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# The Burney family

A few weeks before he died in December 1784, the great lexicographer and essayist Samuel Johnson wrote a short note to his friend Charles Burney which he ends by sending his respects 'to dear Doctor Burney, and all the dear Burneys little and great'.[1] Johnson, without a family himself, was intrigued by and enamoured of the Burneys, 'little and great'. By 1784, the family comprised Charles Burney, the musician and scholar, and his second wife Elizabeth, along with their combined household of six children from Charles's first marriage and the two much younger children from his second. The second Mrs Burney also had three children from her first marriage. Such a blended family of siblings, half-siblings and step-siblings was not unusual, but the Burneys appear to have been peculiarly close-knit, drawn together by the powerful personality of their father. Johnson declared of them, 'I love all of that breed whom I can be said to know, and one or two whom I hardly know I love upon credit, and love them because they love each other.'[2]

The Burneys were a talented clan of musicians, writers, scholars, geographers and artists. And their shared habit of 'journalising', recording their encounters in vivid, as-they-happened letters and diaries that were written for each other but with an awareness, too, of their potential historical significance, has ensured that they will never be forgotten. Between them, the Burneys left behind more than 10,000 items of correspondence.[3] Reading through this enormous written record is to be entertained by an everyday saga of family life that is not so very different from our own: Dr Burney is mugged, his house is burgled, and his daughters fall out with their stepmother. His younger son is expelled from Cambridge for petty theft, another is reprimanded by the Admiralty for insubordination. One daughter dies tragically after enduring for years an unhappy marriage, two stepdaughters waste themselves on unsuitable men, while a third is destined for penurious spinsterdom.

We discover that there is nothing new about vegetarian diets, share the excitement of Fanny and her sisters as they prepare for their first masquerade,

and marvel at a ballgown trimmed with grebe feathers and gold ribbon. But these quotidian concerns are transformed by the stage on which the Burneys lived out their lives. They shared a knack for being in the right place at the right time so that between them they knew many of the remarkable characters of their age. Dr Burney calls on Voltaire at his home in Ferney in Switzerland; his son James travels to the South Seas with Captain Cook; Susan befriends Pacchierotti, the leading Italian castrato of his time; Charles junior swaps Latin epigrams with William Hazlitt; and Sarah Harriet winters in Rome with the poet Walter Savage Landor and Henry Crabb Robinson, friend of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Richard, too, has his own intriguing tale, setting up a school for orphan children in Calcutta.

But it was Frances (or 'Fanny') Burney who most successfully cultivated her life-chances as one of the daughters of the sociable Dr Burney. Her novels, best-sellers in their time, are read and enjoyed now not for the elegance of her prose style or her ingenious plotting, but for the range and depth of her characters – Captain Mirvan, Elinor Joddrel, Sir Sedley Clarendel, Mr Dubster – inspired by the rich variety of her father's circle of acquaintance. When her diaries were eventually published after her death by her niece and great-niece, she earned a new wave of admirers, among them the novelist William Thackeray, who based his account of the battle of Waterloo in *Vanity Fair* on Fanny's gripping version of the events as she had witnessed them. The historian Macaulay, too, remarked on the extraordinary role which her father had played in London society in the 1770s and 1780s: 'few nobles could assemble in the most stately mansions of Grosvenor Square or Saint James's Square, a society so various and so brilliant as was sometime to be found in Dr Burney's cabin'.[4] Fanny, from an early age, flexed her skills as a writer to capture this 'brilliant' world in word-portraits that are as compelling today as when she first penned them.

She was born on 13 June 1752 in the Norfolk river port of King's Lynn, the third child and second daughter of Charles Burney and his first wife Esther. Charles was the parish organist, supplementing his income by giving private lessons on the harpsichord to the sons and daughters of the local gentry. But life in a provincial town was too limiting for a man of his ambition and talent. 'It Shames me to think How little I knew my self, when I fancy'd I should be Happy in this Place', he told Esther. 'O God! I find it impossible I should ever be so … Nothing but the Hope of acquiring an independent Fortune in a Short Space of Time will keep me Here.'[5]

He was one of thirteen children to survive (seven, or perhaps as many as nine, of his siblings died in infancy, including his twin sister Susanna), and for most of his childhood he was sent away from home to board at school while his father struggled to make a living as a portrait painter and dancing master

of no fixed address. Charles Burney was determined to live a very different kind of life. He taught himself French and Italian, wrote letters to Dr Johnson and other leading scholars, and cultivated friendships with the 'ton', those with inherited wealth and genteel status. Ill health had forced him to leave London, where he had hoped to establish himself as a professional musician, and to retreat to the less polluted air of King's Lynn, but by September 1760 he was back in the capital with his young and growing family. In addition to his first child Esther, born rather shockingly before her parents were married (just one of many Burney family secrets that remained hidden for generations),[6] there were also James, Frances, Susan and Charles (two earlier babies named after their father had died in infancy). Charlotte, the youngest of Charles's six children with his first wife, arrived in November 1761.

They were a boisterous, playful and imaginative family, living first in Poland Street in the heart of the bustling West End, then in quieter Queen Square, in a large and elegant house that from its windows looked across fields to the hilltop villages of Hampstead and Highgate. Esther (also known as 'Hetty') excelled on the harpsichord, and by the age of ten was performing in front of a paying audience. Susan, too, had a fine ear for music and an ability to sing as if she were Italian-born (the Italians were then regarded as the finest musicians in London). Their father inspired in all of them a love of books; even James, who was more of a mathematician than a reader and who was sent away to sea at the age of ten, spent his boyhood pennies at the bookstall in the market on 'a pennyworth of *Roderick Random*' (at least if his proud father is to be believed).[7] Dr Burney had always been careful to nurture his contacts with playwrights, composers and actors (he was named after his godfather Charles Fleetwood, a leading theatre manager); in 1750 he had worked with David Garrick, the most prominent and charismatic actor–manager of his day, on a 'pantomime' version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He encouraged his children in their love of dressing up and play-acting, leading to the infamous occasion of 'Fanny and the Wig'.

Next door to the Burney home in Poland Street lived a wig-maker, or perruquier, also with young children, who often joined the Burneys in their amateur dramatics. On one occasion, talked about for years afterwards, they found some old wigs, which added greatly to their make-believe until one of them fell off and into a tub of rainwater. Only Fanny, aged ten, was prepared to challenge the irate wig-maker by declaring, 'What signifies talking so much about an accident. The wig is wet, to be sure; and the wig was a good wig, to be sure; but it's of no use to speak of it any more; because what's done cannot be undone.'[8] 'The wig is wet' became a standing joke in the family, a kind of secret code between them, while wigs often feature in Fanny's fictions, almost as a personal signature.

Dr Burney was preoccupied during these years with his flourishing career, giving as many as fifty-seven lessons a week, dashing from house to house in his private coach. The increasing wealth and leisure time of the burgeoning middle class from the 1760s onwards meant 'there was hardly a private family ... without its flute, its fiddle, its harpsichord, or guitar',[9] and Dr Burney was a remarkably successful tutor. He had devised his own technique of striking the keys of the harpsichord, which gave his performances, and those of his pupils, a distinctive quality.

His musical ability gave him the opportunity to better himself, becoming as socially mobile as if he had been born rich and well connected. But it was his determined self-education and energetic self-promotion, whether it be writing a history of the comets that had been seen in Britain or publishing an account of his travels in France and Italy or compiling his five-volume *General History of Music*, which ensured that in June 1769 he was awarded a doctorate of music by Oxford University and later was invited to join the most prestigious of all social and intellectual circles – Dr Johnson's Literary Club.

By October 1774 he had moved his family to an even more convenient and fashionable address in St Martin's Street, just around the corner from Leicester Fields, where Sir Joshua Reynolds lived, and conveniently close to the Opera House and the theatres on the Haymarket and Drury Lane. London in these years was at the heart of musical life, not just in England but also in Europe, singers from the Continent finding work in the theatres and assembly rooms of the West End and also at the pleasure gardens of Ranelagh, Marylebone and Vauxhall. The success of his book *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (published in 1771) meant that Dr Burney was well known throughout this musical community, and his home became a popular rendezvous, especially on Sunday evenings when he organised informal concerts in his 'music room', starring the latest operatic sensations to have arrived in the capital. Dr Burney and his guests were lampooned by the caricaturist Charles Loraine Smith in his *A Sunday Concert, 1782*, depicting an evening in June when the guests included the tall, gangly castrato Pacchierotti and the statuesque Lady Mary Duncan.

At first there was nothing to suggest that Fanny would become the most renowned of all the Burneys. On the contrary, it was Hetty who inherited her father's abilities on the harpsichord, while Susan could astonish her father by repeating a musical air after hearing it just once. Fanny had little or no musical talent, and was teased by her boisterous brothers for not being able to read until she was eight. She was the quiet and retiring middle child who allowed her siblings to shine rather than competing with them for attention and praise. 'I ... was so peculiarly backward', she wrote later to

Hetty, 'that even our Susan [who was three years younger than Fanny] stood before me. She could read when I knew not my Letters' (*JL* XI, 286).

Fanny, however, had two key weapons at her disposal: her 'gnat-like eyes' – as Virginia Woolf so memorably depicted them in her essay on the Burney family[10] – and her acutely tuned memory. Fanny was short-sighted, and without spectacles saw everything through a myopic blur. She taught herself instead to catch the nuances or quirks of behaviour that betray a person's true character. She was by nature highly-strung: 'What a slight piece of machinery is the terrestrial part of thee, our Fannikin!' wrote her father's friend, Samuel Crisp, who became a kind of adopted uncle to the Burney children. 'A mere nothing; a blast, a vapour disorders the spring of thy watch' (*ED* I, lxxxii). But all the time she was quietly absorbing every detail of the conversation as it ebbed and flowed, storing it up before retreating to her room to write down as much as she could remember. In this way she trained her mind to recall an entire evening of dialogue with such accuracy that reading her letters and diaries is to be there with her in the room, listening to Dr Johnson, laughing with David Garrick, marvelling at the exploits of the explorer James Bruce or the scandalous character of Count Aleksei Orlov, who had arrived in England from the court of Catherine the Great, tainted by his involvement in the plot to murder the Tsar.

Fanny discovered in writing down 'my opinion of people when I first see them, & *how* I alter, or *how* confirm myself in it' (*EJL* I, 14) that she had a talent for word-spinning and character assassination, and that this was an effective outlet for her stifled emotions. The Burney household had become a complicated family unit, and Fanny, as a hypersensitive teenager, needed a secret vice. (Letter-writing was approved of, but private journals and fictions were not deemed suitable for young women of imagination but without an inheritance, who might otherwise become distracted from the task in hand: to find a socially acceptable and wealthy husband.) 'Our way of life is prodigiously altered', wrote Fanny in 1773, 'our Family is now very large' (*EJL* I, 315).

Her much-beloved mother had died shortly after the birth of Charlotte, leaving Charles with six children, the eldest of whom was only thirteen and the youngest just ten months. James was already away at sea, but the other five were left at home with a father who was for a time so upset by the loss of his wife that he was unable to carry on teaching. After several months of this inertia, he decided to travel to Paris, taking Hetty and Susan with him so that he could arrange for them to be educated on the Continent. Concerned for their future (without the prospect of a marriage dowry), he wanted to ensure that they acquired a proper French accent, 'to enable them to shift for themselves, as *I* had done'.[11] Fanny stayed behind with just Charles and

baby Charlotte for company. We do not know why Susan (rather than her elder sister Fanny) accompanied Hetty, but can only assume that Dr Burney thought she would benefit more from the experience than Fanny. Unlike her sisters, Fanny never received any formal schooling, but instead taught herself French and Italian (just as her father had done) and kept firmly to a timetable of her own devising – her 'Lessons of Conduct and Sentiment' – which included 'Religion', 'Duty', 'Sincerity', 'Charity', 'Self-denial' and 'Delicacy'.

By 1767 Dr Burney had married again, a wealthy widow whom he had known in King's Lynn called Elizabeth Allen. The second Mrs Burney brought with her three children, and then had two more children: Richard (or 'Dick'), born in 1768, and Sarah Harriet, born in 1772. There was a 20-year age difference between Sarah Harriet and Fanny, creating a generation gap between the siblings, let alone between parent and child. As Virginia Woolf suggested in her essay on the Burneys, they became 'a mixed composite, oddly assorted family'.

Fanny was fifteen when her father remarried and she never really accepted the intrusion of the second Mrs Burney, nor did her siblings. In her memoir of her father, written when she was in her seventies, the elderly Madame d'Arblay (as Fanny became after marrying the French chevalier, Alexandre d'Arblay) describes her stepmother as having 'wit at will' and 'spirits the most vivacious and entertaining'. But she adds 'from a passionate fondness for reading, she had collected stores of knowledge which she was always able, and "nothing loath" to display' (*Memoirs*, I, 97). It's that 'nothing loath' (alluding to a line in Milton's *Paradise Lost*) which is so telling. Fanny could still conjure up many years later the antagonism that she had felt as a teenager towards her stepmother. In her novels, the heroines always have to grow up without a maternal influence, and are often thwarted by a repressive or misguided older woman.

Dr Burney, admirably, was aware that mixing up the two families could produce tensions: 'It was my wish & hope that our children would not be in each other's way, & that the children of my former marriage would be loved and regarded by my new partner as her own, being myself perfectly disposed & resolved to treat Mrs Allen's children with the same care and tenderness as my own.'[12] For some years the new Mrs Burney kept on her own home in King's Lynn and divided her time, and her children, between London and Norfolk, in an attempt to defuse the difficulties. But the Burney girls were always suspicious of their stepmother, who, in turn, resented their devotion to their father and did not approve of them spending hours hidden away in their rooms, writing page after page of 'secret thoughts'.

Fanny's diary, significantly, begins on 27 March 1768, six months after the marriage, by which time Mrs Burney was already pregnant with Richard

(born in November). 'To Nobody', she says, she will write down, 'my *every* thought, must open my whole Heart!' It reads as though written by a conflicted teenager who is looking for a way to define her character, make her mark, set herself up against her 'nearest Relations'. 'The love, the esteem I entertain for Nobody, No-body's self has not power to destroy', she writes on that first day. 'From Nobody I have nothing to fear ... When the affair is doubtful, Nobody will not look towards the side least favourable' (*EJL* I, 1–2).

There's nothing unusual in this teenage desire for self-expression, or the fact that Fanny satisfied it by painstakingly recording 'my wonderful, surprising & interesting adventures' (*EJL* I, 2) in self-conscious imitation of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.[13] (Her half-sister Sarah Harriet later severely criticised 'the tautology and vanity' of these early diaries.) But Fanny transforms her self-absorption into something much more discerning; she trains herself to write as a reporter, not a self-therapist. Her letters from Streatham Park, the home of Henry and Hester Thrale, which form part of that early journal, were fuelled by her egotistical excitement about the enthusiastic reception of her literary début, *Evelina*. But they also give us new insights into the character of the Thrales' other house guest, Dr Johnson.

Through Fanny's sharply drawn scenes, we see Johnson at play, writing silly verses with Hester Thrale, teasing, bantering, telling off the ladies for not dressing up more fashionably. There was, she writes, 'more *fun*, & comical humour, & Laughable & ... nonsense about him, than almost any body I ever saw' (*EJL* III, 255–6). Many years later when Boswell came to write his biography of Johnson, he begged Fanny to give him some of these insights into the 'Gay Sam', the 'Agreeable Sam', the private man whom she had known at Streatham. She refused, and it was not until her diaries were published after her death in 1840 that this aspect of Johnson's personality was brought fully into public view, amplifying and reinforcing the impression that Hester Thrale had already given in 1786 when her *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* first appeared.

Fanny became 'a Character-monger', as Dr Johnson teased her. 'I am more pleased with Pacchierotti than ever', she writes on 4 December 1778 of the Italian castrato whose eagerly awaited first performance in London had taken place just six days earlier.

> He seems to be perfectly amiable, gentle & *good*: his Countenance is extremely benevolent; & his manners, infinitely interesting. We are all become very good friends, & talked *English*, *French & Italian* by *commodious* starts, just as phrases occurred: – an excellent device for *appearing* a good linguist.
>
> (*EJL* III, 184)

But she was not the only Burney to write a diary. Susan had begun her own habit of daily 'journalising' long before Fanny, when she was sent away with Hetty to France after the death of their mother. Charlotte, too, was an amusing letter-writer, with her own inimitable style. The Burney household had become a virtual factory of words, with Dr Burney writing up his travel journals and preparing his history of music while his daughters worked as his team of secretaries, copying out material and preparing his manuscripts for the printer. At night, in the seclusion of their bedrooms, they kept their own diaries, sketched their own plays, or wrote novels. 'The Family of the Burneys are a very surprizing Set of People', declared Hester Thrale. 'Their Esteem & fondness for the Dr seems to inspire them all with a Desire not to disgrace him; & so every individual of it must write and read & be literary'.[14]

Susan's diaries from the late 1770s, still largely unpublished, are a unique record of the musical life of the capital at that time, giving details and insights not observed by Fanny, or by anyone else. Through her father, she knew all the great singers of the day and made obsessively detailed notes on operas that were brought from Italy, performed on just a few occasions and never afterwards published. 'Every line of the Opera [*Rinaldo*]', she told Fanny, 'is beautifully set by Sacchini, and Pacchierotti, not only in his airs, but in every word of the Recitative delighted me. So much sense, so much *sensibility*.'[15] (The score of *Rinaldo* has since disappeared, as have many of Antonio Sacchini's other works, despite his popularity at that time.)

While Fanny caught the essence of the singer's personality, Susan tells us more about his musicality:

> I never heard him so *well* in voice or in better Spirits . . . He played all sorts of tricks with his voice running up & down as high or low as he could – I knew his compass to be such that he could sing *Tenor* songs but I did not before *suspect* he could vie with Agujari & Danzi [two well-known sopranos] to their *alt-itudes* – will you believe me when I assure you, & with great truth, that in one of his runs he ran fairly up to the highest F of the Harpsichord.[16]

Charlotte was cheekier than her sisters, and more daring in her opinions. Her account of the Gordon Riots that erupted in late June 1780 after the attempt to push a Bill through Parliament restoring to Catholics their rights to attend Oxford and Cambridge and to hold public office is as vivid and historically important as anything written by her elder sister. Fanny was away in Bath and, for once in her life, was not on the spot to witness a dramatic event. It was up to Charlotte and Susan to file reports to Fanny of the fear generated by the rioters (at one point they thought their house was about to be invaded by the mob) and the extent of the violence. On Monday, 12 June, three days after the rioting was over, Charlotte wrote to Fanny,

> I hardly know what to tell you that won't be stale News . . . however thank heaven every body says now, that Mr Thrales House & Brewery [in Southwark and in danger because Mr Thrale as an MP had voted in favour of the Bill] are as safe as we can wish them – There was a Brewer in Turnstile that had his home *Gutted* & Burnt, because the mob said 'he was a Catholic *papish*, & sold *popish* Beer!' Did you ever hear of such Diabolical ruffians?

She continues in typical Burney vein,

> It sounds almost incredible, but they say on Wednesday night, last, when the mob were more powerful, more numerous, & more diabolical & outrageous than ever, there was never the less a number of exceeding genteel people at Ranelaugh, tho' they knew not, but their houses might be o'fire at the time! – God bless you, my dear Fanny! – for heavens sake keep up your spirits – you see there is no occasion to be *Molloncholy* about *us*! (*EJL* IV, 185–7)

The three sisters wrote with the same vivid observation, but yet express themselves quite differently. Susan in her account of the riots of 5 and 6 June not only describes, but also dissects the evidence:

> One thing was remarkable, & convinced me that the Mob was secretly directed by Somebody among themselves – they brought an *Engine* with them, & while they pull'd [Justice] Hyde's House to pieces & threw everything they found in it into the Flames, they order'd the Engine to play on the neighbouring Houses, to prevent them catching fire – a precaution which it seems has been taken in every place that these Lawless Rioters have thought fit to attack. (*EJL* IV, 548)

The sisters spurred each other on, covering page after page with densely written, sometimes heavily crossed, accounts of their everyday lives – an attempt to capture their experiences, but also to keep in touch with each other, so close were the bonds that had been formed between them. Pacchierotti once said of Fanny and Susan that it was as if there was 'but one Soul – but one Mind between you – You are two in one' (*ED* I, lxxiv).

Until she married (in January 1782), Susan was also Fanny's most astute critic. 'There is no wading through such stuff by oneself', Fanny confessed to her after allowing her second novel *Cecilia* to be published without a final read-through (Susan was by this time living in Ipswich with her new husband) (9 July 1782). It is highly possible that the sprightly pace of *Evelina* was achieved by Fanny only because of Susan's constant presence at home, reading through Fanny's drafts as she wrote them and suggesting revisions, curbing her sister's tendency to over-write and lose the plot. Fanny, however, had the greater talent and ambition as a writer, with the ability to flesh out the essence of a person in just a few words. She describes to Susan,

for example, an afternoon tea party in Bath. 'Mrs Montagu and my Mrs Thrale both flashed away admirably' (*EJL* IV, 38) – a beautifully concise exposition of the tension that she had sensed between the rival Bluestockings. (Mrs Montagu was married to one of the richest men in England and was the hostess of a glittering salon, which Hester Thrale struggled to equal.)

The Burney children prospered by their wits and by their mutual support and rivalry, all of them seeking to impress and please their father. That they achieved so much, rising to the topmost ranks of London society, was remarkable, but would somehow be less interesting if they had not also had their imperfections and personal tragedies. James, for instance, the eldest son, from being a captain's servant on an insignificant man-o'-war rose through the ranks to become a lieutenant on board the *Adventure*, one of two ships that sailed to the South Seas under Captain Cook. He later published an account of his travels, and also a complete history of the voyages of exploration in five volumes, complete with charts drawn by him from his own mathematical calculations.[17] He taught himself to speak Otaheitian fluently so that he could communicate with the islanders and, in particular, with the soon-to-be celebrated Omai, who travelled back to Britain with them on the *Adventure* and stayed for two years. Omai was given breeches and a wig to wear as if he were an English lord and taken up by 'society'; the Burneys drew him into their family circle, entertaining him at home. But James's naval career was punctuated by incidents of insubordination, when he refused to carry out orders or became involved in conflicts with his superiors. As a result, he was for many years 'rested' without a ship to command and was forced to remain reluctantly land-bound on half pay.

His younger brother Charles was the clever, bookish son, and won a scholarship to the prominent public school, Charterhouse (his father would never have been able to afford the fees), and then to Cambridge. But Charles threw away the opportunity in an act of criminal stupidity, stealing books from the university library. And not just a few books: ninety-one volumes are known to have gone missing in just a few weeks after Charles's arrival at the university. Nor did he just steal the books; he also removed the title pages, and cut out the catalogue marks with a pair of scissors. When his room was searched after the losses had been discovered – Charles, as the only undergraduate allowed to use the library, was the chief suspect – only thirty-five volumes were recovered; the rest had been sent by Charles to London where it is presumed he had intended to sell them. The volumes were all rare editions of the classics, Tacitus, Ovid, Seneca and Virgil, some from the early sixteenth century. Their loss was deemed so serious that it was still being discussed in Cambridge many years later (a pamphlet published in 1808 listed all the books that had gone missing).[18]