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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Frances Burney, Mme d'Arblay (1752-1840)

HANSEN Mascha



Mots-clés

Fiction

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Résumé

The many-volume publication of Frances Burney's diaries and journals situates her as one of the leading chroniclers of eighteenth-century sociability. She participated in the Sunday evening musical parties her father organized at his home in St Martin's Street. She knew London's sociable sights, frequently enjoying opera rehearsals or outings at Vauxhall and Ranelagh in the company of the leading musicians and artists of her day. Many of these experiences also found their way into her novels. Late in her career, in 1832, she wrote the now infamous biography of her father, *Memoirs of Dr Charles Burney*, which, despite its flaws, may serve as a portrait of the by then bygone days of sociable eighteenth-century life: Burney, by now the widowed Mme d'Arblay, praised the literary salons of her youth for

promoting freedom of speech, controversial ideas, and even conflict, contrasting them to what she perceived to be the flaws of early nineteenth-century society.

Best known as a novelist and chronicler of London's literary circles, Frances Burney was in fact born in King's Lynn, Norfolk, in 1752, and spent the first eight years of her life there. Some eighty years later, when compiling her *Memoirs of Dr Burney* (1832), she remembered the sociability of King's Lynn as characterized by 'inertia', lambasting the mid-eighteenth century provinces for their 'love of frippery, or feebleness of character among the females', a feebleness, she argued, which was 'bequeathed from mother to daughter in small towns at a distance from the metropolis; where there are few suspensive subjects or pursuits of interest, ambition, or literature, that can enlist either imagination or instruction into conversation'.¹ However, by the early nineteenth century, all that had long changed, Burney insisted. The Enlightenment had successfully illuminated even the most rural areas, with the help of two basic sociable tools: conversation and the press.

The tide of ignorance is turned; and not there alone, nor alone in any other small town, but in every village, every hamlet, nay every cottage in the kingdom; and though mental cultivation is as slowly gradual, and as precarious of circulation, as Genius [...] still the work of general improvement is advancing so universally, that the dark ages which are rolling away, would soon be lost even to man's joy at their extirpation, but for the retrospective and noble services of the press, through which their memory – if only to be blasted – must live forever (*Memoirs*, I, 96-97).

The necessary 'mental cultivation' had come about, she suggests here, with the help of the press, by which she understood all kinds of printed matter, though she did not dare name novels. Imagination, however, was as important as instruction: both, to her, served to enliven conversation and encouraged polite forms of sociability that reached right into the privacy of the home, whether in the provinces or the metropolis. Thanks to local book clubs and circulation libraries, literature could be harvested for self-improvement even in a cottage. Accordingly, Burney praised public libraries which enabled readers from all stations in life to, in her words, 'visit [...] the Brains of our fellow creatures' (*Memoirs*, I, 157-58). Not only could books be read everywhere, they offered untold opportunities for those willing to write them, too. Ultimately, it was by becoming authors that both Dr Charles Burney and his daughter found the doors of the literary world open wide, and fashionable London circles willing to receive them (*Memoirs*, I, 25).

For the Burneys, this was a hard-earned privilege. Dr Burney's move to King's Lynn, ostensibly due to health reasons, may have been the more necessary to hide the fact that his first daughter was born shortly before he married the mother, Esther Sleepe, who at that time, and even after their marriage, worked as a fan maker with a shop of her own in London – not

an occupation the aspiring Burney clan was later on keen to make public.² After some ten years, the family moved back to London in 1760, first to fashionable Poland Street, and then, after the death of the first Mrs Burney, into a house in St. Martin's Street, previously owned by Sir Isaac Newton and still containing the astronomer's observatory on top. Here, indeed, they were at the very centre of contemporary London's sociable circles, and Dr Burney moved in most of them:

But to enumerate the friends or acquaintances with whom he [Dr Burney] associated in the world at large, would be nearly to ransack the Court Calendar, the list of the Royal Society, of the Literary Club, of all the assemblages of eminent artists; and almost every other list that includes the celebrated or active characters, then moving, like himself, in the vortex of public existence (*Memoirs*, II, 1).

The Burneys, too, entertained on Sunday evenings, and the younger generation moreover profited from Dr Burney's vast circles of artistic acquaintances, both to catch up on their education and to visit rehearsals, exhibitions, or plays in the company of musicians, artists, and actors. The most famous international musicians of their time – such as Lucrezia Agujari, Francesco and his daughter Jenny Barsanti or Gaspare Pacchierotti – performed for free at the Burney's, discussing music and literature afterwards. On other days, the Burney daughters might be invited for a tour of his paintings by James Barry, or find David Garrick had dropped in to delight everyone with his mimicry of other famous actors on the social scene.³

Those times are brilliantly captured in the journals and letters of the young Burneys. Frances's journals during the years 1774-1784 in particular offer a rich source of contemporary salon culture.⁴ Her phenomenal memory may not always be trustworthy in every detail, but she managed to capture conversations at the Burney's home almost verbatim, or so it seems to the reader. After the publication of her first novel, *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, in 1778, Frances would perform similar feats as part of Hester and Henry Thrale's literary salon at Streatham, where she even learned Latin with Dr Samuel Johnson, if only briefly. A comedy she composed at this time, *The Witlings*, centres on the literary circles of the day, but because family and friends considered it dangerously close to a satire on the bluestocking salons, she was advised to suppress it.⁵

Both Frances's first and second novels, *Evelina* and then *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), reflect the young Burney sisters' experiences of London-based sociability: *Evelina* approaches London as a debutante from the country, getting as lost in the mazes of Vauxhall as in the unwritten rules of London's polite assemblies.⁶ The strict rules to be observed with regard to dancing partners do not allow girls even a polite negative to a partner, as *Evelina* finds to her cost, unless they are prepared not to dance at all for the rest of the evening. *Evelina* discovers the delights as well as the vicissitudes of London sociability: Vauxhall and Ranelagh impress her, but leave her in danger as she is separated from her party and accosted by prostitutes. She finds David Garrick's performance as King Lear at the Royal Drury Lane

Theatre too impressive to describe, but her enjoyment of an opera is spoiled by her ill-bred relatives, the Branghtons. These, on the other hand, introduce her to less polite sociable places in London, and are thus of value to anyone interested in the pastimes of the more affluent working people of London. In spite of all her social errors, however, Evelina is never at a loss when it comes to distinguish true politeness from mere showy insensibility, or so her author insists. Frances's own anxieties are nevertheless visible both in her rejection of the Branghtons and their ilk, and in Evelina's polite epistolary style – the first, more vivacious manuscript that delighted Frances's siblings was heavily redacted by the young author before publication.⁷

A little older, and less naive, the heroine of the second novel, Cecilia, recently orphaned, experiences London sociability in a somewhat darker mood.⁸ The novel begins with instructive conversations among her country neighbours in which the heroine barely has a speaking part: Cecilia is only ever drawn out when spoken to directly. For much of the novel, she stays with one of her guardians at fashionable Portland Place (where he would have been neighbour to the bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu), and – after enjoying the balls and masquerades there with some trepidation – she is shocked to find he cannot pay the massive debts he has run up with the tradespeople who supply the family's luxuries. Her inheritance is quickly resorted to, and the system of guardianship she is still subjected to, as well as the cruelty of old-fashioned patriarchal customs, eventually push her into near-madness.

Both of these novels tend to be classified as 'courtesy novels' (Joyce Hemlow) or 'novels of manners' (Patricia Meyer Spacks) to indicate their concern with etiquette and the language of politeness.⁹ The genre emerged during the mid-eighteenth century and is often associated with an effort of social mobility either on the part of the characters or that of their authors. A socially mobile family themselves, the Burneys were anxious about their new-found status and position in the world. Dr Burney preferred to be caricatured rather than relax his most pointed, almost deferential politeness, while Frances, as part of the second generation to be considered part of the emerging middle classes, had a horror of accepting favours. Their insecurity made them particularly alert to any changes in the rules and customs of politeness among the musical and literary circles they lived in, and the fashionable aristocratic world these interacted with, though not always on the same footing. Thus, Frances was easily offended whenever she sensed a social snub on the part of her 'superiors', particularly during the time she was caught up in the world of Queen Charlotte's Court, where she served as a Keeper of the Robes from 1786-1791.

The queen enjoyed adding intellectual members to her household (as long as they respected religion) but her circle was necessarily very limited, and life at Court anything but exciting, at least for those who could not leave it whenever they liked. Burney could not hide her own discomfort at being considered, and frequently treated, like a servant. She desperately missed the input of the lively salon culture she had enjoyed before, even if her shyness meant she figured mostly as an observant scribbler in those.¹⁰ During her time at Court, her creative genius could only pen tragedies. She stood it for five years, and then resigned, too ill to continue. Already a few months after her release, her sociable side re-emerged and she became a part of the exiled circle of French emigrants around Mme de Stael and the Comte

de Narbonne-Lara at Juniper Hall through her sister Susan, who had settled in the neighbourhood. Here Frances met her future husband, the penniless General Alexandre d'Arblay, whom she married in 1793, in spite of her family's fears for her financial security.

After the birth of their son, she wrote another novel, *Camilla, or A Picture of Youth*, published by subscription in 1796 and dealing with the repercussions of family life but also with the young heroine's monetary concerns.¹¹ *Camilla* takes readers into various sociable situations again, but also highlights the dangers of the sentimental fashion among young people. It cautions against various trends in the education especially of young girls: too much novel reading was dangerous, as it inflamed the imagination (and the passions) but too little was equally wrong, as it prevented young readers from learning about the world. The focus is on country society, this time, and there are few indications of provincial inertia – on the contrary, breakfasts, raffles, and excursions to nearby seaside resorts leave ample room for the portrayal of instructive conversations and singular characters.

In 1802, the d'Arblays went into France to try and recuperate Alexandre d'Arblay's fortunes. The trip, meant to last only a few months, was blighted by a return of hostilities between England and France, and they stayed in France for the next decade. Frances's journal-letters, though much shorter after the death of her favourite sister Susan in 1801, now cover French sociable circles to some extent, and she would maintain many friendships with French aristocrats over the next years. To preserve her son from conscription, and from having to fight against the English, Frances engineered their escape in 1812, arriving back home with the manuscript for a last novel, *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties*, in her trunk.

The first three, and best liked, of Burney's novels all focus on an *ingénue* heroine experiencing contemporary public sociability for the first time, thus giving latter-day readers a good introduction to eighteenth-century conversations, plays, masquerades, balls, and notions of fun, though tinged with a moral preference for domestic activities on the part of the narrator. Subsequent events in the life of Mme d'Arblay changed her narrative concerns, and her last novel adopted the usual heroine's outsider position with a vengeance.

The Wanderer tells the story of a nameless young woman trying to make a living for herself, and even though the – at first seemingly French – heroine turns out to be the long-lost daughter of a British upper-class family, her perspective is that of an outcast in English society, and the narrative voice adds a critical stance on the society of her time. Far from being fêted as a beautiful young heroine, 'Ellis' is continually ostracized as a penniless upstart of seemingly low social status. Even a highly successful appearance as Lady Townly in a private theatrical performance of Colley Cibber's *The Provok'd Husband* is turned to her shame by her ill-meaning and unwilling hostess (*The Wanderer*, 98, 101). The novel, thus, may be read as a description of the difficulties women of the socially mobile classes faced when trying to find appropriate work: barely any professions were open for middle-class women as yet, a problem the successful Enlightenment had not addressed at all. Unlike Burney's other works, this one was a failure, on the one hand because her language was by now old-fashioned, but on the other it is likely that readers had expected a novel about the troubles of France, not those of England.

Similarly, her last work, the above-mentioned *Memoirs of Dr. Burney*, failed to please anyone. Again, the language is difficult, and worse still, the book covers her father's life at best loosely, while her own is prominently included on almost every page. For historians of sociability, however, the book does have undeniable appeal when she describes the sociable habits of times past, including the advancement of polite letters. How cumbersome soever her language, her opinions concerning the value of political debate still resound today. Thus, she wrote about *The Literary Club*:

Dissensions through politics must necessarily be endured; nay, cannot rationally be lamented; they are the unavoidable offsprings of the most exalted exercise of the human faculties, freedom of debate; that freedom whence spring independence, justice, and liberty [...] In truth, to exclude from meetings formed for social enlargement, all who are not in all things of the same opinion, seems assembling a company to face an echo, and calling its neat repetition of whatever is uttered, conversation (*Memoirs*, III, 257-58).

Interestingly, *The Memoirs of Dr. Burney* also mention a 'job opportunity' that Burney herself declined: the political hostess Frances Crewe had suggested a literary weekly paper, to be called 'The Breakfast Table', during the bitter years of the French Revolution, which was to cover titbits of literature and 'to work at *mind* and *morals*' (*Memoirs*, III, 231-34), to be edited entirely by Frances Burney – sadly, though, Burney declined, citing her invincible shyness as a reason (III, 235). In keeping with this side of her character, Burney's last years were spent quietly in London, where she died in 1840.

1. *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, arranged from his own manuscripts, from family papers, and from personal recollections. By his daughter, Madame d'Arblay. 3 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), vol. I, p. 95-96.
 2. Amy Louise Erickson, 'Esther Sleepe, Fan-Maker, and Her Family', *Eighteenth-Century Life* (vol. 42, n° 2, 2018), p. 15-37, here p. 18-19.
 3. On the impact of the Burney Salon on the younger members of the family, see also Cassandra Ulph, 'Frances Burney's Private Professionalism', *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* (vol. 38, n° 3, 2015), p. 377-393.
 4. *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, 5 vols, eds Lars E. Troide and Steward Cooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990-2013).
 5. See e.g. Peter Sabor's introduction to Peter Sabor and Geoffrey M. Sill (eds.), *The Complete Plays of Frances Burney*, 2 vols. (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).
 6. *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World [1778]*, ed. Steward J. Cooke (New York and London: Norton, 1998).
 7. Joyce Hemlow, *The History of Fanny Burney* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 78.
 8. *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress [1782]*, eds. Peter Sabor and Margaret A. Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 9. Joyce Hemlow, 'Fanny Burney and the Courtesy Books', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (vol. 65, 1950), p. 732-61; Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
 10. See especially the first volume of *The Court Journals and Letters of Frances Burney*, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011) for her struggles to adapt to Court life (e.g. p. 8, 50-51).
 11. *Camilla, or A Picture of Youth [1796]*, eds. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
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Citer cet article

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[Letter to Samuel Crisp \(1775\)](#)