

A CELEBRATION OF FRANCES BURNEY

Lorna J. Clark, ed.

Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

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Eighteenth-century women writers represent a very attractive area of literary studies, and analyses of their work are always interesting even if these writers already belong to the canon. This is the case of *A Celebration*, a compilation of papers presented at a conference in 2002, when one hundred and twenty people gathered at Westminster Abbey to celebrate the installation of Frances Burney's memorial window at Poets' Corner. The event meant Burney's ranking with female authors such as Jane Austen or George Eliot.

As students of eighteenth-century English literature know, Frances Burney (1752-1840) —also known as Fanny Burney or as Mme. d'Arblay— was the daughter of a musicologist and the author of *The History of Music* (1776-89), Dr. Charles Burney. The Burney household was a meeting point for celebrities, such as the lexicographer Samuel Johnson and the actor David Garrick, and Frances also frequented Hester Thrale Piozzi and the Bluestocking circle. She portrayed society better than any writer of her age, and, if she did not see her comedies on stage, it was because her mentors and the theatrical producers feared the reaction of the upper classes. During some years at Windsor as Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, she composed a great part of her dramatic tragedies. Burney's marriage to Alexandre Piochard d'Arblay and her maternity brought some joy to her life until she underwent an appalling mastectomy and finally returned to England after thirteen years in exile in France.

Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics have cherished Burney for *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782), but have left *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814) aside. However, it should not be forgotten that, despite early assumptions, Burney is not just the necessary transition between the Fathers of the Novel and Jane Austen. She added wit and social satire to a tradition of women's writing inherited from Aphra Behn and Elizabeth Haywood, for instance. Burney was very conscious of her creative potential, and she encapsulated the essence of the eighteenth-century writer as Paula LaBeck Stepankowsky highlights in the "Foreword" of *A Celebration*: "Students of history, literature, language, medicine, music and theatre all bump into Frances Burney sooner or later" (xii). Brimley Johnson (1918), Ernest E. Baker (1929) and Virginia Wolf (1942) already vindicated her craft, and, in the 1980s and 1990s, attention was paid to her last two novels. Margaret A. Doody (1988) wrote another biography of Burney and a host of feminist works appeared following Patricia Meyer Spacks (1976) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984). Thus, Julia Epstein (1989), Katherine Rogers (1990) and Joanne Cutting-Gray (1992) recovered Burney as a writer concerned with the female sphere. Nowadays, other dimensions—biographical (based on the edition of Frances's journals), her dramatic works, or analyses of her presence in European literatures—are highlighted by researchers of diverse tendencies under the umbrella of Burney Studies.

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There are many reasons to praise a volume which is directly and expressly related to The Burney Society (TBS) founded in 1994, now an affiliate of ASECS (The American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies). TBS publishes *The Burney Letter* and *The Burney Journal*—the former also edited by Clark—and its almost one hundred members from all over the world meet twice a year, in the UK and in the US.

Bearing in mind the contributors—renowned eighteenth-century scholars (Peter Sabor, Betty Rizzo and John Wiltshire) together with new researchers who are gaining more and more status in Burney Studies (Marilyn Francus or Justine Crump)—, *A Celebration* is a carefully edited piece of scholarship. The editor of the volume is Dr. Lorna Clark, who has written extensively on the Burneys and is a Research Adjunct Professor at Carleton University (Ottawa). Clark has recently edited *The Romance of Private Life* (1839), a novel by Sarah Harriet Burney, Frances's half-sister and a successful novelist too, thanks to Pickering and Chatto and the Chawton House Library Series. She has experience with eighteenth-century manuscripts and is currently enjoying a three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to prepare the six-volume edition of *The Court Journals of Frances Burney* for Oxford University Press together with Peter Sabor, Stewart J. Cooke, Geoffrey Sill and Nancy Johnson.

A Celebration is deservedly dedicated to Joyce Hemlow, who began the McGill Burney Project and published the biography *The History of Fanny Burney* (1958) after examining the great mass of Burney's manuscripts. Much later she brought to light the twelve-volume *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Mme. D'Arblay), 1791-1839* (1972-84) and *A Catalogue of the Burney Family Correspondence* (1971). After a "Preface with Acknowledgements" written by the editor, we find an "Introduction" by Dr. Sabor. There are additional features, such as the bibliography which includes secondary sources and the list of contributors at the end of the volume, as well as nine illustrations related to Burney's epoch.

Given the disparity of approaches, the contributions are arranged in six interrelated categories: "Journals and Letters", "The Family", "The Novels", "Comedy and Tragedy", "Life" and "Context". While there are revisionist and feminist articles, and most contributions are based on Burney's impressions in her journals and letters, aspects such as the representation of multiculturalism in Burney do not appear. As a whole, we are offered a great variety of insightful readings of Burney's texts from different perspectives.

The first three articles focus on Burney's journals and letters. Lars Troide traces a complete history of the McGill University Project since Joyce Hemlow embraced the idea of studying Burney. Leslie Robertson defends an approach to Burney's early journals and juvenilia that sees it as a material less crafted than her mature writings but still necessary for Burney to improve her technique and be more self-confident as a writer. Linda Katrizky takes up a similar argument, stressing the importance of Burney's first writings and her readings of classical and popular literature.

The next part is devoted to the Burneys. Lorna Clark rediscovers Sarah Harriet and insists on the literary similarities and personal relationship with her half sister Frances. Elizabeth Allen Burney's alienation within the Burney household and her influence as stepmother on Burney's personality and work is the main point of Marilyn Frankus's paper. Kevin Jordan presents an issue largely ignored in Burney Studies: how Alexandre d'Arblay's unconventional behaviour provided the model for the hero in *The Wanderer*.

Three articles debate Burney's novels. Justine Crump centres on the responses to novel reading at the time and as reflected in her novels, and Barbara K. Seeber compares the position of animals in Burney's fiction with the entrapment of woman in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Finally, Helen Cooper's feminist article focuses once more on how both male and female mentors try to manipulate the heroine in Burney's novels.

The part dealing with Burney's comic wit and potential as a dramatic writer is very appealing. *A Busy Day* was successfully performed in Bristol (1993) and the West

End (2000), and the same was the case with *The Woman Hater* in Richmond (2007-2008) (see Kelly [2004] and Pitofski [2005]). Audrey Bilger studies the effects and uses of laughter as an instrument of satire. Similarly, Alexander H. Pitofsky insists on Burney's anti-capitalist critique in the comedy *Love and Fashion* (1798) and observes a change regarding her contemporaries: for Burney, retrenchment could help to secure and appreciate affection and ambition to rise socially (139). Francesca Saggini's approach becomes an innovative attempt to analyse *The Wanderer* as a dramatic piece with different levels of reading.

The fourth part is related to Burney's personal experiences: Hester Davenport centres on Burney's interest in sea-bathing as depicted in several scenes in *Evelina*, *Camilla* and *The Wanderer*. Two articles dealing with Burney's patrons follow: the late Betty Rizzo analyses the intimate friendship between Hester Thrale and Burney, and Freya Johnston focuses on Burney's relation with the influential Samuel Johnson.

In the last section, both Brian McCrea and Victoria Kortes-Papp are concerned with the medical world with a difference: the former deals with the doctors in Burney's opus and in Burney's life, and the later analyses real and fictional illness in novels such as *Evelina* or *Cecilia*. John Wiltshire closes the volume by insisting that Burney "opened for Jane Austen the possibilities of the contemporary female, domestic, comic novel" (222) and that the character of Miss Bates in *Northanger Abbey* (published in 1818) is modelled on Miss Larolles in *Camilla*.

A Celebration constitutes a highly commendable volume written with scholarly rigour, useful for specialists as well as novices in the field alike. Apart from its pluralistic scope, a notable strength is its comprehensive bibliography covering primary and secondary works. Unfortunately, five years elapsed between the conference and the publication of *A Celebration*, and some topics have already been discussed elsewhere in literary journals. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this edition is a welcome addition to existing criticism and a stimulus for further research on this fascinating woman writer. The great merit of *A Celebration* is its attempt to analyse Burney as a prolific, versatile writer, and it testifies to the vitality and actuality of her *oeuvre*, whose literary merit remains unquestioned.

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Received: 1 July 2009
Revised version: 24 July 2009