

**Charlotte (Turner) Smith (1749-1806)**  
*by Ruth Facer*

Soon after I was 11 years old, I was removed to London, to an house where there were no books...But I found out by accident a circulating library; and, subscribing out of my own pocket money, unknown to the relation with whom I lived, I passed the hours destined to repose, in running through all the trash it contained. My head was full of Sir Charles, Sir Edwards, Lord Belmonts, and Colonel Somervilles, while Lady Elizas and Lady Aramintas, with many nymphs of inferior rank, but with names equally beautiful, occupied my dreams.[1]

As she ran through the 'trash' of the circulating library, little could the eleven-year Charlotte Turner have imagined that she was to become one of the best-known poets and novelists of the late eighteenth century. In all, she was to write eleven novels, three volumes of poetry, four educational books for young people, a natural history of birds, and a history of England.

Charlotte was born in 1749 to Nicholas Turner, a well-to-do country gentleman, and his wife, Anna. Her early years were spent at Stoke Place, near Guildford in Surrey and Bignor Park on the Arun in Sussex. The idyllic landscape of the South Downs was well known to her and was to recur in her novels and poetry time and again:

Spring's dewy hand on this fair summit weaves  
The downy grass, with tufts of  
Alpine flowers, And shades the beechen slopes with tender leaves,  
And leads the Shepherd to his upland bowers,  
Strewn with wild thyme; while slow-descending  
showers, Feed the green ear, and nurse the future sheaves!  
*Sonnet XXXI* (written in Farm Wood, South Downs in May 1784)

Sadly this idyllic life was to end abruptly with the death of Anna Turner, leaving the four-year old Charlotte to be brought up by her aunt Lucy in London.

Eleven years after his wife died, the ever-extravagant Nicholas Turner determined to remarry for money and was introduced to the middle-aged Henrietta Meriton, reputed to be in possession of £20000. Their marriage took place in 1764 on the condition that the now fifteen-year old Charlotte would be removed from the household. Unfortunately, Charlotte and her future stepmother had taken an instant dislike to each other from the moment they met. Smith repeatedly drew on her life experiences in her writing and Henrietta may well have been the model for Miss Jobson, the hated step-mother described in her first novel *Emmeline* (1788): 'a tall meagre person, a countenance bordering on the horrible, and armed with two round black eyes which she fancied beautiful, had seen her fortieth year pass'. An easy solution was found to dispose of the young Charlotte - she was to be married!

A choice of husband was made quickly: Benjamin Smith, son of a wealthy West India merchant. The wedding took place on 23 February 1765. Married life for the couple began living over Benjamin's father's shop and Charlotte had to adapt from a life of

gentility to one of commerce. Unfortunately any hopes of happiness were short lived. Smith was soon to find herself irretrievably joined to a dissolute gambler, interested in such sports as racing and boxing, with a poor concentration span, and little intention of supporting his ever-growing family. He was also promiscuous and at times violent towards his wife. Like Alexander Elphinstone in Smith's third novel *Celestina* (1791) he was 'wild, eccentric and ungovernable: [and] sometimes rode away to races when he ought to have been settling with the grocers'.

In 1766 the first of the couple's twelve children was born. Their son was to die when their second was born the following year. Only eight of Smith's children were to outlive her. They too brought her sorrow. She parted from William (b. 1768) and Nicholas (b. 1771) early on, when they joined the East India Company in India, and Charles (b. 1772) lost a leg in the war with France in 1793. Her favourite child, Augusta (b. 1774), married a French émigré, but tragically died at the age of twenty, leaving her mother distraught. Smith frequently alluded to her own trials and tribulations in the prefaces to her poems and plots of her novels and was both praised and criticised for this strategy. < link to Anna Seward biography > **Anna Seward**, for example, found Smith's dramatisation of her own life in her writing deeply improper and unfeminine, lampooning Smith for what she perceived as the improper washing of her dirty laundry in public and characterised her sonnets as 'everlasting lamentables [and] hackneyed scraps of dismality'. [2] Nevertheless, in marketing her woes, Smith successfully cultivated many readers' sympathy. As < link to Mary Wollstonecraft biography > **Mary Wollstonecraft**, a regular reviewer of Smith's work, wrote in *The Analytical Review* when considering *Marchmont* (1796), 'her manner, indeed, of alluding to her domestic sorrows much excite sympathy and excuse the acrimony with which she execrates, and hold up to contempt, the man to whom she attributes them'. Who can blame Smith, if overwhelmed by the death of a beloved daughter, she wrote in her preface to *Marchmont*, 'one dreadful evil has overtaken me, and nearly overwhelmed me that lovely Being who was the greatest blessing of my life, [...] has been torn from me for ever'? Her daughter's death deeply affected Smith's writing, and in the same preface, she apologised for the defects of *Montalbert* (1795), another of her novels, which she had to finish after the death of her daughter. The book is loosely written, with long drawn out dialogue between mother and daughter and is probably one of her least successful works. Paid by the volume, Smith was clearly writing for money.

These personal tragedies were compounded by Smith's treatment at the hands of her dissolute husband. Richard Smith was well aware of his son's shortcomings and financial imprudence. When he died in 1776, he left much of his fortune (approximately £36000) tied up in trust for his grandchildren. Unfortunately, the will was heavily disputed and a settlement was only reached in 1813, seven years after Charlotte Smith's own death. (Dickens may well have had Smith's lawsuit in mind when he wrote *Bleak House*). She fought long and hard throughout her life to secure her children's inheritance and developed an acute hatred for lawyers. In her preface to *Desmond* (1792) Smith enlisted the sympathy of her public by suggesting that any typographical errors in her novel were the direct result of her 'attention [being] distracted by the troubles, which it seems to be the peculiar delight of the persons who are concerned in the management of my

children's affairs, to inflict upon me'. In *Marchmont* (1796) she more overtly criticised lawyers as 'reptile[s]' 'whose most hideous features are too offensive to be painted in their enormity'.

Although any affection Smith may have had for her husband died early on in the marriage, she did accompany him to debtor's prison in 1783. She had a strong sense of her duty as a wife, but her anger against male oppression and the powerlessness of women in the patriarchal society in which she lived is reflected in all her novels. In *Emmeline* her own situation as martyred wife is reflected in the character of Mrs. Stafford, married to a profligate husband, while in *Desmond* woman's lot is bleakly dramatised in Geraldine's fate: 'In short, dreadful as the confirmation of my fears was, I had no longer to doubt but that Geraldine was sold (to a Duke) by the wretch who dares call her his wife'.

In her early years, Smith often read novels illicitly, for pleasure. As a mother, married to an unreliable husband, she turned to writing to feed her children. However, she started her writing career not with a novel, but with *Elegiac Sonnets and other Essays* (1784), a highly successful volume of poems, some of which were written while she was in debtor's prison. She was aided in this project by the poet William Hayley, who was to become a close friend and who she described in the volume's dedication as 'the greatest modern Master of that charming talent, in which I can never be more than a distant copyist'. Her poems brought her critical acclaim. She was praised by Robert Southey, and her poetry was to influence Coleridge and Wordsworth, who wanted Alexander Dyce to put her 'I love thee, mournful, sober-suited Night' into his 1827 anthology.[3] In 1833 Wordsworth prophetically described Smith as 'a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered':

She wrote little, and that unambitiously, but with true feeling for rural nature, at a time when nature was not much regarded by English Poets; for in point of time her earlier writings preceded, I believe, those of Cowper and Burns.[4]

Indeed, Smith had to wait many years for the acknowledgement Wordsworth claimed she deserved. Only in recent decades has she once again come to prominence. In 1994 Stuart Curran wrote that 'Charlotte Smith was the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic'. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Smith's poetry combined a powerful assertion of self with a deep sense of nature, beautifully exemplified by Sonnet 4 of her *Elegiac Sonnets*, 'To the Moon':

Queen of the silver bow! by thy pale beam,  
Alone and pensive, I delight to stray,  
And watch thy shadow trembling in the stream,  
Or mark the floating clouds that cross thy way.  
And while I gaze, thy mild and placid light  
Sheds a soft calm upon my troubled breast;  
And oft I think - fair planet of the night,  
That in thy orb, the wretched may have rest:

The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go,  
Released by death - to thy benignant sphere  
And the sad children of Despair and Woe,  
Forget, in thee, their cup of sorrow here.  
Oh! that I soon may reach thy world serene,  
Poor wearied pilgrim - in this toiling scene.

Again and again her deep unhappiness dominates in the poems and in Sonnet 5 she calls on the Arun, the river near her childhood home, to bring her oblivion.

And you, Aruna! - in the vale below,  
As to the sea your limpid waves you bear,  
Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,  
To drink a long oblivion to my care?

*Elegiac Sonnets* was very popular and eventually the work ran to nine editions and several reprints. The long list of subscribers to the fifth edition (1789) included such famous names as William Cowper, Charles James Fox, Horace Walpole and Mrs. Siddons.

In the year that saw the publication of the *Elegiac Sonnets* Smith followed her husband to a castle in Normandy, a retreat from the ongoing demands of his debtors. In true Gothic tradition, a party of monks arrived unannounced in her room one night, made off with her newborn son, and trooped through the cold to take him for baptism in the local church. It is hardly surprising that barely a few months after this experience and many trying years of marriage she took her children back to England. Two years later she left her husband for good, but the constant demands on her purse were to continue for the rest of her life. It was fortunate that she could write.

Smith's first three novels, *Emmeline*, *Ethelinde* (1789) and *Celestina* (1791) were written in the popular Romantic, sentimental style. Her heroines are sensitive girls with strong moral values, who undergo trials and tribulations before they are finally united with their lovers. *Emmeline* is one of the first works of English fiction to describe a Gothic setting for its heroine, a theme that was to recur in more of Smith's novels, notably *The Old Manor House* (1793). It was an important influence on the Gothic novels of Anne Radcliffe and of Jane Austen's parodic *Northanger Abbey* (1818). In her next work, *Desmond*, Smith articulated some of her most radical views in support of the French Revolution and showed sympathy for the reform movement in England. This epistolary novel is an unconventional love story that explores a man's desire for a married woman.

Again interweaving fact and fiction the preface to *Desmond* asserts that the 'political passages dispersed through the work ... are for the most part, drawn from conversations to which I have been a witness, in England, and France, during the last twelve months'. She wrote that she had 'given to my imaginary characters the arguments I have heard on both sides; and if those in favour of one party have evidently the advantage, it is not owing to my partial representation, but to the predominant power of truth and reason, which can

neither be altered nor concealed'. Smith was one of the group of radical 'Jacobin' writers, which included Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Robert Bage and Thomas Holcroft among others. Living in London in the late 1790s, Smith became acquainted with many of these writers and in 1800 she was to write the Prologue for Godwin's *Antonio* (1800).

A year after the publication of *Desmond*, Charlotte Smith wrote one of her most successful novels, *The Old Manor House* (1793). The novel has a Gothic setting and tells the tale of the secret love of Monimia, a girl of relatively humble background, and Orlando, descendant of the upper class line of the Rayland family. The novel is set against the backdrop of American War of Independence and reflects on democracy, class struggle, and the injustices of the inheritance system.

Criticised for her radical views and waning in popularity, Smith wrote five more novels. *The Young Philosopher* (1798) marked a return to her more radical novels of the early 1790s, but in her final years she turned to books for children and young persons on such subjects as the *History of England* (1806) and *The Natural History of Birds* (1807). She also added two more major poetical works to her bibliography, *The Emigrants* (1793), a complex work that reflects upon the tragic aftermath of the Revolution while retaining a residue of revolutionary fervour, and her final work, *Beachy Head* (1807).

Towards the end of her life, Charlotte Smith was increasingly restless, living in London, Weymouth, Exmouth, Bath and Oxford. She was now crippled with arthritis and writing had become extremely painful and difficult. Charlotte Smith died only a few months before her husband at Tilford, near Farnham, on 28 October 1806. Smith's estate was finally settled in 1813.

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in Charlotte Smith's works fuelled by the republication of several of her novels and Stuart Curran's 1994 OUP edition of *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. Two recent biographies, Carol L. Fry's *Charlotte Smith* (1997) and Loraine Fletcher's *Charlotte Smith, A Critical Biography* (1998) confirm her importance as a major eighteenth-century woman writer. Judith Stanton's edition of Smith's letters will be published in 2003.

Let the last lines of her best-known poem, *Beachy Head* (1807), be Smith's epitaph:

And as the time ere long must come  
When I lie silent in the tomb,  
Thou wilt preserve these mournful pages;  
For gentle minds will love my verse  
And Pity shall my strains rehearse,  
And tell my name to distant ages.

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1 *Rural Works: in Dialogues intended for the use of young persons*. 2nd edition (London: Cadell & Davies, 1795), II, p.104

2 Quoted in Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 101.

3 See Fletcher, p. 334

4 William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, ed. de Selincourt, Vol. 4 p.403, quoted in Fletcher, p.334

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