

Abbey Address

By Paula Stepankowsky

It is with great appreciation that we thank Dean Wesley Carr, the Chapter, and the staff of Westminster Abbey, for allowing us to honour Frances Burney with this memorial in Poets' Corner on her 250th birthday.

This tribute is not something she herself would have sought, but it is right that the woman whom Virginia Woolf called "the Mother of the English Novel" should join her literary peers at last in this place that honours both faith and literature.

What is most remarkable about Frances Burney, to my mind, is her voice.

There have been times when it appeared she had been forgotten. Yet, her voice, in the form of her novels, diaries, letters and plays, would not be stilled despite the centuries that separate her life from our own. She lived a remarkable life and, what is even more remarkable, is that she WROTE IT ALL DOWN! There has never been such a chronicle of a life and, in our digitized society, there may never be again.

In taking her place in Poets' Corner, Frances Burney represents not only herself but an entire century of women novelists, poets, and playwrights. These include Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Hannah Cowley and Ann Radcliffe—all of whom changed their chosen genre in important ways. Indeed, Frances Burney is the first woman to have published in the 18th century to be honoured here.

While Frances Burney was a celebrity in her own time, the full measure of her accomplishment is only now being recognized. Her works are in print again, and, in some cases, have been published for the first time only recently.

When *Evelina* burst upon the scene in 1778, it was the *Bridget Jones Diary* of her day. With *Evelina*, she created a new genre in English literature—the comedy of manners that was so brilliantly polished by Jane Austen. Unlike the stock ingenues who preceded her, *Evelina* was a groundbreaking heroine, one who lived in contemporary London and actually learned from her mistakes. The novel captured contemporary life and manners with a vitality and wit that had not been seen before.

Burney's next two novels, *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, were also best-sellers. Jane Austen took the title of *Pride and Prejudice*, along with some plot lines, from *Cecilia*. Austen also subscribed to the first edition of *Camilla*.

Evelina was reprinted often in the 19th and 20th centuries, while *Cecilia* and *Camilla* were more difficult to find but still obtainable. It wasn't until 1991, however, that her last novel, *The Wanderer*, was reprinted for the first time since the first edition appeared in 1814. This novel, unappreciated in her time and underappreciated in ours, is a remarkable departure from anything she had written before. No one had depicted the difficulties of working class life for young women in quite this way. Its themes of social justice presaged Dickens. The novel's

dramatic denouement at Stonehenge looked forward to Thomas Hardy and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

In the 19th century, Frances Burney became known more for her lively diaries and letters than her novels. The full extent of this literary treasure is only coming to light with the publication of the complete, unexpurgated diaries begun by the late Joyce Hemlow at McGill University in Montreal. The work continues under the general editorship of Lars Troide, assisted by Stewart Cooke and Betty Rizzo, who are all here today. Peter Sabor, who co-edited Burney's *Complete Plays*, as well as *The Wanderer*, will assume the general editorship next year.

These diaries, in addition to recording the wit flashing around Samuel Johnson, have become a key resource for everything from philology to 19th-century surgical techniques. Students of history, literature, language, medicine, music and theatre all bump into Burney sooner or later.

She was an eyewitness to many important events of her time, including the trial of Warren Hastings, the Madness of King George III and the aftermath of Waterloo. At age 63, she refused to evacuate Brussels along with the other British and nursed the English wounded as they came off the battlefield.

In the pages of her diaries, her voice is so vital we are almost fooled into thinking she is just gone into another room or about to pay a call. We laugh with her as she skewers a snob. We rejoice with her at her literary success. We suffer with her over a failed romance. We celebrate with her when she marries Alexandre d'Arblay. We mourn with her as she buries her close friends and relatives—including her husband and son.

In the diaries, she assumed the persona of a shrinking Miss when it suited her, but in reality, she was a brave, smart, funny and observant woman, a brilliant writer, a loyal friend and sister, and a devoted wife and mother.

Her plays were almost entirely unknown during her lifetime and were published completely for the first time in 1995. The West End was introduced to her comic potential in 2000, when Ian Kelly, who is here today, co-produced *A Busy Day* 200 years after she wrote it.

Above me, now, is our tribute to Frances Burney, Writer, who lived a remarkable life in remarkable times. She made writing women—and women's writing—acceptable. She earned a place at the literary table, opening the door for many to follow.

She is surrounded by memorials to her literary heirs—Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, William Thackeray, and Charles Dickens, whose own work built in ways large and small upon her own.

Before today, Frances Burney's only presence in this historic place was as the author of the memorial to her father, Dr. Charles Burney, that Charles pointed out to you a moment ago.

From this day forward, she has her own place. how right, how welcome it is.