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## A CENTURY OF FEMALE NOVELISTS.

BY EMILY J. MACKINTOSH.



MADAME D'ARBLAY.

**M** HERE had been a dinner-party at the house of a well-known literary celebrity, and after we had adjourned to the drawing-room, the talk turned on female novelists. Our host was famous as a collector of fine books and of engravings, especially engravings bearing on literature. It is he who owns the incomparable Froissart, with nearly a thousand illustrations, most of them illuminations from his own pencil.

"Have you ever seen," he said, "the likenesses of the more famous female novelists? I have them all here."

As he spoke, he led the way to a large standing-rack, containing a bulky portfolio, and began to take out portrait after portrait, commenting on each in turn.

"Here," he said, "is Fanny Burney, painted after she became Madame D'Arblay. She may

be held to be the pioneer of the female novelists of the modern school. She was born a century and a quarter ago. No fiction, from a woman's pen, except 'Jane Eyre,' has ever had the immediate and distinguished success of her 'Evelina.' All London raved about it, from Johnson and Mrs. Thrale on the one hand, to Mrs. Delany and the royal family on the other. Its popularity was increased by the story, which got about, that it was the work of a girl in her teens. But this was not correct. Miss Burney was twenty-eight when she wrote it. Moreover, she had been accustomed all her life to seeing and hearing, at her father's *conversaciones*—for he was a leader in the musical world of that day—the brightest and most intellectual people of the metropolis, and some even of the highest fashion. The novel was, therefore, not such a miraculous performance, after all. It is, moreover, only a novel of manners, and not of character; and consequently, critically speaking, ranks in the second class, though, let us admit, at the head of that class."

He threw the engraving aside, and taking up another, said:

"Madame D'Arblay was only a sort of introduction. But we come, now, to what properly belongs to this century. This is Anna Maria Porter, one of the celebrated Porter sisters. She was a great pet with Sir Walter Scott, who, perhaps, overrated her ability. She was born in 1781, just one hundred and two years ago. Her best works were the 'Hungarian Brothers' and 'Don Sebastian,' both now almost entirely forgotten. She was quite handsome, as you see, and a little theatrical in manner, as most women in society at her time were. Her elder sister, Jane, had much more talent: strictly speaking, neither of them had genius. The latter was born in 1776, and survived until 1850. Any person, now, past middle age, might easily have known her. The most popular of her books were



MISS ANNA MARIA PORTER.

'Thaddeus of Warsaw' and 'The Scottish Chiefs.' The first was translated into almost every Continental language, and was exceptionally popular, because its theme, I suppose, was Poland. In compliment to her, she was elected a lady canoness of the Teutonic order of St. Joachim, and often, after that, wore the garb in which you see her in this engraving—the uniform, so to speak, of that order."

"People think her works are no more read," said a publisher, who was present; "but I know for a fact that 'Thaddeus of Warsaw' still keeps its hold on the public. Thousands of copies of it are sold annually."

"I am not surprised," answered our host. "It is intensely romantic and emotional, and such fictions will be read by the people at large as long as human nature is human nature."

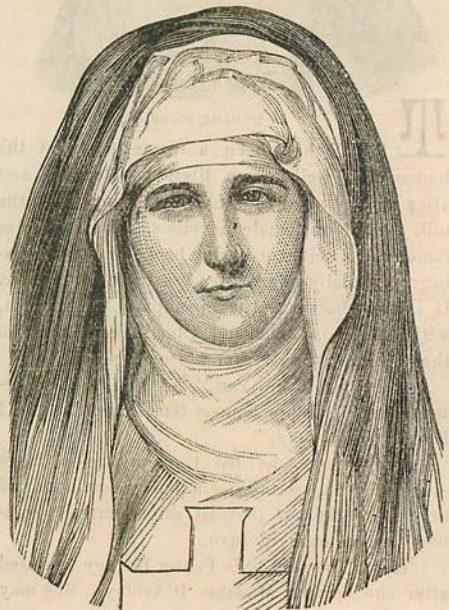
"Yes, and 'The Scottish Chiefs,' whose hero is Wallace, and which appeals to the same universal sentiment," said the publisher, "continues also to sell."

"Have you ever thought," our entertainer remarked, after a pause, "that the emotional character of those novels was due, in a large degree, to the tempestuous passions of the French Revolution? That event stirred the human heart to its profoundest depths. Everybody, in England as well as on the Continent, became emotional. People cried openly at the theatres;

even George, Prince of Wales, when quite fifty, did it. If a well-bred Englishman, now, was seen in tears in such a public place, he would think his manhood disgraced forever. Orators, even in Parliament, were passionate rather than logical. Compare Sheridan or Erskine with Gladstone, for example, or even with D'Israeli. You find this emotional character in everything. It culminated in Byron, who, in this particular, was the type of his times."

"You are correct," said a well-known critic. "Certainly, things had not been so a generation earlier, nor are they so now. There is nothing especially emotional in Miss Burney's novels, nor, as a rule, in the literature of her generation: in fact, the reverse is the case. It was rather, like our own, a critical, even skeptical age."

"Here is Mrs. Inchbald," said our host, taking up another print. "She was born in 1753. Her portrait, like that of Miss Anna Maria Porter, has a touch of the theatrical about it. Such was the fashion of the age, as I have hinted. But it was personally characteristic of her. She was very beautiful: tall and slender, with hazel eyes, and luxuriant hair of a golden-aurum tint. When only sixteen years old, she ran away from home, and went to London, intend-



MISS JANE PORTER.



MRS. INCHBALD.

ing to become an actress. At nineteen, she married Mr. Inchbald, an actor, and appeared, with him, as Cordelia, at Bristol. She acted afterwards with the Kembles. But her success in this line was never great. In 1791, her 'Simple Story,' a tale of real pathos, the best of her many works, appeared. She died in 1821. She was quite ignorant, that is, for a person of her pretensions. Some of her writings, too, show a want of refinement; but her pathos was irresistible; and she may be said to have had real genius. She is now almost entirely forgotten, however: nobody, hardly, in this day, reads even the 'Simple Story.'

"But who is this?" I said, taking up an engraving. "You have got a baby, cap and all, mixed in with your female novelists."

"No, that is Jane Austen, the best novelist, in her line, that English literature can show. Sir Walter Scott once said, you remember: 'I can do the big bow-wow,' and added, 'but Miss Austen has a delicacy of touch I don't pretend to rival.' That picture shows how absurd the fashion of dress is sometimes. Such a cap would not now be worn by any grown-up woman, without convulsions of laughter from everyone seeing it. Miss Austen was born in 1775, only a few years more than a century ago, and died in 1817. She lived a quiet, uneventful life, principally spent in Bath and Southampton. Her father was a clergyman.

Her novels are perfect types of English rural life among the upper middle class, in the first decade of this century; and from that point of view have almost a historical significance; while, as realistic pictures, they rank, in literature, as Gerard Dow, Teniers, and the best of the Flemish school rank, in art."

"Only they are more refined."

"Yes, they are purity itself, morally considered."

"And intellectually?"

"As works of art, unrivaled, I think. There is nothing of its kind in the language better than 'Pride and Prejudice'; and I doubt if there ever will be."



MISS JANE AUSTEN.

"Ah, here is Mrs. Opie," I said. "I remember, in childhood, reading her 'Simple Tales.' She married Opie, the artist, who succeeded, if I recollect, Fuseli, as professor of painting at the Royal Academy."

"Yes! She is remembered for that, more even than for her writings. Her style is careless and incorrect; but she knew, like Mrs. Inchbald, how to appeal to the heart. You see, all through this age, it was the emotional quality, as I have already said, that came to the front. In person, Mrs. Opie was more noticeable than in mind: her face was bright and animated; she had beautiful auburn hair; and her figure was especially elegant. She survived until 1853."

"Who is this?"

"Ah, now we begin to touch on a different epoch: the transition, so to speak, between the

Past and Present. That is Mrs. Gore. Nobody reads her novels now; but even so late as thirty years ago, they were popular: and they have a certain kind of merit, after all. She was born in 1799, and married Capt. Charles Arthur Gore, a man of good family, and an officer in the Life-Guards. That tells, to a certain extent, the whole story. Living in the fashionable world, her novels are devoted, almost exclusively, to fashionable life. Her first story appeared in 1823, her last one just twenty years after. Her novels, apart from any literary merit, have a value as pictures of life in England, among the gentry, in the second quarter of this century. She knew that class thoroughly. No novelist ever exceeded her in her desire to paint things as they were. Once, having to describe a steeple-chase, she not only asked information of a gentleman about to ride in one, but walked over the whole course with him."

"The emotional age had died out, by her time," I remarked. "That, at least, is what you mean, I suppose, by saying she lived in a transition age, between the Present and the Past."

"Yes! The day when passion reigned supreme had gone. The French Revolution had



MRS. O'FLAHERTY.



MRS. CHARLES GORE.

burnt itself out. The day of cold analysis, however, had not yet quite set in. Meantime, here is a portrait of the most beautiful authoress of them all; one of the most lovely women, indeed, of her time: the Honorable Mrs. Norton. I would have shown it to you before that of Mrs. Gore, if you had not been too quick for me; for she belonged, almost wholly, to the emotional school. Yet she was much younger than Mrs. Gore, not having been born until 1808."

"Poor thing! What an unhappy life was hers."

"Yes, in part; but not at the close. She was born, apparently, with every advantage; for she was a granddaughter of Sheridan, and inherited his genius; and she had both personal and intellectual gifts. What a family of girls that was! A sister is now Duchess of Seymour, and was 'Queen of Beauty' at the famous Eglintoun tournament; and another was Mrs. Blackwood, author of 'I'm Sittin' on the Stille, Mary,' and mother of Lord Dufferin. Mrs. Norton wrote 'Stuart of Dunleath,' and various other novels and tales, most of them now quite forgotten. Some of her poetry, however, is still read."

"It is better, I think, than that of Mrs. Hemans, her cotemporary," I said. "It has, at least, more force. Her poem, 'The Undying One,' if I remember, was pronounced by the Quarterly Review to be worthy of Lord Byron.



THE HON. MRS. NORTON.

Perhaps that is rather exaggerated praise; but a journal so high in character would not have committed itself to anything really absurd; and therefore there must be some truth in the comparison."

"She may be called a cotemporary of us all, for she lived to 1877. Hence, though in the character of her mind she belongs to the earlier years of the century—that is, to the emotional age—yet, in other respects, she may be ranked with our own day. And this brings us to Mrs. Gaskell, who is more of the Present than of the Past, though still, to a very great degree, emotional."

"She looks almost like a nun."

"She was anything but a nun, in some respects; for she was the wife of a Unitarian clergyman. Yet she had quite the chaste, severe character of the typical nun. She was born in 1810, and may be said to stand for a generic class, to which Dinah Mulock, and, to a certain extent, Mrs. Oliphant, belong. I select her, because I think her the best, though not the most voluminous; and because, being dead, one can speak of her impartially. Her 'Cranford' and 'Ruth,' to say nothing of 'Mary Barton,' are very remarkable."

"Ah! here is Charlotte Brontë, the greatest genius of all," I said.

"Yes! No novel, written by a woman, ever produced the immediate and wide-spread sensa-

tion that 'Jane Eyre' did. It had a greater popularity than 'Evelina' even. It founded a school, in fact. For nearly a generation, the favorite type of hero, in all novels written by women, was somewhat of the Rochester type. I am not sure but that Charlotte Brontë, in point of real genius, was quite equal to George Eliot, though she had not the same wide culture, and did not live to become so consummate an artist. She was born in 1816, and died in 1853. Mrs. Gaskell's biography has made her life familiar to everyone."

"This, I suppose, is George Eliot. It certainly is ugly enough."

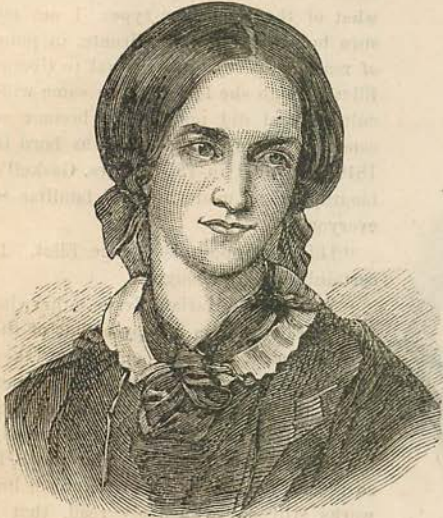
"Yes, that is Marian Evans, otherwise George Eliot. It is a copy of one of the two portraits: the only ones ever taken of her. The artist has softened, somewhat, the exaggerated outlines of her nose—a feature, by the bye, singularly like that of Savanarola's. Her death is so recent, her career so well known, her works still so extensively read, that I need not speak further of her. Only note, before we close the portfolio, the

distance we have traversed, not only in years, but in the change in taste, since Anna Maria Porter. A century ago, novels were either dramatic or emotional; and the best of them both. Now, they are analytical and logical. Then we had 'Thaddeus of Warsaw' and the 'Children of the Abbey'; now we have 'Daniel Deronda' and



MRS. GASKELL.

'Vanity Fair.' The earlier ones had not the genius of George Eliot; but neither had they the hopeless views of life we find in 'Middlemarch.' I sometimes wonder if we have, on the whole,



CHARLOTTE BRONTË.

improved. If culture leads only to despair, in what, I pray you, have we gained?"

"I see Miss Edgeworth, Hannah More, Mrs. Trollope, Miss Jewsbury, Lady Morgan, and Miss Mitford here. What of them?"

"Well, they were hardly typical; in the sense, at least, in which I have been discussing this question. Hannah More represents, however, the religious element in fiction; Miss Edgeworth the didactic and matter-of-fact school; the others, other qualities. Then there was a very good writer, partly of the romantic school: Mrs. Marsh, whose 'Admiral's Daughter,' thirty years ago, made quite a sensation, and deservedly, I think. I have tried to take a broad view, you see. I have endeavored to trace the progress of novel-writing, in the hands of women, from the emotional school, through that of fashionable life,

down to the severely intellectual one of the present day. The Misses Porter, Mrs. Gore, and George Eliot stand for the three exponents of these several schools."

"It is something of a new idea to me," I said. "But it seems plausible."

"Of course, in this hurried talk, I have not been able to discuss the question so thoroughly as I could have done, if there had been more leisure. But I think you will realize, the longer you reflect about it, that literature, fiction especially, is very greatly affected by the age. Scott's novels could not have been written in the days of Queen Anne, nor could they be written now. A Thackeray would have been quite out of place, would have been impossible, during the era that brought forth a Byron. So Miss Porter, Mrs. Gore, and George Eliot could not have done what they did, except just when they did."



GEORGE ELIOT.

With these words, he closed the portfolio, and we went to the piano, where a great artist was about to perform.

## SAVING HANDS.

BY GEORGE WEATHERBY.

WHEN men need help, can we pass coldly by?  
When, with despairing hearts, the mourners weep,  
Dare we, unmoved, sink tranquilly to sleep?  
Have we no ears to hear the widow's sigh—  
The wife's lament—the hopeless bitter cry  
That reaches us across the troubled deep,  
When the fierce waves their awful harvest reap,

And one by one brave hearts sink down and die?  
Has Pity lost her old-time loving touch?  
Does Charity but seek herself to please?  
Nay, God be praised, kind hearts will ever be  
To whom Christ's words are spoken: "Inasmuch  
As ye have done it unto one of these,  
Ye have most truly done it unto Me."