

24 November 1812 William Lincolne in Witham to Mary Napier

Witham Nov.24th. 1812

My dear Mary

is an appellation from my adoption of which it gives me the highest gratification to reflect you will not shrink and I use it in the most endearing sense. To you are directed the tenderest emotions of my heart and I now seem only to require a renewal of your Correspondence to impart an energy to my hopes too delightful not to be assiduously fostered a “form and presence” to my feelings too deep to be obliterated.

But, my dearest Girl, I left you abruptly – yes – abruptly and the circumstance gives me pain for although you certainly intimated your intention, yet there was a something in your manner from which I unhappily persuaded myself, you thought to deviate from your previous arrangement. Had I not have taken up this idea my disappointment would have been much less, but indeed, indeed, I could not have arrived before I did. It may savour of egotism but certainly in the list of my frailties is not to be found that too common one of a reluctance to acknowledge my own errors, for were I conscious of having betrayed anything like dilatoriness on this occasion, believe me I would not state what I now do – many persons would sooner display the most egregious quibbling than knock under, a propensity which I view with the greatest contempt.

I am happy to recollect your remark that you are a novice in certain matters as it affords me such a fine opportunity for making a similar avowal, and therefore if in the future intercourse which I trust will take place between us, any thing occurs calculated to make an unfavourable impression on your mind I pray you be at once frank and explicit, as I wish you ever to find in my conduct a parody on the patriotic declaration of the Old Roman, “I love Caesar well but Rome better”; that is to say I may love myself well but Truth better. I beg permission however to give you one gentle caution – charge me not with presumption in the readiness with which I entertain the fondest anticipations as this is an indulgence you have now left me at full liberty to exercise. You have calmly unfolded me the door of Hope and I am irresistibly pressed forward.

You will write – and you can write with less reserve than you have spoken. I ask you not to say more than your feelings will dictate – I only intreat you will not say less. Remember I am not worthy even of your esteem unless you can confide in me and I will hope I shall be called the remainder of my life to prove myself not unworthy of your Love. Therefore my dear Girl be not tardy in giving me reason to believe (*paper torn here*) do and are disposed to think you even shall consider me as Your William.

Tuesday night $\frac{1}{2}$ past Nine

The letter is handwritten in ink and covers three sides of a folded sheet, before being folded 3 times more and sealed. It is addressed to 'Miss Napier, Grand Junction Wharf, Whitefriars, London', where she lived with her prosperous corn merchant father and stepmother. The writing is heavily slanted but perfectly legible.

This letter is the first one in which William Lincolne addressed the woman he loved by her first name. Until now it had been 'Miss Napier', but Mary had presumably consented to his using her given name. The letter is heartfelt and hopeful. William had probably visited Mary in London the weekend before this letter was written and the visit clearly buoyed his spirits and gave him hope that she returned his love. He lived and worked in Witham in Essex and any visit to London took him hours on his day off. He seems to have arrived rather late and left rather abruptly and is anxious that Mary should not blame him. He seems happy that Mary is not well-versed in love 'matters' and reassures her that he is not either. Their shared religious beliefs, allied to her rather undemonstrative nature, would have precluded any earlier flirtatious behaviour with other people.

Transcribed from the original letter by Helen Wolvey, 3 x great granddaughter of William and Mary Lincolne, in 2018.