

Louise Curran
University College London

McGill-ASECS 2010 Fellowship Report

The research topic for my month-long fellowship at the Burney Centre was ‘Letters as literature: the author as correspondent in the eighteenth century’. Related to my doctoral thesis on Samuel Richardson’s correspondence, this project involved researching perspectives on eighteenth-century letter writers from Richardson to Frances Burney. The bulk of my fellowship time, therefore, was spent reading selected letters in the Burney Centre by the Richardson circle, the Burney family and their contemporaries, and biographies, eighteenth-century periodicals and reference works in the collection relevant to my research. An internationally recognized institution for the editing of eighteenth-century novels and letters, the Burney Centre, and the Rare Books and Special Collections division of McGill University Library, are a rich resource for any study of the development of the letter as a literary genre in the eighteenth century and enabled me to explore more fully this development as part of my PhD research.

A month at the Burney Centre reading a proportion of the thousands of letters held as photocopies or contained in hundreds of microfilm reels, the originals of which are scattered over many collections world-wide, enabled me to read a cross-section of letters that I would not have been able to access otherwise. The first two weeks at the centre were spent reading and taking notes on Richardson’s correspondence. I made my way through many drawers of filing cabinets containing copies of nearly all Richardson’s correspondence, which - in the absence to date of any scholarly, comprehensive edition of Richardson’s correspondence - included much unpublished material I had not read previously. A particular highlight, here, for example, was reading a series of letters exchanged between Richardson’s daughters, Anne Richardson and Martha Bridgen, during the 1780s in which they discuss the publication of their father’s letters and his literary reputation. In the latter part of my fellowship I broadened my research to include letters by writers in the Burney family’s extended circle that intersected or were connected with Richardson’s correspondence networks: these correspondents include Samuel Johnson, Hester Thrale Piozzi, David Garrick, Hester (Mulso) Chapone, Mary (Granville) Delany and the nineteenth-century collector of Richardson’s correspondence, William Upcott.

Such research into Richardson’s letters and those in the Burney collections gave me the opportunity to widen and contextualise my study of the eighteenth-century author as correspondent. I was also able to obtain information on Frances Burney as a correspondent (a novelist who also reflected upon her letters as literary productions in their own right) through reading her letters in editions in McGill’s collections, for example *The journals and letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D’Arblay)* edited by Joyce Hemlow, and works such as *A catalogue of the Burney family correspondence 1749-1878*, also by Hemlow, which were extremely useful sources to have close to hand on a day-to-day basis. Also welcome was access to related online sources, such as the Burney Collection of 17th and 18th Century Newspapers and Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO). Furthermore, the organisation of files in the Burney

Centre was much more hospitable to the kind of research I was then conducting than many of the catalogues of libraries where originals are kept.

My time at McGill, hunched over copies of letters, manuscript originals and other research resources, at my allocated office space in the McLennan Humanities and Social Sciences Library, provided me with an intriguing overview of the creative, social and commercial ambitions and achievements of Richardson and Burney and their circles. In short, a McGill-ASECS Fellowship gave me access to an unparalleled set of materials with which I was able to consider the changing habits of a whole literary culture towards the letter as a literary genre in its own right during the eighteenth century.

Additional to all this primary and secondary material, McGill University has a lively programme of seminars and events to stimulate the life of the mind. I became acquainted with the work of the 'Interacting with Print' research group, who regularly run lectures, seminars, and workshops, and attended many thought-provoking and lively presentations during my time there, including a paper on Richardson's correspondent, Lady Bradshaigh. I came away not only with a wealth of new research material but an abiding sense of the rewarding interdisciplinary nature of life both at McGill and other nearby universities, such as Concordia.

I would like to extend my thanks to all the people at McGill who helped me with my research; who introduced me to the facilities at the Burney Centre and the Rare Books and Special Collections division of McGill University Library; and who made me feel so welcome during my stay: Elaine Bander, Stewart Cooke, Katie Gemmill, Hilary Havens, Anne Marie Holland, Joanne Holland, Holly Luhnning, Sarah Skoronski, Lars Troide, and Richard Virr. Above all, my thanks go to Professor Peter Sabor. As Director of the Burney Centre, general editor of Burney's Court Journals and co-general editor of Richardson's Works and Correspondence, he was a mine of useful information on Richardson and Burney's respective letters and networks which really brought my subject to life. Finally, my thanks go to McGill University and ASECS for awarding me this fellowship.