Recognition for a lost literary voice

With a memorial at Poets’ Corner, Fanny Burney is at last receiving the honour due to an important 18th century author

by Kate Chisholm

When the window dedicated to the memory of Frances Burney (popularly known as Fanny Burney) is unveiled late this afternoon in Westminster Abbey, her name will join those of Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontë sisters as the only women deemed worthy of inclusion in that monument to English literature. The Burney Society (which has long campaigned on her behalf) will be out in force to witness this long-overdue tribute to the writer whose diaries have given us such an extraordinarily vivid portrait of life in the 18th century.

When they were first published in the 1880s they were an immediate success and have remained popular ever since. But Burney was known to her contemporaries as a best-selling novelist.

In recent years her importance as a writer has been reassessed with a clutch of new biographies and the long-overdue premiere of her stage play 4.40 from Paddington. Both have confirmed her comic genius. One reviewer said of the play that it was "about as enjoyable as a cheese sandwich".

Fanny Burney was born exactly 250 years ago on 15 June 1752. She and backward for her age, she appeared to be less talented than her sisters, but soon revealed an astonishing gift for memorising conversations; her father once said of her: "Fanny carries birdie lines in her brain, for everything that lights they stick!"

She was given every opportunity to exercise this gift as the daughter of a musician, writer and socialite whose weekly concerts at their home in St Martin's Street (just behind the National Gallery) were attended by all the great characters of the day. Garrick, Johnson, Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Osmi (the South Sea Islander brought to England by Captain Cook).

Fanny would stay silent throughout the evening, watching and listening intently from the shadows of the candlelit music room. But later, when everyone was asleep, she would write up her journal, which she began in 1786 and addressed to "Nobody...since to Nobody can I reveal every thought, every wish of my Heart."

The journal is compelling because of Burney's ability to conjure up in just a few words what it was like to have dinner with Dr Johnson, be at Court when George III lost his reason, or, later, at a ball with Napoleon's military parades in the Tuileries. But perhaps the most extraordinary passage is her account of how she suffered a miscarriage without anaesthetic while living in Paris with her French husband, General D'Arblay.

Once rated, it will probably never be forgotten: as soon as the "dreadful steel" was "plunged into the breast", she began a scream that lasted intermittently during the whole time of the incision (17 and a half minutes) and almost marvel that it rings not in my ears still so exquisitely was the agony!

Although Burney wrote up her diaries as a record of her life and view of the world, she was always aware — and especially so after the success of her first novel that she was writing for an audience. So much so, that before her death in 1840 she went through all her papers carefully cross-checking every thing that she did not want us to know.

A novel less ordinary: the window in Westminster Abbey that will be dedicated to Burney today

ND yet — despite this self-conscious manipulation of her material — the diaries remain of importance because of Burney's knack of always being in the right place at the right time.

When she was a witness, a journalist, of all the great events of her time — whether it was in the audience at Drury Lane entertained by Garrick's performance as Richard III, or in Brussels watching from a window as the soldiers marched through the town on their way to Waterloo (Thackeray used her account of the night before the battle in his novel Vanity Fair).

Her debut novel Elvira, published in 1790, tells the story of a young girl's arrival in London from the country in search of a husband. It's a traditional tale, but Burney astonished and delighted her readers (and she still does) by creating a heroine whose observations on the foolish and often cruel foibles of fashionable society are very contemporary and sharply funny.

Her fictions — Evelina, Cecilia, Camilla and The Wanderer — are of crucial significance to the development of the novel, paving the way for Austen, Eliot and the Brontës. When the heroes of Austen's Northanger Abbey is caught reading, she returns "Oh! It is only a novel... it is only Cecilia... or in short some work in which the most though knowledge of human nature... [is] conveyed to the world in the best chosen language."

"She lived to be a Classic," said one contemporary reviewer of her life and work. Now at last we are giving her that recognition with the memorial in Poets' Corner.

Kate Chisholm is author of Fanny Burney: Her Life (Vintage). The dedication of the window in Westminster Abbey takes place today at 6pm. In celebration, a two-day conference is also being held at the Abbey and at the National Portrait Gallery, where lectures tomorrow are open to the public.

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