

## Chair Report on Panel C 'Important Women' by Miriam Al Jamil

### Paper 6 Karin Fernald, "'Clinging to the Edge of Life's Precipice": Mrs. Piozzi and God'

Karin Fernald began her paper by quoting Hester Piozzi's encounter with a seller of 'Wild Beasts' on Westminster Bridge, when she asks him his opinion about the supposed common origin of all dog and wolf species. Assuming God knew best about how to order the world was increasingly questioned but Piozzi remained true to this belief.

Fernald discussed Piozzi's religious beliefs using a wealth of evidence and anecdotes from diaries and journals written by Piozzi and her contemporaries. She introduced theories about the age of the world, held by such as geologist James Hutton who challenged Biblical doctrine on this. Twice Frances Burney recorded conversations on the subject with a Mr. Bryant and with Revd. De Guiffardiere or 'Mr. Turbulent' whom she found intimidating. Fernald suggested Piozzi would have more confidently engaged in an argument as a fervent and lifelong Anglican. Piozzi expressed her belief that we will appear at the Resurrection as we were when known on earth, that animals have souls, that Paradise would be a place of wonder and pleasure but that the end of the world was in sight, understandable in view of the dire results of the wars with France. Throughout her life, her learning, reading and love of languages gave her much needed strength and relief from her many tribulations, especially as she aged, but she always maintained a sense of humour that sustained her to the end.

Presented with wit and insight, Fernald's talk was a delight to hear, and much appreciated by her audience.

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### Paper 7 Karin Fernald on Hester Davenport and their collaborations

Karin shared with us her fond memories of Hester Davenport who followed Kate Chisholm as our Society chair in 2010, until her death in 2013 of ovarian cancer, although she had been active in Society affairs long before that. The talk was accompanied by pictures which gave us an insight into the many sides of Hester's life.

Hester taught English Literature at East Berkshire College. Her early interest in Frances Burney was sparked by her research for her books, *Writers in Windsor* (1995) and *Faithful Handmaid: Fanny Burney at the Court of George III* (2000). This also led to her book on the actress, poet and novelist Mary Robinson, *The Prince's Mistress: Perdita Robinson* (2006). Fernald had many memories of Hester's artistic skills and interests, and her antiquarian discoveries such as a rare print of an Edward Francisco Burney illustration for *Evelina* which she donated to Chawton Library.

We heard about Hester's research to verify Frances Burney's account of her dangerous adventure on the beach in Ilfracombe when she was trapped at high tide. Hester was also a keen student actor and director at UCL and presented lively readings with Fernald at several Burney conferences. The paper was a warm tribute to Hester as a woman, scholar and friend who will always be remembered by the Burney Society with affection.