

# 1. An American Family



With Dorothy and Mother (Frank Dillon collection, courtesy Museum of Modern Art)

The daughter of James Leigh Gish and Mary Robinson McConnell, Lillian Gish was proud of her roots, deeply planted in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America.

The Gish name was initially the source of some mystification. In 1922, at the time of the opening of *Orphans of the Storm*, Lillian reported that the Gish family was of French origin, descending from the Duke de Guiche, who fled France to escape his military duties. This French connection is reported in the program bio for *Orphans of the Storm*, in keeping, perhaps, with the French locale of the picture. Such press-agentry falsification was common. Just a few years later the story was modified slightly so that de Guiche becomes the more illustrious Duc de Guise. It is also possible that Lillian was, at this time, genuinely ignorant of her father's origins. Her ties were infinitely stronger to her mother's side, and she had, in fact, had little contact with her father's family for many years.

The first "Gish" to settle in North America was Matthias Gisch, who came from the Saar region, around Wolfersweiler. The family historian, J. I. Hamaker, a professor at Randolph-Macon Women's College, alerted Lillian in 1933 to the two hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Gish homestead near Manheim, Pennsylvania, six miles north of Lancaster, where Matthias received a land grant of 170 acres from William Penn. A monument marks the site at

eight-tenths of a mile south of Penryn, at Gish and Newport Roads. The Newport Road was a highway that linked Harrisburg and the port at Wilmington, Delaware. Matthias was a prosperous smithy as well as a farmer. When it was sold in 1942, the farm consisted of ninety-eight acres, a brick house built in 1851, and a barn with a cornerstone dated 1733.

Because of conflicting records, it is not clear whether Lillian belonged to the fifth or sixth generation of Gishes born in America. Many in the family migrated from Pennsylvania to Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and as far west as Idaho and California. Some stayed in Pennsylvania as practicing Mennonites. Among the Gish ancestors were a great-uncle probably murdered on a business trip to Philadelphia and four cousins who served in the Civil War. Lillian's father, James Leigh Gish was the youngest of four sons of David Gish (1814–88) and Diana Caroline Waltz. Baptismal records exist for two of James Leigh's brothers, David Edwin (June 30, 1860) and Alfred Grant (July 19, 1864) but none for James Leigh.

Lillian's mother, Mary Robinson McConnell, the daughter of Henry Clay McConnell and Emily Ward Robinson, had a sister, Emily, and two brothers, Henry and Frank. When she was a little girl, Lillian's personal mythology was informed by her maternal ancestors and the stories she heard from her great-aunt Carrie Robinson. A tenth-generation American on her mother's side, Lillian inherited a family history that reads like American history—emigration from the Old World, settlement and struggle in the New World, military service and political commitment, even distinction in the arts. Francis Barnard emigrated from England in 1632 or 1634 to Hartford, Connecticut, and then Hadley, Massachusetts. John Taylor, born in 1641, also from England, was an early resident of Northampton, Massachusetts. Joseph Barnard, who helped settle Deerfield, Massachusetts, was killed there by Native Americans in 1695. His gravestone is still standing. Other members of these lines were a brigadier major in the French and Indian War, an Ohio state senator, a drummer boy in the Union Army. Lillian's great-grandmother Emily Ward Robinson, who was the first young woman from Ohio to attend Mount Holyoke College, also had her poems published in *Harper's Magazine*. But the most illustrious member of the family was President Zachary Taylor, whose portrait hung in Lillian's apartment. (A more recent claim to celebrity lineage was Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales, her seventh cousin thrice removed.) For Lillian Gish, American history was, at the microcosmic level, in part, a family affair. She described how, when she was a child actress touring the country, her mother took her to graveyards where they would search for the family names. "It surprised us to see how many times familiar names turned up, but, of course, this country was a lot younger then. Mother's great-great-grandmother shook hands with President George Washington when she was a little girl!"

References to the courtship and marriage of James Gish and Mary McConnell are brief. Lillian herself dates their meeting "a few years" after the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1893, a misrepresentation designed to shave "a few years" from her own birthday in that very year. The dates in the rest of her account are also inaccurate. James had left Hummelstown, Pennsylvania, to clerk in a wholesale grocery firm in Springfield, Ohio. Remembering her father as fair-haired and good-looking, Lillian, in her handwritten corrections to the manuscript of Paine's biography, adds "young, handsome and winning" to the description of "James Gish, a traveling salesman." She also puts James's age at twenty-one when he met and soon thereafter married Mary, a pretty, blond, petite young woman, who she claimed to be three years his junior. The couple first settled in Springfield, Ohio. Lillian Diana Gish was born in a rather large two-story house at 219 Linden Avenue, October 14, 1893. She was born with a caul, and according to her grandmother, this was a good omen. Three weeks later, the grandmother saved her from a life-threatening attack of membranous croup. But all this really transpired when Lillian's father and mother were still teenagers; James was seventeen or eighteen and Mary seventeen. James's death certificate indicates he was born in 1875 or 1876; Mary's birthday was September 16, 1876. They had to falsify their declarations to obtain a license in the state of Ohio, where a statute forbade marriage for men younger than twenty and women younger than eighteen. They were married on January 7, 1893, at a Lutheran church in Dayton.

The Gish's second daughter, Dorothy, was born in Dayton on March 11, 1898. That date was always correctly reported, while Lillian Gish's birth date was a vexed issue throughout her professional life. When she first began to work as a child actress, she was not yet nine years old, but it was in her interest to pass for younger. Audiences of melodrama took particular delight in the disasters that threatened the cute tots on the stage: the younger the tot, the more vulnerable the victim, the greater the thrill and the pathos. Actually, Lillian's little sister, Dorothy, probably preceded her on the stage. Dorothy, four and a half years Lillian's junior, did not have to falsify her age to play Little Willie in *East Lynne*. She could not have been more than four years old at the time. The span of years between the two sisters was shortened to give Lillian the chance to be a littler girl than she actually was, thus extending her marketability in theatrical troupes that toured melodramas just after the turn of the century. This subterfuge served Lillian well when she joined D. W. Griffith at Biograph in 1912. Already a veteran actress, going on nineteen, she needed to be young in a medium that cherished the freshness of youth. Griffith often cast her and his other favorites in the roles of girls and very young women.

Sidney Sutherland, the author of Lillian's 1927 serialized biography in *Liberty Magazine*, confessed to perplexity about the age of his subject. Not unsur-

prisingly for a movie star, Lillian's own memory apparently failed when called upon to provide details. Sutherland did some checking and found the court records that gave Dorothy's accurate birth date as March 11, 1898, and Lillian's as October 14, 1893. Why then did *Who's Who* indicate October 14, 1896? he asked. "And yet Dorothy's birth record shows your father gave his age in 1898 as twenty-four—so he must have been nineteen when you were born, according to Clark County, a manifest absurdity." Absurd perhaps, but true. Sutherland consulted Griffith, who advised him to leave vague the matter of Lillian's age.

Albert Bigelow Paine, her 1932 biographer, puts her birth date in 1896, not 1893, on the first page of his work, as Lillian instructed. Paine thought this forthrightness very brave of her, and entirely consonant with her admirable character: "You are not in a class with those who are willing to sail under false colors." Over the subsequent decades, Lillian's year of birth was variously reported as 1896 and 1898. It was not reported at all in her 1969 autobiography. And as late as 1987, when she was going on ninety-four, she still indulged in the creative chronology that actors often think their prerogative. "I was born ten weeks before the beginning of the twentieth century. I'm not 90 years old, as many people seem to think, but I am as old as the century." That neat calculation subtracted seven years from the august total.

Paine relishes the stories of Lillian's childhood—how she preferred playing with her sister, Dorothy, to her rag doll, her taste for castoria cured only when her aunt half-filled the bottle with cod-liver oil, the recurrent nightmare of a masked face appearing in a window. Since marital separation did not fit Paine's idealized portrait of the girl who loved to say her prayers and adored her mother, he deals only briefly and reticently with the most important event of little Lillian's life: the breakup of her parents' marriage. Lillian herself always attributed the failure of the union to the extreme youth of the couple, and the father's immaturity and dreamy nature.

At the time of Dorothy's birth, in 1898, the four Gishes were living with James's grandmother in Dayton, a situation that did not suit Mary. There are a number of variations on the account of the family's fortunes, the most fanciful of which is that James "was the owner of a prosperous and ever-extending chain of confectionery stores, one of the real founders of the chain stores system in this country." In fact, an opportunity did arise for James to go into the confectionery business in Baltimore, where the family relocated. It was here that Lillian made her first appearance on a professional stage, at Ford's Theatre, along with popular actors Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliot, distributing Christmas stockings to poor children.

In the official versions, the restless James soon sold his share and moved on to New York City, leaving Mary and the girls in Baltimore. An undated typescript in Lillian's files supplies a more candid explanation of the events.

It refers to James's alcoholism and Mary's hope that a move to New York would help cure him. He only got worse. For a while, Mary worked for James's ex-partner, Edward Meixner, packaging candy. When the family was reunited in New York, Mary was engaged as a demonstrator in a Brooklyn department store and became the principal wage-earner for the four Gishes. They lived in rooms on West Thirty-ninth Street, near Pennsylvania Station.

The final crisis occurred when James failed to pay the \$3 weekly installment on the furniture Mary had bought on time. The bedroom suite was repossessed, and James Leigh Gish walked, or was sent, out of the lives of his wife and daughters. He made several reappearances, begging to be allowed to return. Mary was adamant in refusing to reconcile until he proved able to support the family. But James never reformed. The marriage was over and a legal separation was secured. Whenever James resurfaced in their lives, Mary feared that he, abetted by the Freemasons, would abduct one of the girls. Lillian was terrified that he would separate her from her mother and sister. She once asked if her mother would ever remarry. Mary Gish replied, "Your father destroyed me. Another man would destroy us." The girls' attachment to Mary was profound, and so it remained until her death in 1948.

Lillian presented her father's addiction as an essentially unfathomable aberration. "Why my father suddenly, and for no apparent reason, should renounce all responsibility and destroy himself with alcohol fills me with sad wonderment. It had not been inherited." How then to understand that her father had become a hopeless drunk? She looked to family for an explanation and found none. Her own, in particular, was a model of sobriety and reliability. "My mother's mother, my grandmother, died when she was twenty-eight and left four children. . . . Families were closer then than now. And perhaps that is why America was, as we think, healthier. Because, what is America but one big family? And families make a country, good or bad." Again, personal history and national history meld, but neither account for the irresponsible, alcoholic James Leigh Gish. An ulterior comment on Lillian's father paints the classic dreamer with a brilliant scheme for success who, like so many others, needed only some money to prevent losing "his brain-child to others." There is no indication about the breed of brainchild that would have made his fortune. But as Lillian was fond of saying, he lavished upon his biological child a gift, without which she would not have persevered down the hard path of her career: "I think I was so lucky that my father gave me insecurity, that he put me out to work at five [*sic*]. That way I learned what it was like to work. And . . . to be hungry at times." The ethic of deprivation and hard work was fundamental to the American dream and to Lillian Gish's narrative of her life.

