

Editor's Note: The following are the full texts of the addresses given during the window dedication ceremony in Westminster Abbey on 13 June 2002, by Burney Society President Paula Stepankowsky and family representative Charles Burney. These speeches followed some well chosen words of welcome made by the Very Reverend Dr. Wesley Carr, Dean of Westminster. He said that he was allowing particular memorialising, for a variety of reasons, at the start of the 21st century, and that, in celebrating women writers, it seemed particularly appropriate to honour Frances Burney, who was at the very forefront of the movement. There was no written text for these extempore remarks.

Some Remarks on Fanny Burney

By Charles Burney

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The hereditary principle has recently been eliminated from a Chamber not so far removed from here. Its laudable survival in the Burney Society gives me my sole claim to speak now.

The memorial we are gathered here today to dedicate is very different, of course, from that which Fanny Burney herself composed for her father, to be seen in the north choir aisle, at a cost of 35 guineas. In characteristic style, she refers to his "goodness with gaiety, talents with taste."

Fanny Burney has long been recognised in the land of her birth as a lively, industrious and talented writer, even by many with but scant acquaintance with her works. She was a whole person: whether she can be put together again after academic dissection has created a box full of jigsaw puzzle piece remains to be seen. Admittedly the very range and variety of her writings has invited such detailed and searching analyses, food for the modern thesis industry. To appreciate the true portrait, however, one must stand back. Superfluous detail will then recede into the background, or vanish.

Many will love the youthful exuberance, penetrating insights and coy reticence of the years when *Evelina* was written and finally published, and be mocked by some for their taste. Others will passionately promote her later works, in the years when courage was her dominant quality, and risk being teased for so doing. For many in this land the production of *A Busy Day* was an eye-opener, where, at the age of 48, Fanny best displayed her insights into contemporary society in 1800, with its aristocrats, City merchants and nabobs. It is perhaps almost appropriate that a writer who faced so many setbacks and disappointments in her long life should have had the delightfully successful London production of her best comedy cut short to make way for a third-rate drama.

Fanny Burney was one of a large, lively, sometimes cantankerous but for the most part united family, albeit with sundry skeletons in its cupboard. Of course her father was a dominant influence, but he cannot be blamed for all her shortcomings. That would be to diminish Fanny herself. She did not agree with his political views. Yet she had too strong a sense of humour and love of satire—not always immediately

apparent in the style of writing of her time—ever to have made a full-blown radical, as became very plain in 1793. Politically a traditionalist, she was socially ahead of her day.

How Fanny Burney saw herself is well demonstrated in a letter she wrote to Samuel Crisp in 1780, included in the most recent publication:

"I never mix Truth & Fiction: all that I relate in Journalising is *strictly*, nay *plainly*, Fact . . . the World, and especially the great World, is so filled with absurdity of various sorts,—now bursting forth in impertinence, now in pomposity, now giggling in silliness & now yawning in dullness, that there is no need for *Invention* to draw what is striking in every possible species of the ridiculous."

This is indeed a memorable occasion, for which all thanks are due to the President and Officers of the Burney Society on either side of the Atlantic, to the organisers of the conference and to the Dean and his staff in the Abbey. While I myself, as Fanny Burney's great-great-great-great-nephew, need none to tell me what a great writer she was, our debt to all those scholars, not least to the late Joyce Hemlow, who have laboured over many years to amplify, and where requisite to explain, is immeasurable. We have here a great writer: we need no icon. She stands in her own right as a figure of her own age, not of ours.

For me the memorial set up after her death in 1840 in St. Swithin's Church in Bath is not far off the mark as a brief eulogy, running thus:

Sacred to the memory of Frances d'Arblay . . .

The Friend of Johnson and Burke,

Who by her Talents has Obtained a Name

Far more Durable than Marble can Confer.

By the Public she was Admired for her Writings;

By Those who knew her Best

For her Sweet and Noble Disposition

And the Bright Example She Displayed

Of Self-Denial and Every Christian Virtue . . .

Few could wish for a finer epitaph!

We may see and indeed may style her as we wish, but we can be sure of two points: Fanny Burney was a feisty lady of great guts, and (at her best) she could be great fun. Let us enjoy her!