

Report on Burney Society UK Conference ‘Locating the Burneys: from the Margins to the Mainstream’

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By Montana Davies- Shuck

Due to the kind support of the Bishop Grosseteste University Post-Graduate Bursary I was able to attend this year’s conference of the Burney Society UK, hosted at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln. Organised by Cassie Ulph and the wider Committee, the conference was a two-day exploration of the Burney family and their wider networks. The atmosphere while serious and scholarly, was also fun, engaging and friendly. Prior to the conference dinner, the committee organised a quiz, inviting us to branch out of our own individual interests and discover about the wider scope of the Burney family.

The theme of this year’s conference was margins and mainstreams, as the society invited scholars to think more widely about the role of the Burney family both within academic study and in the public imagination. The excellent range of papers addressed this concept in a number of ways, with discussion centring on our understanding of Frances Burney as simultaneously a canonical and yet a periphery author. This dichotomy was particularly drawn out in the keynote by Lorna Clark, titled ‘Progress of a Heroine: From the Margins to the Mainstream with Frances Burney’, where she traced the growing popularity and scholarly attention paid to Frances Burney. The discussion after the keynote revolved around the issue of defining “mainstream” and acknowledged that while Frances Burney had entered the mainstream of scholarly attention, she was still little-known outside of academia – remaining on the margins and in the shadow of authors such as Jane Austen. But in considering margins and mainstreams, the discussion also tapped into the wider Burney family, with questions addressing the tendency to focus on Frances, the author, at the expense of the rest of, what I learned to be, a very diversely talented family.

The second keynote, by Gillian Dow, was titled ‘Des riens, sans consequence, et sans interet: Some Things of Interest in Frances Burney’s French Journals’. Moving away from the traditional attention paid to Frances Burney’s literary works, Dow offered a thought-provoking look into the author’s French Journals. Focusing particularly on the theme of language, Dow explored the tensions surrounding dual-language speaking and writing, providing interesting insights into Frances Burney’s struggles and frustrations with navigating her own education within the French language. Coming back to Frances Burney’s last and least well-known literary work, *The Wanderer*, Dow brought together Burney’s journals with her literary endeavours to explore the ways in which Burney’s own understanding and struggles with language shaped her novels.

The concluding round table saw Gillian Dow, Katherine Fennelly, Claudia Capancioni, and Miriam Al Jamil discuss ‘Living memory? The challenge of heritage without a house’. All the speakers provided interesting thoughts on how we could move beyond academic circles to bring the Burney family to a wider audience. In particular they considered the ways in which not having a country house which can specifically be identified as the ‘Burney’s’ family home posed problems in relation to ensuring the legacy of the family in the public imagination. Discussion considered the popularity of country houses and the attached significance of a physical location as a means of introducing the wider public to historically

successful families such as the Burney's. On balance, however, the speakers also addressed how this lack of a fixed location could be helpful. Not being tied to one specific location, it was suggested, offered opportunities to be creative with projects and reach a wider audience. For example, Katherine Fennelly proposed using community-based projects as a means of introducing the public to the Burney family. She suggested that by going directly into communities and linking that specific location to the Burney's history you could generate a connection between past and present which would encourage a public interest in the family and their works. Speakers also thought more broadly about the issue of popular appeal and bringing the Burney family to the attention of the public. The discussion returned to Frances Burney as a figure whose work is accessible and something which can be used to introduce the public to the family's wide-ranging talent. One suggestion was that rather than distancing Frances Burney from Austen, we should make use of the connection as a means of introducing a wider audience to her work.

The rest of the programme comprised of a range of papers, covering everything from the representation of marriage in Burney's novels, the importance of naming and names, the paintings of Edward Burney, the wider literary influence and cultural capital of Frances Burney's work, the significance of the dressing room, as well as a paper which used material culture to locate and support a reading of Frances Burney's attendance at the Trial of Warren Hastings. While the papers and contributions were diverse in scope, the discussion did also address the tendency to focus specially on Frances Burney, despite the conference aim to draw together work on the Burney family more broadly.

Encouraging attendees to consider the larger cultural importance of the Burney family, the conference generated lots of positive discussion about the future study of the family. Attended both by scholars and members of the public, the conference reflected the aims of the society to encourage the study of the Burney family both within and without of academia. While recognising the challenges the society and its supporters face in bringing the work of the Burney's to the attention of a broader spectrum of the public, the conference ended with a note of optimism that positive steps are being taken to enable the works of the Burney family to move beyond the academy and into the mainstream.