

**Penelope Aubin, short biography.**

**by Dr Debbie Welham, University of Winchester.**

**Aubin, Penelope** (1679?–1738), businesswoman, poet, novelist, translator, orator and playwright, was the natural daughter of Sir Richard Temple (1634–1697), and his mistress, Anne Charleton who was the second daughter of the royal physician and natural philosopher Walter Charleton (1620–1707). Suggestions, apparently arising from an article by Abbé Antoine Prévost in *Le Pour et contre* in 1734, that Aubin was the daughter of an anonymous French officer have been disproved; recent research has found that Aubin was instead the half sister of Viscount Cobham. Anne Charleton and her daughter lived in what is now the Upper Mall on the riverside in Hammersmith as neighbours of Catherine of Braganza and, perhaps importantly for Aubin's later depictions of good Catholic characters in her novels (often as characters forced to practice their religion in secret), as neighbours of the convent of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The convent acted as a school for girls from gentry and aristocratic families and, though Sir Richard Temple was accused of being a Catholic, lists of the attending pupils are extant and do not show Aubin as an attendee; there is no evidence that Penelope was a Catholic but there is much evidence to suggest otherwise. Aubin acted as godparent to children baptized in Huguenot churches, but her own preferences were Anglican, probably a reflection of her Charleton heritage which was staunchly Anglican and Royalist.

On 4 May 1696 Penelope married Abraham Aubin (*d.* 1740), the eldest son of a merchant family from Jersey, at St James's Church, Duke's Street, London, without the consent of her parents. Anne Charleton declared her 'greate griefe and affliction' over the match. Abraham had been advised to 'desist' as Sir Richard Temple, hearing that Abraham's parents did not intend to settle anything on him (they appear to have wanted to make him earn his money from managing their London business interests), had announced that he would not give Penelope one farthing unless Abraham's parents

matched the value of her portion. The couple married clandestinely and the marriage left Penelope without her portion of £1000. Anne Charleton believed the match would be her daughter's 'utter ruine' and she intervened to get Penelope's father to reconsider. A piqued Sir Richard Temple agreed to pay his daughter £50 a year for life if Abraham took her to Jersey and worked as his parents' factor in their business, unfortunately Sir Richard died soon after without making arrangements to pay. By the time Sir Richard died the Aubins had already travelled to Jersey, where their first child, Marie Anne Arabelle, was baptized on 22 May 1697; it is common in Jersey for women to be referred to by their maiden name and the register entry for her daughter's birth gives Penelope's name as Demoiselle Penelope Temple. By 1699 the family had returned to London, where in June Penelope gave birth to a son, Abraham Harcy, and then a daughter, Penelope, in March 1701. The family initially resided at Key Court, close to St Mary Aldermary where their children were baptized; they also used an address at Princes Court in Lothbury where Abraham's brother Henry Aubin also traded as a silversmith, but by 1730 the family was living in Portugal Row, Lincoln's Inn Fields, where they continued to live until Penelope Aubin died and Abraham seems to have needed to return to Jersey.

Aubin was an astute businesswoman, and she appears to have assumed control of the family's affairs, particularly when her husband served in the army. In 1702 she advised Thomas Fairfax, fifth Baron Fairfax of Cameron, and Richard Savage, fourth Earl Rivers, in a salvaging expedition, it is likely that this was a scheme intended to dive the wreck of a ship called the Bon Jesus in the Caribbean. In 1708 Aubin declined an invitation to assist in the launching of a controversial private scheme headed by a suspected pirate John Breholt and his sidekick Peter Dearlove, to repatriate the British pirates settled on Madagascar in return for a substantial payment to the treasury. Aubin's evidence against the scheme during a Board of Trade inquiry in 1709 helped to discredit it.

Amongst his snippets of (erroneous) biography Prévost suggested that Aubin may have tried her hand at pamphlets on current affairs, but the only early writings that survive are three poems, *The Stuarts: a Pindarique Ode* (1707), *The Extasy: a Pindarique Ode to her Majesty the Queen* (1708), and *The Wellcome: a Poem to his Grace the Duke of Marlborough* (1709). The poems are Aubin's most autobiographical works, alluding to her royalist heritage and her Anglicanism. However, Aubin's literary career only began in earnest in the 1720s. It has been suggested that Aubin might have been forced to write for money because of the death of her husband, but in fact Abraham was alive and had only recently inherited money and property from his father in Jersey when Aubin's first novel was published. Between 1721 and 1729 she produced seven novels, *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil* (1721), *The Life of Madam de Beaumont* (1721), *The Life and Amorous Adventures of Lucinda* (1721), *The Noble Slaves* (1722), *The Life of Charlotta du Pont* (1723), *The Life and Adventures of Lady Lucy* (1726), and *The Life and Adventures of Young Count Albertus* (1728). The novels were popular and apparently also drew on experience; when, for example, her brother-in-law David Aubin wrote from Barbados describing how his ship had been taken by pirates in Martinique, Aubin included thinly disguised details of the attack in *Charlotta du Pont*.

Aubin also introduced the English to various French texts: she edited *Doctrine of Morality ... According to the Stoick Philosophy* (1721), Thomas Mannington Gibbs's translation of the work by Marin le Roy, sieur de Gomberville, republished in 1726 as *Moral Virtue Delineated*. Somewhat mysteriously Aubin appears to have inherited the manuscript of the translation from Gibbs as he made her the sole beneficiary and executrix of his will. Aubin also produced *The Adventures of the Prince of Clermont, and Madame de Ravezan* (1722) and *The Life of the Countess de Gondez* (1729) from the originals by Louise-Geneviève

Gomez de Vasconcellos and Marguerite de Lussan. Aubin's translation of François Pétis de la Croix's *The History of Genghis Khan the Great* (1722) was dedicated to the Prince of Wales, the future George II. Her most important translation is considered to be that of Robert Challes's *Les illustres françaises* (1713), which she retitled *The Illustrious French Lovers* (1726), a work to which Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* and Prévost in *Manon Lescaut* may be indebted.

In addition to her novels Aubin was also no stranger to the London stage. In 1724 'cards of Mrs Aubin's', possibly as some form of benefit night, were presented for a performance of John Dryden's *The Spanish Fryar* at Lincoln's Inn Fields on 2 January. In December 1730 Aubin's own play *The Merry Masqueraders, or, The Humorous Cuckold* was performed at the New Theatre in the Haymarket. The jaunty title of the play may well mask its barbed satirical observations, the masqueraders in the play are not merry and nor is the cuckold humorous. Aubin is said to have spoken the epilogue and she was granted the revenues of the second (final) performance. The play has traditionally been viewed as a failure, but it was published in 1732 and reprinted in 1733 with a new edition in 1734 which makes its success or otherwise unclear. What is more certain is that by 1730 Aubin should have been comfortable on the stage. In April 1729 she established the Lady's Oratory at York Buildings, Villiers Street. Announcing herself to be 'Mrs Aubin' against 'Mr Henly' [sic] she positioned herself in opposition to John 'Orator' Henley. Aubin's advertisements for the oratory performances included mockery of Henley's claims that his oratory was in Lincoln's Inn Fields, when it was actually in the less prestigious Clare Market, and parody his 'henletical' style of oration.

Though Prévost reported that Aubin died shortly after the oratory and the play closed, meaning that Aubin had previously been thought to have died in 1731, Aubin actually

died in Southwark in April 1738 probably at the house of her doctor, William Smithson, who was the dedicatee of *The Illustrious French Lovers*. She was interred at the church of St George the Martyr, Southwark, on 23 April 1738. She was predeceased by her children but was survived by her husband, who was buried at St Helier parish church, Jersey, on 3 April 1740.

A collected edition of Aubin's novels was published in 1739 and several editions of *The Noble Slaves* and *Charlotta du Pont* appeared in England and America between 1777 and 1815. Chawton House Library also holds the only known copy of a work called *The Inhuman Stepmother: Or, the History of Miss Harriot Montague, in Two Volumes* (1770) which appears to be a plagiarism of *Charlotta du Pont* indicating that Aubin's works retained some appeal in the later century. However, Aubin was subsequently ignored, largely because of the perception of her as a pious woman author. More recently Aubin's characterization as a pious stepping stone from Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley to Richardson has been reconsidered. Further examination of Aubin's novels has found that, despite the piety of her prefaces, her works contain erotic and sexually charged scenes as racy as those in the works of Haywood and Manley. There will no doubt continue to be revisions of Aubin's contribution to the eighteenth-century novel as more biographical findings and textual explorations are undertaken.

Dr Debbie Welham, University of Winchester, January 2011.

Further Reading:

Joel H. Baer, 'Penelope Aubin and the Pirates of Madagascar: Biographical Notes and Documents', Linda V. Troost, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Women: Studies in their Lives, Work and Culture, Volume 1* (New York: AMS Press, 2001), 49-62

Kulik, Maggie, 'What the Bookseller Did: a case of eighteenth-century plagiarism, *The Female Spectator* (2000).

[http://www.chawton.org/library/files/what\\_the\\_bookseller\\_did.pdf](http://www.chawton.org/library/files/what_the_bookseller_did.pdf)

William H. McBurney, —, 'Mrs. Penelope Aubin and the Early Eighteenth-Century English Novel', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 20 (1956-7), 245-67

Chris Mounsey, '...bring her naked from her Bed, that I may ravish her before the Dotard's face, and then send his Soul to Hell': Penelope Aubin, Impious Pietist, Humourist or Purveyor of Juvenile Fantasy?', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 26 (2003), 55-75

—, 'Conversion panic, circumcision and sexual anxiety: Penelope Aubin's queer writing', Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda eds., *Queer people : negotiations and expressions of homosexuality, 1700-1800* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007)

Sarah Prescott, 'Penelope Aubin and the Doctrine of Morality: a reassessment of the pious woman novelist', *Women's Writing*, Volume 1, No.1 (1994), 99-112

—, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

Debbie Welham, 'The Particular Case of Penelope Aubin', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31:1 (March 2008), 63-76

Debbie Welham, 'Delight and Instruction?: Women's Political Engagement in the Works of Penelope Aubin', Phd Dissertation (University of Winchester; November 2009)

Copyright Debbie Welham & Claxton House Library