

Charlotte (Ramsay) Lennox (c.1729-1804)
by Ruth Facer

British or American? The answer to this question depends on whose work you read, as the facts of Lennox's early life are far from clear. Some scholars in the United States have claimed Charlotte Ramsay Lennox as their own, labelling her 'the first American novelist'. [1] Miriam Rossiter Small, who wrote a biography of the writer in 1935, suggested that she was born in New York in 1720. Duncan Isles, whose articles in the *TLS* and *Harvard Library Bulletin* in the 1960s and 1970s did so much to promote studies of Lennox's work, tentatively narrowed down the birthdate to 1729-1730. [2] In her introduction to the 1989 World's Classics edition of Lennox's *Female Quixote* (1752), Margaret Anne Doody builds on Isles' work, suggesting that Charlotte Ramsay was born some time between 1720 and 1730, and that her birthplace, was not New York, but Gibraltar, where her father was a lieutenant in the British army. [3] If Small is to be believed, Lennox probably spent part of her childhood in a fort in Albany, an outpost on the Hudson river frequently visited by Indians, where her father was a relatively junior officer. Other sources assert, and Lennox herself suggested, that he was Lieutenant-Governor of New York. Whatever the truth of her early upbringing, Charlotte Lennox used the excitement of her American experiences and the daunting Atlantic crossing to good effect in her novels, notably *The Life of Harriot Stuart* (1750) and *Euphemia* (1790).

The next phase of her life is also a little unclear. It seems that either at the age of fifteen, or in 1735, Charlotte Ramsay was sent to England to further her education. Here she lived with an aunt, who either died or turned out to be insane. Little financial provision had been made for the young girl, but she was fortunate in that she was patronised by two aristocratic ladies, Lady Isabella Finch and the Countess of Rockingham, who gave her an entrée into circles she would never otherwise have been introduced to.

In 1747 Charlotte Ramsay married Alexander Lennox, a Scot who worked for the printer William Strahan. Through her husband's work, Lennox may have been given useful contacts, including an introduction to Dr. Johnson. Sadly, though, the marriage appears to have been unhappy almost from the start. It was to end in separation; the couple appear to have split up in the early 1790s. They had two children, a daughter born in 1765 and a son in 1771. Despite her prolific writing, Charlotte Lennox seems to have had little money both during the marriage and after the separation. By 1793 she was living with Frances Reynolds, sister of Sir Joshua Reynolds. In the last decade of her life, she made a number of appeals to the Royal Literary Fund for financial aid, and the Fund subsidized her regularly, including thirteen guineas in 1793 to help her send her son to America, twenty pounds in 1802 to alleviate 'urgent distress', and a weekly allowance of one guinea established in 1803. She died in penury in Westminster on 4 January 1804.

Money being always short, there was plenty of incentive for Charlotte Lennox to live by her wits and her writing. Before her marriage, she took to the stage, but her brief appearance as an actress was not well received. Horace Walpole wrote to George Montagu on 3 September 1748, 'I have just come from a play at Richmond where I found

the Duchess of Argyll etc. [...] and a Miss Charlotte Ramsay, a poetess and a deplorable actress'.[4] Lennox did not persevere with her acting career, but continued to write. She soon became a known and respected literary figure, applauded by Johnson and aided by Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Johnson famously wrote of Lennox: ' I dined yesterday at Mrs Garrick's with Mrs Carter, Miss Hannah More, and Miss Fanny Burney. Three such women are not to be found; I know not where to find a fourth, except Mrs Lennox, who is superior to them all'.[5]

A prolific and varied writer, Lennox was to become a playwright, translator, poet, magazine editor, and an acclaimed novelist. One of her best-known poems is *The Art of Coquetry* (1747) but not everyone appreciated the work. The scholar Elizabeth Carter scathingly wrote, 'It is intolerably provoking to see people who really appear to have a genius, apply it to such idle unprofitable purposes'.[6] Her first attempts at playwriting received a similarly mixed response. David Garrick, manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, refused to stage Lennox's pastoral drama, *Philander* (1757). *The Sister* (1769), a sentimental comedy, was withdrawn after one performance at Covent Garden, which appears to have been attended by troublemakers: '...part of the audience shewed great marks of disapprobation, which interrupted the piece for some time; it went on, notwithstanding great opposition, until the beginning of the fifth act, when the noise was so great that the actors were unable to proceed in their parts'.[7] When the play was later printed it enjoyed greater success and ran to a second edition. Fortunately, Lennox did have one theatrical triumph. *Old City Manners* (1775), adapted from *Eastward Hoe* (1605), by Chapman, Jonson and Marston had a run of six nights at Drury Lane. *The London Chronicle* (9 November 1775) reported:

This alteration from the Eastward Hoe of Ben Jonson, Chapman, etc. is said to be the work of Mrs. Lenox, a lady well known as a favourite attendant in the train of the muses, and considering the grounds she had to work upon she has much improved it.

The play is vigorous and full of action as characters depart for the Indies and are shipwrecked, while others find themselves in and out of prison. At the end of the play, one Francis Quicksilver, all for fashion and folly, repents in sackcloth and ashes.

In addition to writing frothy comedies, Lennox turned her hand to more scholarly writing, translating works from Italian and French. Probably encouraged by Johnson, and helped by John Boyle, Earl of Cork and Orrery, she wrote the first comparative study of Shakespeare's source material, entitled *Shakespear Illustrated* (1753-54). The stories and historical accounts on which the plays were based were translated from Italian, Danish, Latin and French, and reprinted with commentary. Lennox was, perhaps, over critical of the Bard and reviews of the work were mixed. The *Gentleman's Magazine* (1804) accused her, for example, of intending 'to prove that Shakespeare has generally spoilt every story on which his plays are founded, by torturing them into low contrivances, absurd intrigues, and improbable incidents'.

Ever versatile, another of Charlotte Lennox's ventures was to edit *The Lady's Museum* (1760-1), a periodical that ran for eleven issues. The magazine included her serial fiction, 'The History of Harriot and Sophia', later to be published as the novel *Sophia* (1762), as well as articles on such varied subjects as the trial of the Maid of Orleans, the Vestal Virgins of Rome, Oriental tales, several numbers of a 'Treatise on the Education of Daughters', poems, and articles on geography and natural history. Although she republished material written by other writers of the day, Lennox wrote the lion's share of *The Ladies Museum*. Its articles evidence a wide range of knowledge on topics ranging from 'The natural History of the Swallow Tail'd Butterfly, and its Ichneumon' to the islands of Amboyna (one of the Moluccas) the customs of its inhabitants and 'the strange fruits and extraordinary marvels which are to be found in that country'. The magazine is not without humour, however, and its poems include 'A Poetical Epistle from Busy, the Lap-Dog in London, to Snowball, the Buck-hound, in Windsor Forest'.

Today Lennox's careers as poet, dramatist, translator and editor have been eclipsed by her reputation as one of the most celebrated novelists of her time. Her first novel, *The Life of Harriot Stuart* is, on the surface, an amatory romp, in which the heroine undertakes a series of escapes at breakneck speed. On her journey from America to London, Harriot travels across land and sea, by coach, carriage and ship. She is beautiful and sparkling but self-centred. She enjoys the attentions of men, yet is fearful of their predations and has to battle for her honour. Her most dangerous skirmish is with a determined sea captain who chases her round his cabin in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. In order to escape, she stabs him, climbs to a window to jump into the sea - and is rescued once again. Mishaps and misunderstandings abound, but somehow Harriot keeps her honour safe and finally marries the ever-faithful Dumont who has been in the background for much of the novel. Emotions run high in this novel, even though they are often enclosed in brackets, '(said he sighing)', '(weeping excessively)', '(distracted with remorse)'. Yet there is a serious side to the text also, and it does offer a thoughtful criticism of patronage. After her arrival in England, Harriot is taken up by a female patron who makes promises which are never fulfilled, a theme which reflects Lennox's own experiences under the patronage of Lady Isabella Finch, after her arrival in England. Critical of the system in which, according to her, motives of self-interest predominated, Lennox's ingratitude shocked Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. 'People you have obliged hate you' she remarked.

If as Harriot's mother suggested, 'horrid romances have turned the girl's brain', this was even more true of the heroine of Lennox's next novel, *The Female Quixote*. Arabella, the beautiful, intelligent and spirited heroine, who lives in a remote castle, discovers a store of old French romances, that had once belonged to her mother, in her father's library. Arabella avidly reads them and her belief in their reality results in many amusing episodes. Naively, she believes that all men will fall at her feet, but that they are all potential ravishers also. For example, when she sees a gardener who is actually planning to steal a carp from the pond, she thinks he must be a prince in disguise with designs upon her. Eventually, she travels to Bath and London where more confusions, and even a duel, arise due to her empty minded reading and romantic delusions. Finally she is converted through reason and discourse by a 'Divine', and submits to paternal authority.

She is 'now recovered to the free Use of all her noble Powers of Reason' having been 'wholly absorb'd in the most disagreeable Reflections on the Absurdity of her past Behaviour, and the Contempt and Ridicule to which she now saw plainly she had exposed herself'. Arabella is ready to be united in matrimony to her cousin and lover, Mr. Glanville, 'in every Virtue and laudable Affection of the Mind'.

Buoyed by the esteem of established and respected male writers, the novel was well received. Fielding printed a very favourable review in the *Covent Garden Journal*, saying it was better than *Don Quixote*, and Richardson advised Lennox in preparing the novel for the press. After the novel's publication, Dr Johnson organised a celebration party in Lennox's honour at which he presented the author with an apple pie, decorated with bay leaves. Still read, and sold in paperback, *The Female Quixote* has attracted various interpretations. It has been called 'a satirical harlequinade', a burlesque, and is said to be about the nature of female power and whether such power can be achieved in real life or just exists in romantic fiction. Whatever the interpretation, *The Female Quixote* is recognised as one of the most important novels of the mid-eighteenth century. For Norma Clarke, the novel dramatised 'the creative process itself':

The dramatisation drew on female psychic and social experience and a female literary tradition to produce a text of such originality that its strengths have been largely overlooked. There is no doubt that this novel belongs with *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random* as one of the defining texts in the development of the novel in the eighteenth century.[8]

Life had been hard for Charlotte Lennox and this showed in her personality. It cannot only be with literary allusion that Dr Johnson wrote of her *Shakespear Illustrated*, 'When Shakespeare is demolished, your wings will be full summed and I will fly you at Milton; for you are a bird of prey, but the bird of Jupiter', the god associated with tempests and thunderbolts.[9] On a more serious note, Lennox was brought before a magistrates' court in 1778 when she was accused, with her daughter and another woman, of assaulting her maid, who was wounded in the affray. She appears to have been untidy, bad at housekeeping, was exceptionally quarrelsome and had a vile temper. Despite this, Charlotte Lennox was highly regarded as a writer and was labelled as one of the most distinguished literary characters of the time. Her image is there for posterity in the National Portrait Gallery where she hangs on the wall in a painting, 'The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain', by Richard Samuel, first exhibited in 1779. Clad in classical garments, she is in the company of Angelica Kauffmann, the painter, Mrs. Sheridan (formerly Elizabeth Linley), the singer, and a group of fellow writers which includes Elizabeth Montagu, Hannah More and Elizabeth Carter. *The Life of Harriot Stuart*, *The Female Quixote*, and *Euphemia* are in print today, with an edition of *Henrietta* soon to be published by the University of Kentucky Press.

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1 Philippe Sejourne, *The Mystery of Charlotte Lennox, First Novelist of Colonial America*, Vol. 62 (Aix-En-Provence: Publication Des Annales De La Faculte Des Lettres, 1967).

2 Duncan Isles's articles on Lennox's correspondence appeared in the TLS on 29 July 1965 and 5 August 1965. See also, 'The Lennox Collection', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 28:4 (1970), pp. 317-344.

3 Doody's evidence is well backed up by other research. Her biographical information is partly based on Miriam Rossiter Small's book, *Charlotte Ramsay Lennox: An Eighteenth-Century Lady of Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935), and on Jerry C. Beasley's entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (1985) and the letters of Samuel Richardson.

4 Quoted in Small, p. 7.

5 James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, (1791), ed. Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent, 1906) p. 510.

6 In a letter from Elizabeth Carter to Catherine Talbot, quoted in Norma Clarke, *Dr. Johnson's Women* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000) p. 75

7 Small, p.37

8 Clarke, p. 92.

9 *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford (Princeton, New Jersey, 1992).