

## The Arts

# 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

**W**HEN the window dedicated to the memory of Frances (popularly known as Fanny) Burney is unveiled late this afternoon in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, her name will join 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 1840s they were an immediate success and have remained so 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 *A Busy Day*, in the West End, which confirmed her comic genius. One reviewer said of the play that it "was about as politically correct as *All G*".

Fanny Burney was born exactly 250 years ago on 13 June 1752. Shy 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 birdlime in her brains, for everything that lights there sticks."

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, Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Omai (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, while everyone was asleep, she would write up her journal, which she began in 1768 and addressed "To Nobody ... since to Nobody can I reveal every thought, every wish of my Heart".

The journals are 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, a guest at one of Napoleon's military parades in the Tuileries. But perhaps the most extraordinary passage is her account of how she suffered a mastectomy without anaesthetic while living in Paris with her French husband, General d'Arblay.

Once read, it can 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



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

of the incision (17 and a half minutes) & I almost marvel that it rings not in my Ears still! so excruciating 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 crossing out everything that she did not want us to know.

**A**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. She was a witness, a journalist, of all the great events of her time — whether it was the audience at Drury Lane enthralled 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, *Evelina*, published in 1779, 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 subversive 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 heroine of Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is caught reading, she retorts "Oh! It is only a novel! ... It is only Cecilia ... or in short some work in which the most thorough 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 (020 7306 0055; www.npg.org.uk)



Lady of letters: Fanny Burney's portrait, painted by Edward Francis Burney, in the National Portrait Gallery

**'In Brussels, Fanny was 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*'**

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