

**Frances Burney (1752-1840)**  
*by Valerie Patten*

Described as ‘the Mother of English Fiction’[1] by Virginia Woolf in 1918, Fanny Burney was acclaimed by Anna Letitia Barbauld a hundred years earlier: ‘Scarcely any name, if any, stands higher in the list of novel-writers than that of Miss Burney’.[2] Fanny Burney helped to promote the status of women’s writing, but the introduction to her last novel, *The Wanderer*, reveals her lifelong ambivalence towards writing which she associated with ‘degradation’. ‘I struggled against the propensity which [...] impelled me into its toils’. When her first novel made her a celebrity at the age of twenty-six in 1778, she danced for joy around a mulberry tree but hid her novel from view to save herself the embarrassment of having to own up as its author.

Born on 13 June 1752 in Lynn Regis, now King’s Lynn, in Norfolk, Fanny was the third of the six surviving children born to her popular, sociable and charismatic father, Charles Burney, later to become eminent in the world of music, and his first wife, Esther Sleepe, herself a musician and daughter of the leader of the Lord Mayor’s Band. At the time of Fanny’s birth, the family lived in King’s Lynn for her father’s health, but the Burneys were a family that spawned various artistic talents and thrived on London. Charles Burney’s great friend, Samuel Crisp, later to become Fanny’s mentor and whom she would lovingly refer to as ‘Daddy Crisp’, encouraged his friend to move back to London, ‘the centre of riches, luxury, taste, pride, extravagance, - all that ingenuity is to fatten upon?’ Fanny’s Bohemian childhood was spent in houses in Poland Street in London’s Soho, Queen Square in Bloomsbury and St. Martin’s Street near Leicester Square.

Fanny’s education was neglected, but once she had mastered reading and writing she indulged in both avidly. Her father’s recollection was that she was ‘silent, backward and timid, even to sheepishness’, but her mother maintained that she had ‘no fear about Fanny’. Sadly, this adored mother died when Fanny was ten years old. Fanny’s father was heartbroken but his caring nature and capacity for love and friendship ensured that relatives and friends flocked to support and sustain the grieving household.

One of these friends was the famous actor-manager, David Garrick. He made frequent visits to the Burney home, entertaining and delighting the children with impromptu performances. Fanny, with her phenomenal memory and powers of observation, was the greatest beneficiary, soaking up the mimicry and acting skills displayed before her.

According to her memoirs, on her fifteenth birthday, in 1767, in the courtyard of Poland Street and with a tearful sister, Susanna, as her only witness, Fanny made a bonfire of all she had written, including a novel, *The History of Carolyn Evelyn*. She had begun writing in earnest, ‘Elegies, Odes, Plays, Songs, Stories, Farces, -nay, Tragedies and Epic Poems’. Her motives for this destruction are unclear, but in her *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (1832) she hints that her relentless pursuit of scribbling was shameful, ‘an inclination at which I blushed’.

On 2 October 1767 Charles Burney remarried a widow, Elizabeth Allen, whom he had met in King's Lynn several years before. Their new mother was to become increasingly unpopular with the Burney children. Significantly, perhaps, in March 1768, Fanny Burney began her diary. Asking herself, 'to whom dare I reveal my private opinion of my nearest relations?', she judiciously decided to address her diary 'to Nobody'. The new Mrs. Burney, who had three children from her previous marriage, was to give birth to two more children, half-siblings to the Burney children.

In June 1769, Charles Burney was awarded a doctorate in music from Oxford University. Fanny revealed her devotion to him with a commemorative poem, and described him in her diary as 'the dearest, most amiable, this best beloved - most worthy of men!'

In 1771, Fanny confessed, 'I have known the Time when I could enjoy Nothing, without relating it'. As well as her diary, Fanny wrote letters, particularly to Samuel Crisp and her favourite younger sister, Susanna. In spite of the bonfire, her 'incurable itch to write' had survived and she wrote another novel in secret, *Evelina*, a sequel to the novel she had previously destroyed. *Evelina* is written as a series of letters, following the style of Samuel Richardson's successful novels, *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa: or the History of a Young Lady* (1747-1748). The romance plot follows the fortunes of its eponymous heroine, the daughter of Caroline Evelyn, brought up by her kind clergyman guardian in the country after being rejected by her father. She is introduced to London where her sensibilities are assaulted by her vulgar grandmother and her pretentious and ill-bred cousins. After many adventures, her poise and beauty win her the hand of Lord Orville. *Evelina* is reconciled to her father and her mother's reputation is justly restored. The novel was praised not only for its moral tone, but for its comedy.

Fanny's secrecy about her writing reflected the difficulty of female writers in the eighteenth century who risked condemnation by revealing a knowledge of the world judged to be inappropriate for a respectable female. This fear was to be even greater when Fanny found herself attracted to writing for the stage. Fanny's fear of bringing disgrace on her family made her reluctant to reveal her identity. With the help of her brother and a cousin, *Evelina, or, A Young Lady's Entrance into the World* was published anonymously on Thursday, 29 January 1778. Fanny was paid thirty guineas. The book was an instant success. The reviews were glowing. 'Readers will weep [...] will laugh, and grow wiser', declared the *Critical Review*. Fanny wrote to her sister, 'Good God! My dear Susy!, what a wonderful affair this has been! - & how extraordinary is this *torrent* of success, which sweeps down all before it!'. Fanny's success brought her the approbation of Mrs. Thrale, a well-known London literary hostess, whose daughter received music lessons from Dr Burney. Through her Fanny Burney came to meet Dr. Johnson, Edmund Burke and many others.

Her success and the encouragement of Mrs. Thrale and her friends, particularly Sheridan, persuaded Fanny to start work on her play *The Witlings* (composed in 1778-1780). This lively work satirised literary pretension. Fanny was shocked and upset when it was suppressed by her father and Samuel Crisp who both took fright at the thought that the comedy might be perceived as a satire against the kind of influential literary figures upon

whose patronage Dr. Burney was dependent. While mourning the loss of Lady Smatter, Mrs. Sapient and Mrs. Voluble, Fanny accepted the judgement.

*Cecilia, Memoirs of an Heiress*, Fanny's next successful novel, was published in five volumes on 12 June 1782. Dr. Burney procured £250 for the copyright. The heroine, Cecilia Beverley, eventually marries the man she loves after being ill-treated by her three guardians and almost tricked out of her fortune. Fanny had aimed to make the story 'true to life'. Leslie Stephen, in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1885), hailed her as giving 'the first impulse to the modern school of fiction which aims at a realistic portrait of society'. Jane Austen admired all her works, and found the title for *Pride and Prejudice* in the last chapter of this novel.

In 1786, Fanny was invited to become Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte. The introduction was made by Mrs. Delany whom Fanny had met through Mrs. Thrale's circle. Seemingly a prestigious post, it was in reality a subservient and gruelling role, paying £200 a year. Fanny accepted to please her father. She hated her position and the deprivation of her freedom. By 1791, her health had broken down and she was allowed to resign. Queen Charlotte honoured her with an annuity of £100 a year. Her diaries from the period give us a fascinating record of life at Court, particularly King George III's illness in 1788-9, and the impeachment of Warren Hastings in 1788.

Fanny regained her health and visited the Lockes, old friends of the Burney family, who lived at Norbury Park near Mickleham in Surrey. Through them she was introduced to an unconventional group of French exiles living at nearby Juniper Hall, including Madame De Staël, then aged only twenty-six, and her lover, the Comte de Narbonne. She was soon writing to her father about one in particular, 'M. d'Arblay is one of the most singularly interesting Characters that can ever have been formed. He has a sincerity, a frankness, [and] an ingenious openness of nature'. A romantic attachment to General Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Piochard d'Arblay was quickly established but, although from a well-to-do family, he was penniless. His estates in France had been confiscated. Fanny gained her father's grudging approval and on the morning of Sunday, 28 July 1793 they were married in Mickleham church. She wore a ring engraved with the words 'Sa douceur m'enchant' (Your sweetness enchants me).

On 19 November, Fanny published a pamphlet, *Brief Reflections relative to the Emigrant French Clergy; earnestly submitted to the Humane Consideration of the Ladies of Great Britain*, written for a charity with which her father was involved, and which aimed to raise money for the emigrant French clergy. It had a mixed reception. Some criticised the work for its pompous language, but the pamphlet delighted her father who wrote, 'I never liked anything of your precious writing more'.

The Lockes' wedding present to Fanny and her husband was a plot of land on which to build a cottage. Their lack of money to fund the project decided Fanny to resurrect one of the several blank-verse dramas which she had worked on while at Court. *Hubert de Vere* is set on the Isle of Wight during the reign of King John; *The Siege of Pevensey* is set during the reign of William Rufus, and *Elberta* takes place in the aftermath of the

Norman Conquest, but it was *Edwy and Elgiva*, another historical tragedy, that Fanny presented in order to raise money. The work was accepted in the summer of 1794. By August, it was realised that Fanny's 'constant bilious attack' through May and June were the symptoms of pregnancy. Fanny d'Arblay's first and only child was born on 18 December, a beloved, spoilt and precocious boy named after his father, Alexander Charles Louis Piochard and referred to by his parents as 'the Idol of the World'. Somewhat distracted, Fanny attended the opening night of *Edwy and Elgiva* on Saturday, 21 March 1795. It was a disastrous performance and Fanny withdrew the play immediately.

Undeterred, she completed her novel, *Camilla: or, A Picture of Youth*, in less than two years. Camilla's intended husband, on the advice of his misogynist tutor, subjects Camilla to a 'probationary interval' and mistrustfully follows her adventures in society, ready to believe the worst. The novel is imbued with a Gothic atmosphere, when Camilla is ostracised after running into debt, collapses and appears to be dying alone and unknown at an inn.

*Camilla* was not a literary success, but was popular enough and earned Burney £2000 in copyright and subscriptions. Even Fanny agreed that it was far too long, running to 350,000 words in five volumes. It was published in July 1796, and Fanny secured permission to dedicate it to Queen Charlotte. The year also brought the death of Dr. Burney's second wife and Susanna's removal to Ireland with her husband and children.

The D'Arblays moved into Camilla Cottage in 1797, but it had cost more than predicted. Fanny set to the 'scribbling business' again, and wrote a drama; a comedy called *Love and Fashion*. In 1799, a buyer was found to produce the play anonymously the following March. Before this could happen, in January 1800, Susanna, desperately ill, died on the journey back from Ireland. Fanny and her father were devastated by their loss. When a newspaper reported the impending production of *Love and Fashion* with Fanny named as the author, she withdrew it at her father's insistence. Susan's death probably influenced her father's action, but by now Fanny was prepared to stand up to her father's misgivings about her writing. She wrote to him, 'It is not wanton, my dearest Father [...] you will find nothing [...] that will make you blush for me'. She began to write two more comedies, *The Woman-Hater* and *A Busy Day*, but neither was produced.

Early in 1802 Fanny and her son followed Monsieur d'Arblay to France, where he was trying to salvage something of his property and estates. With the outbreak of war between England and France in May 1803 Fanny was unable to leave France for nine years. During this period she recorded in vivid detail a mastectomy operation which she underwent without anaesthetic on 30 September 1811.

In August 1812 Fanny and her son surreptitiously escaped back to England where Fanny was relieved to be reunited with her 'affectionate tribe'. Fanny had smuggled the manuscript of *The Wanderer* out of France where she had worked on it sporadically during her stay. She had been shocked to find that she and her husband did not own the freehold of Camilla Cottage although they were to be compensated for its sale as part of

Norbury Park. Her need for funds galvanised her into working on *The Wanderer* from early in 1813. It was published as *The Wanderer: or Female Difficulties*, at the end of March 1814. *The Wanderer* was not as successful as Fanny's previous novels. Fanny hoped to make £3,000 from the sales but she probably only received half of the amount. The identity of its heroine, Juliet Granville, the orphaned daughter of an earl, is not revealed until the fourth of five volumes. Juliet escapes from a forced marriage in Revolutionary France and endures many trials and deprivations. The novel tackles some of the difficult issues for women of the day and one of its free-thinking characters berates men 'who would keep us from every office, but making puddings and pies for their own precious palates!'

Fanny's father died on 14 April 1814 and her husband hurried over from France to be with her. They returned to Paris, but by March the following year Napoleon's troops were on the outskirts of Paris. To Fanny's distress, her husband prepared himself for battle, entreating her to flee from Paris. Fanny disguised herself as a friend's maid and travelled non-stop to Belgium. The battle began on 16 June and Fanny Burney's 'Waterloo Journal' gives us a vivid picture of the fear, and the uncertainty in Brussels.

Fanny and her husband, who was now in poor health, returned to England on 17 October 1815. They settled in Bath where D'Arbly became further incapacitated and succumbed to jaundice and depression. He died on 3 May 1818 and is buried in the Walcot Street cemetery in Bath. There is a fulsome inscription to him written by his wife in St. Swithin's church nearby which reflects their devoted and happy union.

Fanny retreated to London where she spent several years sorting through her father's papers and writing an anodyne version of his life in *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*. It was published in November 1832, and generally welcomed by reviewers. Her son's death from influenza in January 1837 almost broke her spirit, 'all Life's happiness is flown with my Alexander'. He was buried beside his father in Bath. Her only surviving close relative, Charlotte, her youngest sister, died in September the following year. Her niece, Charlotte Barrett, to whom Fanny left all her family papers, was present at her death on 6 January 1840. Fanny was buried beside her husband and son in Bath.

Charlotte Barrett published *The Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arbly* in seven volumes between 1842 and 1846. Fanny's reputation as a novelist in the eighteenth-century was eclipsed by the success of the diaries during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. However, in the last twenty years her novels have been re-assessed and their value as contributions to the development of the novel and feminist literature have been acknowledged.

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1 *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press 1986-94), II, p.314.

2 *The British Novelists*, Anna Letitia Barbauld, 50 vols (London: F.C. & J. Rivington, 1810) XXXVIII.