

## McGill-ASECS Fellowship Report, August 2016

Cassie Ulph, Bishop Grosseteste University, UK

I visited the Burney Centre in August 2016 to consult archival material relating to Frances Burney's *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (1832). I hoped to uncover the extent to which Burney's presentation of her father, Charles, as a musical and literary professional accorded with his own. This was a return to research I had begun as a doctoral candidate, whilst investigating Burney's construction of her own literary-professional identity in relation to the artistic culture in which she was raised, and the impact on that identity of her father's musical career. *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* is relatively neglected amongst Burney's published work, and is a text that has frequently been treated as incongruous with, or inferior to, the other texts she produced since Croker's attack in the *Quarterly Review* in 1833. Most often it is treated as evidence of Burney's desire to over-write or silence her father, and many critics have rightly noted that this supposed biography frequently strays into auto-biography. John Wagstaff in his 2004 DNB entry for Charles attributes Burney's 'frequent inaccuracies', rather more kindly, to 'an over-zealous sense of duty, to paint her father in the best possible light', something not all critics agree she achieves (or intends).<sup>1</sup> Remarkably few critics have treated *Memoirs* as a creative product in itself: amongst the few who have, Margaret Doody suggests that *Memoirs* is Burney's 'riposte' to Hester Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786), 'proving that Burney, too, can write from intimate knowledge of a great man, and thus is great herself'.<sup>2</sup> That *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* is as much about the author as its subject is, then, generally agreed. Where there is less consensus is how this strange work can be understood within the Burney family oeuvre: it relates not one but two creative careers; it is an intersection between Charles's and Frances's entwined artistic identities. For many critics, the inability to adequately distinguish between these is Burney's failing in *Memoirs*: for my project, it is their chief point of interest.

In the context of my own recent research, I have begun to understand Burney as carving out a distinct identity that is in relationship with, rather than necessarily against, her father as an artistic professional. To this end, I wished to investigate the extent to which Burney's presentation of her father is in dialogue with his own self-fashioning, how far it conformed to his intentions for his posthumous reputation, and how far it truly marked a conscious

<sup>1</sup> John Wagstaff, 'Burney, Charles (1726–1814)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2016 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4078>, accessed 9 May 2017]

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1988) p. 378.

distinction or resistance. Prior to visiting the Burney Centre, this investigation had begun with the published version of *Memoirs* itself: in order to establish the extent to which Burney's editorial strategy conformed to or differed from her father's wishes, I would need to consult Charles's unpublished correspondence, fragment memoirs, and miscellanea, of which copies are held in the Centre. By consulting copies of letters and fragments reproduced, annotated, or partially obliterated by Frances Burney, I hoped to uncover the strategies for inclusion or exclusion of Charles Burney's original material in *Memoirs*; for the same reason, I was particularly interested in Charles's correspondence relating to the last few years of his life (1810-1814) following Burney's return from France, and in the period following the death of Elizabeth Allen Burney in 1896, during which time Charles is reported to have first begun composing his own memoirs and arranging correspondence with Burney's help.<sup>3</sup> This, surely, would reveal the extent to which Charles had directed or curated his own memoirs, and how his own representation of his professional life differed from that ultimately presented by his daughter.

My initial enquiry began with the extant fragments of Charles's memoirs that remained as edited by Burney. As Miriam Benkovitz has noted (and as others have since), even the little that survived Burney's executorship is rarely included in *Memoirs*.<sup>4</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest, firstly, that Burney was editing those materials with at least some intention of including them, and secondly, that she believed, or at least hoped, that editing to conform to her father's intentions. One such document, recounting Charles's friendship with 'a Norfolk friend', shed light on Burney's priorities for such through her amendments to Charles's original text. Where Charles had written that his friend 'attached me the first time I saw him, though he only sent for me to tune his Harpsichord', Burney amends this to 'This Gentleman attached me to him the first time I saw him, though it was but professionally', eliding the inconvenient employment relationship with the euphemistic 'professionally', and formalising Charles's 'my friend' to the more respectful 'this Gentlemen'. Other references to the precise nature of Charles's profession were similarly edited out, consistent with the narrative shaped in *Memoirs* of Charles as a polite, learned 'professional' rather than a musician for hire, many of whose social acquaintances were, more often than not, also his employers. This was one of a number of examples where

---

3 Alvaro Ribeiro, 'Introduction' in *The Letters of Dr Charles Burney*, ed. by Alvaro Ribeiro, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991-), i. xxii-xxix (xxiv-xxv).

4 Miriam Benkovitz, 'Dr Burney's Memoirs', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 10:39 (1959): 257-268 (257).

Burney doctored the extant manuscripts in preparation for publication, only to omit them later.

While it is evident from these fragment memoirs that Burney made a number of tactical amendments to her father's own words, and ultimately omitted much of his original material, it remained to be seen how far this conformed to Charles's own wishes or directions. Burney claims in *Memoirs* that the little she includes of her father's poetry 'is inserted only biographically' because it is of inferior quality and, more importantly, 'not designed for the press'. I wished to investigate the extent of Charles's 'design', and interrogate this claim that Charles's poetry 'could not, in these fastidious days, be called verses'.<sup>5</sup> In my time at the Burney Centre I was able to consult not only copies of Charles's poems in his own hand, but also Barbara Hopkinson's 1979 MA Thesis, consisting of an edited selection of these. From Hopkinson's selection, and detailed editorial, Charles's use of poetry emerges as a means of reinforcing personal relationships, both private and public: he commemorates loved ones (for example on the deaths of his daughter Susan, and his second wife Elizabeth); he eulogises eminent friends (such as in his poem on the death of Sir Joshua Reynolds); and he attacks rivals, as exemplified by the gleefully derisive 'On Sir John Hawkins giving his collection of old musical books to the British Museum'. The latter poem in particular illuminated Charles's attitude to literary posterity: he criticises Hawkins for attempting to 'escape damnation' (that is, secure his reputation) through his gift like a sinner on his deathbed. Furthermore, Charles calls into question the value of that legacy:

E'en thus the Knight, in proud oblation,  
Bestows the sweepings of each stall;  
And with them, to escape damnation,  
The dust, the cobwebs, worms & all. (ll. 5-8)

Charles's satire, here, of Hawkins's indiscriminate (and characteristically for Charles, scatological) 'sweepings' left to posterity, betrays his consciousness of the trace of a life that is left by the material text. Hawkins, Charles suggests, has tried to harness this potential by attaching his name to a mass of papers, but his selection is too indiscriminate to be of value. In contrast to the dust, cobwebs and worms of Hawkins's library, Burney argues that 'None 'scape the flames – but by good works' (l. 12). The double meaning of this 'pious protestant' (l. 9) sentiment is piquant, implying that Hawkins's is unable to supply 'good works' in the

---

5 Frances Burney, *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*, 3 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), i. 90, 147.

form of his own writing: Hawkins's *History of the Science and Practice of Music* had been published almost concurrently with Charles's own work on the subject, but had been far less well-received (in part due to Charles's greater personal popularity). That only 'good works' (as opposed to bad ones) should 'scape the flames' might prove a key to Charles's own attitude to posthumous reputation: that his literary 'works' would prove his ultimate legacy, and that anything unworthy should be consigned to the bonfire. In light of this, Burney's destructive sifting of her father's works would appear less act of revenge than sacred duty, sifting out the 'dust', 'cobwebs' and 'worms' ensuring only 'good works' remained behind.

In addition to Charles's own works, and Burney's amendments to these, I was able to consult her annotations and commentary on these fragments as she sifted and shaped the narrative of her father's life over many years. In one memoir fragment, Charles describes a pocket-book recording engagements, that seems to be precisely the kind of 'stall-sweeping' that he would not wish to commit to posterity:

when these short entries were made I had not leisure for details, & now memory will not supply them [...] but sh.d these memoranda be termed my confessions, they at the worst cd only be called vain boasts of notice & favours rec'd from eminent & worthy persons; not of transactions too corrupt & depraved to be termed human frailties, or amiable weaknesses (Berg, Misc Holographs)

While this is in itself highly revealing of Charles's self-conscious eye to posterity, the fragment is also annotated overleaf by Burney, who states that it

will account for the Why & the Wherefore his chosen memorialist has held it a duty to destroy, or suppress, the numerous MS. Volumes of Memoirs which Dr. Burney had drawn up: & which probably, when he read over himself, he had seen at once in the light he has here depicted them. I have met with this wise, candid, deeply judged passage only this day, 10 Oct. 1824. It was buried, unobserved, in a mass of papers. – But I am most thankful to be thus confirmed in the right path I had already taken from conscientious tenderness to the true fame of my revered & gifted father, who, had he a little earlier commenced his memoirs would have made them one of the best & most edifying works of the present age.

Burney's course is retrospectively vindicated by this: her father's wishes 'account for' her suppressions, which he would 'probably' have approved of, and in so doing she treats the pocketbook as representative of all of her father's unpublished work, literary or otherwise. Of

course, this raises the question of who Burney is addressing in her annotation. The anxiety betrayed by her self-justification echoes the awkwardness of her attempts, in *Memoirs*, to narrate her own position as editor or ‘memorialist’. Burney apparently preserves this piece of her father’s self-conscious, self-abnegating modesty – Charles’s self-presentation, as part of his memoir – as evidence for her own rightness of conduct. This is highly suggestive of the persona that she herself wishes to establish as his editor, and her desire to justify her own literary performance as a ‘good work’. The discovery of this document ten years into her project of self-confessed destruction and suppression – and her recording of this fact – offers a further puzzle: is this a means of balancing her own claim to authority and literary judgement with the demands of biographical responsibility?

The longer I spent amongst Charles’s papers, and Burney’s interventions in them, the more complex became the picture of Burney’s relationship not just with her father’s memory, but with his own attitudes to posterity and literary reputation. Her desire to recast Charles in the image of ‘man of letters’ and obscure the nature of his professional background, as suggested by my reading of *Memoirs*, became undeniable on the examination of the original documents. However, the widely-believed picture of the resentful daughter emerging from her famous father’s shadow with an act of editorial revenge was shown to be simplistic at best, reinforcing my increasing belief that *Memoirs* is an expression of negotiated identities, rather than a straightforward exertion of control. In the short term, the research undertaken during my fellowship has allowed me to complete an article to this effect on *Memoirs* for a forthcoming special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life*, which situates this neglected text in the context of Romantic-era attitudes to biography.<sup>6</sup> In the longer term, the research I undertook at the Burney Centre has allowed me to better understand Charles’s creative life and his own attitude to musical and literary professionalism. This has provided valuable archival material for my planned monograph, which places Burney in the context of fellow creative professionals including opera singers, artists, and women writers such as Hester Piozzi and Laetitia-Matilda Hawkins. This work is concerned with the informal artistic culture that informed women’s literary professionalism, taking the Burney family as its primary network.

I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to undertake this research made possible by the generosity of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies and McGill University, and for the warmth with which I was welcomed to the Burney Centre and to

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘Authoring the “Author of my Being” in *Memoirs of Doctor Burney*’ in Sophie Coulombe (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Burney Family*, a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* (forthcoming, 2017).

Montreal. Many thanks are due for the sage advice and good company of all the staff at the Centre, and in particular to Elaine Bander, Stewart Cooke, and Megan Taylor. Megan's day-to-day assistance as all-purpose Burney Centre guru (and her excellent lunch-spot map, which I have kept for future reference) made navigating new environments, institutional and geographical, infinitely smoother. In the spirit of sociability and ephemeral creativity, I'm eternally grateful to Lorna Clark for showing me what lies beyond the city limits. Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Peter Sabor and Dr Richard Virr for their advice and support, and for welcoming me to the Centre on what I hope will be the first of many visits.