cockell (1996), 65-68; (2021), 104-5.
- 4.^ Cockell (1993), 4-6.
- 5.^ Cockell (2008), 8.
- 6.^ Barrington (2002), 108-9.
- 7.^ Barrington (2002), 109; also Cockell (1993).
- 8.^ Barrington (2002), 109.
- 9.^ Cockell (1993), 53-54.
- 10.^ Cockell (2021), 71.
- 11.^ Cockell (2021), 72.
- 12.^ Cockell (1993), 53-54.

- 13.^ Cockell (1993), 10-11.
- 14.^ Cockell (2008), 81.
- 15.^ Cockell (2008), 81-82.
- 16.^ Cockell (2008), 98-99.
- 17.^ Cockell (1993, 2008, 2021).
- 18.^ Cockell was in touch with the BBC producers at the time she was contacted by John's daughter and had her first telephone conversation with Sonny, but she was asked not to have further contact with Sonny until after the BBC had interviewed him, a request with which she complied (Cockell, 2008, 101-2).
- 19.^ Cockell (2021), 31-32, 111-12.
- 20.^ Cockell (2021), 33-44.
- 21.^ Barrington (2002), 107.
- 22.^ Personal communication from Jenny Cockell, 13 June 2021.
- 23.^ Barrington (2002), 107, 109.
- 24.^ Nickell (1998).
- 25.^ In his comprehensive review of the evidence for reincarnation, researcher James Matlock (2019, 219) notes that names are often not remembered in spontaneous memories and those produced under regression are typically wrong.
- 26.^ Wilson (1993).
- 27.^ Wilson (1993), 309.
- 28.^ Wilson (1993), 309.
- 29.^ Alexander (2021), 191-309.
- 30.^ Alexander (2021), 308.
- 31.^ Cockell (2021), 52-82.
- 32.^ Cockell (2021), 52-53.