

Mary Brunton (1778-1718)
by Ruth Facer

Few readers today have heard of Mary Brunton. Although labelled ‘the forgotten Scottish novelist’ by Mary McKerrow in the title of her recent biography,[1] her work has not been entirely unknown. In her own time, in the words of her husband, Alexander Brunton, who wrote a full and touching *Memoir* of his wife, ‘they [her novels] rose very fast into celebrity, and their popularity seems to have as quickly sunk away.’[2] Contemporary criticism of Brunton’s fiction included some gentle ironic comments by Jane Austen in her letters, while her religious didacticism clearly appealed to early Victorian readers who were able to enjoy several further editions of her fiction between 1837 and 1852. Her first novel, *Self-Control*, was translated into French in 1829. In recent years her writing has been resurrected both in Britain and in the States. Her three works of fiction, *Self-Control* (1811), *Discipline* (1814), and *Emmeline with some other pieces*, (1819) were published in paperback in the late twentieth century, and are currently available on an internet website.[3]

The daughter of an army officer, Colonel Thomas Balfour of Elwick, and Frances Ligonier, sister of the second earl of Ligonier, Mary Brunton came from an upper class Scottish family. She was born on 1 November 1778 on Burray, Orkney. Her education was limited; according to her husband’s *Memoir*, her father had little leisure to teach her and her mother was more trained to ‘the accomplishments which adorn court, than to those which are useful in domestic life.’[4] However, her mother did teach her music, Italian and French, although when Mary was 16, ‘the charge of her father’s household devolved upon her’,[5] lasting for nearly four years. Life could be hard on Orkney and she could have had little time for leisure or self-improvement.

Mary Balfour was soon to meet the Rev. Alexander Brunton, a Church of Scotland minister, with whom she fell lastingly in love. Unfortunately, her mother had other ideas for the future of her daughter which did not include marriage to the son of a shoemaker. Therefore in 1798 she planned to send her to London to live with her godmother, Viscountess Wentworth. When Mary refused to go, she was sent to the island of Gairsay to stay with the family of Sir William Craigie, M.P., in order to get her away from her lover. Happily for Mary, but to the fury of her mother, this plan did not work. The story goes that Alexander Brunton rowed over from the mainland in a fishing boat, spirited Mary away to get married.[6]

The Bruntons’ marriage seems to have been a very happy one with close bonds of companionship and mutual interest. When they left their first house in Bolton, near Haddington in Scotland, to move to Edinburgh in the autumn of 1803, Mary Brunton did not want to leave a home which she loved. However, she put her husband, or Mr. B., as she called him, first - ‘I think I can reconcile myself to anything that gives him pleasure.’[7] A picture of fireside cosiness emerges from the *Memoir*; the couple studied philosophy and literature together and ‘in the evening, I was in the habit of reading aloud to her, books chiefly of criticism and Belles Lettres.’[8] Not everything was shared, and when Brunton started to write her first novel in 1809, she did not tell her husband at first.

Once he had been let into the secret, he would sit and listen to what she had written during the day, giving useful criticism and praise. According to Mr. B, his wife was not very good at maths and had a dislike of letter writing, although judging from the number of letters included in the *Memoir*, she was quite prolific.

When the couple lived in Bolton, Mr. B. wrote of his wife that the fine scenery near the Manse 'helped to form the habit of observing the varieties and beauties of nature which afterwards became so marked a feature of her mind.'^[9] Mary Brunton loved hills and wrote to her mother in 1809 when visiting Harrogate, 'A scene without a hill seems to me to be about as interesting as a face without a nose!'^[10] The couple enjoyed travelling and made three journeys to England and Wales, in 1809, 1812, and 1815 which Mary recorded in her journal. According to her husband, 'The Journal was written in the most hurried and desultory manner, often noted down in the parlour of an inn at night after a fatiguing journey.'^[11] Her descriptive powers in this work are not exceptional and do not rise to the heights of some of her fellow novelists such as Anne Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith, but they are pleasantly written and evoke a good picture of the scene. In 1810 she wrote to her friend Mrs. Craigie, describing Fountains Abbey:

The roof is gone. The noble pillars, of more than Corinthian lightness, which once supported it, still spread here and there into broken arches, twisted with ivy; which clothes, but does not conceal their forms. Large trees, rising from the dismantled court, mingle their giant arms with the towers.

The most prevalent trait of Mary Brunton's character was a deep religious devotion which flows through her novels in an insistent, though not overpowering way. She taught the catechism to two East Indian wards who lived with the family, prompting her husband to write, 'Both in her own mind and in the mind of her pupils, she was anxious to make religion an *active* principle, to carry its influence habitually into life [...] Her religion was not a religion of gloom. It shed brightness and peace around her. It gladdened the heart which it purified and exalted.'^[12]

Another characteristic of this well-balanced Scots woman was the humour which emerged occasionally in her novels as well as in her letters. In a letter, dated November 1813, to Joanna Baillie, the Scottish poet and novelist to whom *Self-Control* was dedicated, she is able to laugh at her fellow countrymen:

In general, nothing is more ridiculous than a Highlander's description of his maladies. It is such a mixture of shrewdness, confidence, and total ignorance; it is so absurdly minute, and yet so loaded with apologies to the delicacy of the listener, that I have many a time been obliged to laugh, at the expense of being thought a monster of insensibility.^[13]

Occasionally humour surfaced in her fiction and like Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, she was ironically amused by attitudes to certain novels of her time:

Miss Dawkins, by this time more than half-suspected her companion of being a Methodist. 'You have such strict notions,' said she, 'that I see Tom Jones would never have done for you.' 'No,' said Captain Montreville, 'Sir Charles Grandison would have suited Laura infinitely better.' 'Oh no, papa,' said Laura, laughing; 'if two such formal personages as Sir Charles and I had met, I am afraid we should never have had the honour of each other's acquaintance.' Then of all the gentlemen who are mentioned in novels,' said Miss Julia, 'tell me who is your favourite? - Is it Lord Orville, or Delville, or Valancourt, or Edward, or Mortimer, or Peregrine Pickle, or' - and she ran on till she was quite out of breath, repeating what sounded like a page of the catalogue of a circulating library.[14]

After twenty years of marriage, Mary Brunton finally became pregnant when she was nearly 40. It seems that this was not a happy time for her, and she was convinced that she would not survive the birth. Although she was calm and resigned, her belief in her forthcoming demise led her to make elaborate preparations for her death. Her husband wrote in his *Memoir*,

The clothes in which she was laid in the grave had been selected by herself; she herself had chosen and labelled some tokens of remembrance for her more intimate friends; and the intimations of her death were sent round from a list in her own hand-writing.[15]

Sadly, Brunton's prophecy came true and in the words of her husband, 'Her anticipations, however, had been only too well-founded. After giving birth to a still-born son, on the 7th of December, and recovering, for a few days, with a rapidity beyond the hopes of her medical friends, she was attacked with fever. It advanced with fatal violence, till it closed her earthly life on the morning of Saturday, December 19, 1818.'[16] Her friend Anne Grant, the letter writer and poet, also wrote a moving account of Mary Brunton's final illness and death, and paid the following tribute to her: 'One consolation I have, which does not seem to be taken into account by others; it is looking back on the peculiar and very superior degree of happiness which she enjoyed here, resulting from a clear conscience, and a life spent in the active and unwearied exercise of beneficence, - a cordial and vital piety that was too much a part of herself to be worn outwardly in the way of display; a vigorous and powerful mind, above disguise or littleness of any kind; a constant, unvaried cheerfulness, not the result of mere animal spirits, but of true wisdom and content; an excellent husband, loving and beloved, and sufficiency for her modest wishes.'[17] Alexander Brunton was to have many years of widowhood before him. He had already embarked on an academic career, having been appointed Professor of Oriental Languages at Edinburgh University in 1813, and publishing his *Outlines of Persian Grammar* in 1822. He was made Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1823 and died in Perthshire in 1854 aged 82.

Mary Brunton's legacy to the world of literary fiction was very small, - two full-length novels, *Self-Control* and *Discipline*, followed by *Emmeline*, an unfinished novella, published posthumously in 1819. She insisted that her prime reason for writing was to promote religion but that is only part of the story. Underlying her two main works there is

also a pulsating sexuality in the form of predatory romantic anti-heroes, from whom her heroines must, although initially reluctantly, escape. Both experience destitution struggling to survive as women on their own and enter the dark night of the soul, but rise from the depths of despair through a growing religious strength. Through their own abilities and mental strength they emerge finally from their trials as morally strong women who, having learnt self-reliance and some economic independence, have kept themselves from starvation. At the end of the day, it is goodness backed by a deep religious faith that matters, but the heroines have to travel a rocky road before they attain moral self-improvement, together with a social awareness, and can prove themselves worthy of the men they really love. There is a feminist element in both these novels in that women can survive and can become independent yet still maintain their sensibility. Mary Brunton's novels were an antidote to some of the romantic ideas perpetrated by fiction writers at the time, offering a different model to the young ladies who read them.

Brunton's first novel, *Self-Control*, concerns a young woman, Laura Montreville. In her dedication to Joanna Baillie, she indicated the essence of the work:

In the character of Laura Montreville the religious principle is exhibited as rejecting the bribes of ambition; bestowing fortitude in want and sorrow; as restraining just displeasure; overcoming constitutional timidity; conquering misplaced affection; and triumphing over the fear of death and of disgrace.

At the beginning of the novel, Laura is pursued by Colonel Hargrave, a libertine, who passionately and dramatically asserts his undying affection. Unbeknown to her father, Laura agrees to marry Hargrave on condition that he reforms within two years. In the meantime, she has met Montague de Courcy, a man she only gradually comes to love. When her father is declared bankrupt, the starving Laura is forced to sell her mediocre paintings to keep them both, but is unaware that it is de Courcy who is helping her by buying them. In her own efforts to market them, Laura risks both scorn and possible assault by going out into the street while trying to sell them; she has earned a right to financial independence through hard work. Her father dies and poor Laura has nowhere to go except to an aunt, Lady Pelham, who plots with Hargrave and does all she can to give him access to her vulnerable and unprotected niece. Minor characters are well portrayed in detail in both Brunton's novels; we can hear the termagant Lady Pelham as she commands Laura to visit a house where she knows Hargrave will be:

‘But I say you shall go, Miss,’ cried she in a scream that mingled the fierceness of anger with the insolence of command. ‘Yes I say you shall go; we shall see whether I am always to truckle to a baby-faced chit, a creature that might have died in a workhouse but for my charity.’[18]

After more trials, Laura is finally abducted to Canada by Hargrave's minions, escaping from their Indian guards in a canoe. As she plunges over the rapids, she thoughtfully ties herself to the boat with her cloak, survives, is rescued, and lands up in Scotland where she goes to the house of Mrs. Douglas, her great friend and substitute mother.

Miraculously de Courcy appears, Hargrave commits suicide, and Laura ends up happily married with five children.

Although the success of the novel exceeded its author's expectations, selling 240 copies in Edinburgh in the first five days, followed by publication in London, she herself was not altogether happy with it. She wrote to her great friend, Mrs. Izett, 19 April 1811, saying that the story was disjointed, lacked unity and 'that no virtuous woman could continue to love a man who makes such a debut as Hargrave'. She went on to write that the American incident did not harmonise with the sober colouring of the rest: 'We have all heard of a "peacock with a fiery tail;" but my American jaunt is this same monstrous appendage tacked to a poor little grey linnet.' [19] Jane Austen, too, found Laura's adventures on the other side of the Atlantic absurd, mentioning the novel three times in her letters. In a letter to Anna Lefroy, 24 November 1814, Austen threatened to write 'a close Imitation of "Self-control" as soon as I can; - I will improve upon it; - my Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way & never stop; till she reaches Gravesend'. [20]

Mary Brunton's second novel, *Discipline*, 1814, concerns Ellen Percy, a very spoilt motherless rich girl with little thought for other people. She is her own worst enemy, and usually knows it. Her faults have already been pointed out by Mr. Maitland, a Mr. Knightly figure and friend of her father, who loves her, but deems her unworthy to marry him:

'I perceived... that your habits and inclinations were such as must be fatal to a very plan of domestic comfort; and at four-and-thirty a man begins to foresee, that, after the raptures of the lover are past, the husband has a long life before him in which he must either share his joys and his sorrows with a friend, or exact the submission of an inferior To be a restraint upon your pleasure is what I could not endure; yet otherwise they must have interfered with every pursuit of my life - nay, every hour have shocked my perceptions of right and wrong...No! Ellen, the wife of a Christian must be more than the toy of his leisure; - she must be his fellow-labourer, his fellow-worshipper.' [21]

Influenced by her flighty friend Juliet Arnold, Ellen succumbs to the charms of a libertine, Lord Frederick de Burgh, who nearly abducts her to Gretna Green. Her fortunes change when her father blows his brains out, leaving her almost destitute. Now her self-realisation begins, described by Brunton in graphic and touching language:

But I had lived without God in my prosperity, and my sorrow was without consolation. In the sunshine of my day I had refused the guiding cloud; and the pillar of fire was withdrawn from my darkness. I had forgotten Him who filleth heaven and earth, - and the heavens and the earth were become one dreary blank to me. The tumult of feeling, indeed, unavoidably subsided; but it was into a calm, - frozen, stern, and cheerless as the long night-calm of a polar sea.' [22]

In an effort to support herself, Ellen goes to Edinburgh where she is persecuted by the abominable Mrs. Boswell in whose family she is a governess, and thrown into a lunatic asylum where her dark journey of the soul continues. Finally through religion her self-realisation dawns:

In a few days I learnt more of myself than nineteen years had before taught me; for the light which gleamed upon me as it were from another world, was of power to shew all things in their true form and colour. I saw the insidious nature, the gigantic strength, the universal despotism of my bosom sin...It had embittered the cup of misfortune, poisoned the wounds of treachery, and dashed from me the cordial of human sympathy.[23]

At last Ellen's sufferings come to an end. Rescued from abject poverty by her new-found friend, Charlotte Graham, she is taken to Castle Eredine, the home of the head of the Graham clan. In one of Brunton's sudden unlikely twists of plot, Maitland, alias Henry Graham, the laird, and brother of Charlotte, appears. He reaffirms his love and Ellen has now become the kind of person he envisaged marrying. She has achieved her earthly reward through sufferings and purgation combined with a deep self-awareness and a Christian fortitude.

Towards the end of her life, Mary Brunton had planned a series of short narratives under the title of *Domestic Tales*, but they were never to be written. Her last unfinished work was *Emmeline* (1819), which was published posthumously in its incomplete state. A dark, unhappy novella of 100 pages, the intention of the work was, in Brunton's own words, 'to shew, how little chance there is of happiness when the divorced wife marries her seducer.' Or we might turn to the prefix of the first chapter:

'Shame hath spoil'd the sweet world's taste, That it yields nought but bitterness.'
Shakespeare [24]

The piece begins with the marriage of Emmeline, a divorced wife, and her lover Sir Sidney de Clifford, 'a soldier high in fame,--a gentleman who, in person, manners, and accomplishments, was rivalled by few--a lover, who adored her with all the energies of a powerful mind.' [25] The wedding is a miserable, friendless ceremony, in the middle of which Emmeline bursts into tears. She has been banned by her new husband's family and cut off from her children: 'Her's were the deadly pangs of remorse--not that life-giving sorrow, which finds, even in its own anguish, a healing balm.' [26] Her ex-husband Devereux sends her money, but money is destructive, infuriates Sir Sidney de Clifford, and is no substitute for the friendship and acceptance that Emmeline craves. The last we hear of de Clifford's emotion, at the end of the completed section, is that he is 'like the deep flood of lava, firm, dark, and cold to the beholder, while devouring fires are yet glowing in its heart.' [27] It is not therefore surprising that the outline for the rest of the work, which Brunton left, sends de Clifford riding off to return to his military career, leaving Emmeline entirely alone, bereft of friends, scorned by relatives, and ignored by neighbours. There is little to commend *Emmeline* to readers today. The piece is static and

slow moving, the theme is moral but bitter, and the heroine is left without even the comfort of religion.

Despite her shortcomings as a didactic novelist - her plots are too long, certain incidents are improbable - Mary Brunton still deserves to be read. Hers are no sugary Romantic heroines, but moral, thoughtful women who despite their sex, strive hard to maintain economic independence. Although not overtly a feminist, Brunton does, in her gentle way, promote the right of women to maintain themselves and to forge their own destinies according to what they think is right.

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3 www.labrocca.com/marybrunton

4 *Memoir*, p. vii

5 *Ibid*, p. viii

6 McKerrow, p. 58. Not surprisingly, this is not noted in the *Memoir*

7 *Memoir*, p. xiv

8 *Ibid*, p. ix

9 *Ibid*, p. xi

10 *Ibid*, p. xxii

11 *Ibid* p. xxiv

12 *Ibid*, p. xiii

13 *Ibid*, p. lxiii

14 *Self-Control*, Vol. II, p. 135-6 (Page numbers are taken from the 2nd edition)

15 *Memoir*, p. xcix

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17 Grant, Anne, *Memoir and correspondence of Mrs. Grant of Laggan* (London, 1844), Vol. II, p. 221

18 *Self Control*, Vol. III, p. 20

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21 *Discipline*, Vol. II, p. 42

22 *Ibid*, Vol. II, p. 113-14

23 *Ibid*, Vol. III, p. 77

24 *Emmeline*, p. 3

25 *Ibid*, pp. 3-4

26 *Ibid*, p. 17

27 *Ibid*, p. 97