

Anna Seward (1742-1809)

by Marion Roberts

The eighteenth century was a competitive world, progress being made by the money you had or the notice you attracted; with whom you mixed and to whose gatherings you were invited; how much influence you had and how many connections you made. All these were of much concern. You needed to understand the rules of social rank and have a respect for wealth. Being female in a society which valued female dependency was difficult, but could sometimes be turned to advantage.

Women's lives seemed to be a progress of various milestones: maiden, wife, mother, and, if she was unlucky, widow, dowager and grandmother. At each stage, women were expected to bow to the will of providence and do their duty. For Anna Seward to be mistress of herself was paramount: to be self-possessed, self-controlled and self-sufficient, brave and enduring in the face of misfortune. She turned her back on the institution of marriage, which she blamed for her misfortunes and despite several proposals, resolved to lead a quiet, spinster life. But as Robert Burns would write: 'The best laid schemes of mice and men/ Gang aft a-gley'.

Anna Seward was born in 1742 in the Plague village of Eyam, in the Derbyshire hills, where her father, the Rev. Thomas Seward, was minister. A redheaded, precocious, sensitive child, she could recite Milton at the age of three. She was greatly attached to her younger sister, Sarah. Sarah died, aged nineteen, from an 'unspecified fever' (possibly Miliary Tuberculosis) just before her arranged marriage to Joseph Porter. Porter was a forty-year-old 'merchant from Leghorn Italy' and the stepson of Samuel Johnson. She also enjoyed a close friendship with Honora Sneyd, her 'adopted' sister, who came into the Seward household when the child's father was left a widower and needed someone to care for one of his children.

When Anna was seven, her father having been appointed Canon-Residentiary at the Cathedral, they moved to Lichfield, Staffordshire, moving into the Bishop's Palace when the Bishop refused to live in it. Here Anna lived for seventy years until her death in 1809.

The Rev. Thomas Seward was known as a 'genteel, well-bred clergyman' who had contributed to Dodsley's *Collection* (1748) and had edited the *Works of Beaumont & Fletcher* (10 vols. 1750). He educated his daughter at home, recognising and encouraging her literary and early poetic ability much to the resentment of his wife, Elizabeth Hunter, who, worried that her bookish daughter would disconcert any suitor and remain unmarried, becoming dependent on her father in later years, tried to persuade her husband to pour cold water on Anna's efforts.

So, how did this provincial gentlewoman, living in splendid isolation in Lichfield, deep in the heart of the Midlands, birthplace of Samuel Johnson and David Garrick, and who now, unlike them, is largely forgotten, come to have such an impact on British literary life?

Her success can be partly explained by the power of her personality, but it is also a tribute to the rich resources of eighteenth-century life. Lichfield, at that time was the centre of cultural life in the Midlands, its inhabitants enjoying a wide range of interests: poetry, botany, gardening, walking, dancing, plays at the Guildhouse, visits to London and to health resorts, music, (Lichfieldians were passionate about Handel) and discussions of philosophy, experiments and inventions.

The Seward family cultivated an 'open door' policy at the Bishop's Palace, holding breakfast, tea, dinner and supper parties and musical evenings, to which many from the prebendary houses in The Close: The Addenbrookes, Smallbrookes, Woodhouses, Vyses and the Garrick ladies. Anna, well read, with an active mind and great personal charm was always in the midst, enjoying herself with a fierce intensity. Now quite a beauty, she elicited adulation whenever she appeared.

1746 saw the arrival of Erasmus Darwin in Lichfield, where he came to set up a medical practice in Beacon Street, becoming the Seward family physician. A bachelor, of average height, slightly stooped, thick-set, inclined to corpulence, with a bad stammer, Anna did not at first care for him, but Darwin saw and greatly encouraged her poetic potential, much to the anger of her father, who did not wish to be eclipsed by his daughter. Darwin could be sarcastic, even arrogant, but with Anna, he was always 'playful'. At 14, she fancied herself in love with him, hoped for marriage, and was devastated when he married her seventeen-year-old friend, Mary Howard, in 1747.

Anna was not without admirers. She had surreptitious affairs with Cornet Vyse and Colonel Hugh Taylor, both serving military men, but they came to nothing. Her father found out, forbade her to leave the house and reminded her that she had no dowry. In John Saville, her music teacher, concert singer and Vicar Choral at the Cathedral, though, she found her 'soulmate', her 'heart's darling' and they lived a rather 'open' and devoted life together at the Bishop's Palace, while his wife, 'a vulgar, abusive shrew', according to Anna, and their children lived a short distance away in The Close.

They first met when her father asked Saville to teach his twelve-year-old daughter the harpsichord. He was twenty but this did not stop a growing friendship over time, which found him often closeted with Anna in her room yet returning to his wife each night. Their behaviour scandalised the Close. Now she was travelling everywhere with him, wherever he was to perform, even to Covent Garden. Once again, her disapproving parents confronted their daughter, who vowed that theirs was 'a love without sin' and that there was nothing untoward in the relationship. As a result, many shunned the Seward family in Lichfield but she would never give up her beloved 'Giovanni'.

Darwin's fame as a doctor and scientific genius brought him into contact with some of the great industrialists and thinkers of the day. Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood, James Watt, James Keir, Joseph Priestley and Dr. William Small, would not only become good friends but were to become the members of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, now seen as the main intellectual powerhouse of the Industrial Revolution in England.

These men met in each other's homes to discuss their ideas and inventions and were very often entertained at the Bishop's Palace by Anna and her family. Boulton and Small were musical and loved singing and dancing, so one may imagine rooms filled with sound and gaiety accompanied by harpsichord and fiddle; with sharp, incisive discussions round a dinner table to the clink of wine glasses or tea cups; Anna always there, listening, admiring, questioning and learning.

Lichfield and the Bishop's Palace attracted other fascinating characters. In 1770, the tall, darkly handsome, polished, rich Irishman Richard Lovell Edgeworth, (the widowed father of Maria Edgeworth), came to live at Stowe House. Rather eccentric, he used magnetism, loved conjuring tricks, designed a revolutionary phaeton, (bringing him into friendship with Darwin), and other fantastical machines. He made friends easily and loved women. He flirted outrageously with Anna and gave her hope, but devastated her by marrying her beloved Honora Sneyd, in the Cathedral in 1773, taking her back to live on his large estate in Ireland, where she died in 1780. Anna never forgave Edgeworth and carried her hatred into old age.

Other frequent companions at Stowe House were: Thomas Day, another eccentric, rich, idealistic and charming. He was also a depressive misogynist, lacking in the social graces. Stooped and dishevelled, he never combed his hair but was fond of washing in a stream! He was a follower of Rousseau's ideas on 'education through kindness and freedom', determined to find a wife 'out of duty' - hence his famous experiment with two orphan girls to discover which would be the perfect wife. Anna was totally sceptical about this experiment, though Lunar Society members were enthusiastic. They valued him but she thought it was because he owned a vast estate and had £1200 a year!

Brooke Boothby, rich son and heir of the baronet of the same name, was also eccentric. A poet, he was learned, humane, enlightened, but inclined to indolence and melancholy and was often drunk. Anna thought of him as 'far too dissipated'. An admirer of Darwin and a recruit to his literary circle, he was to become one of the founder members of the Lichfield Botanical Society.

Throughout her early life, Anna had continued to write poetry, still encouraged by Darwin, who she considered her mentor. It was he who sent her poem, written in 1777, as she sat in the 'pleasure garden' he had constructed in a little wild valley at Abnalls, a mile from his house, to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, where it was published.

She had always read widely, from books, and periodicals including the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Female Spectator*. She listened to what was happening around her and started to contribute forthright opinions to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, exerting a powerful influence on the critical and poetic views of her day, for Anna, often outspoken herself, believed everyone was entitled to speak their mind and should have chance to display their natural genius. But it was in 1780, following the death of her mother, that her literary life really came into being.

Her poems, notably her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and *Monody on the Death of Major Andre* (1781), were greatly admired, as was her sentimental verse novel, *Louisa* (1784), which ran to five editions in Britain and one in North America.

She always supported younger poets and writers: Walter Scott, Robert Southey, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Chatterton, Robert Burns, and championed any of 'humble origin', like Thomas Bewick, the Newcastle wood engraver, whose work was to bring him international fame. His *vignettes* of rural life, which Anna said 'spoke of place: provincial as opposed to metropolitan', brought praise from Wordsworth, Ruskin and Carlyle.

Anna had a taste for sentiment, sublime landscape and medievalism. She knew several of the celebrated 'Bluestockings' and established herself as a principled critic. In her vast correspondence, which she preserved and re-wrote for publication, she offered opinions on almost everything, while still portraying herself as a dutiful daughter, a friend, a busy gentlewoman going about her round of daily life, often finding little or no time to write.

Provincial Lichfield life might seem strange in one who was so ambitious to hold sway on the public stage, but Anna always declared her condemnation of that 'Great Babylon', London and its high society, refusing to move, either to there or to Bath. It proved a very shrewd move. By staying in her home town, Anna Seward ensured that the literary world came to see and hear her, 'The Swan of Lichfield', visits that were 'the most high-prized honours my writings have procured for me.'

Even Samuel Johnson, 'The Great Cham' and James Boswell came to visit her, but she had no time for either - she thought Johnson an over-rated ranter 'who received uncritical adulation' and Boswell 'a Scottish coxcomb' who twice tried to have an affair with her and whom she sent packing!

In her thirties, Anna was invited by Lady Anne Miller of Bath-Easton to join her circle. At Lady Miller's home, aspiring poets would meet and socialise placing their work into a large urn, known as The Delphic Vase. The best poem would win the Wreath of Myrtle. Anna was overwhelmed on one occasion to receive it. It led to her fame and by the end of the decade contributions by and about her were rarely absent from the pages of leading London periodicals.

She also won the admiration and friendship of the poet and biographer, William Hayley. He visited her, spending two weeks in her home, thereby confirming her position as the new leader of literary society in Lichfield. She then visited him at his home in Eartham, Sussex, and carried on, with him, a voluminous correspondence over several years. Now she was being hailed as 'The Swan of Lichfield' and 'The Queen Muse of Britain'.

Following her father's death from a stroke in 1790, Anna continued to live in the Bishop's Palace on an income of £400 a year. Now, having bought her own carriage, she went to Bath for the waters and for sea-bathing at Hoylake, near Birkenhead, a place she much enjoyed, and it was near here, in Plas Newydd, Llangollen, in 1795, that she visited

the celebrated 'Ladies of the Vale', Lady Eleanor Butler and her friend, Sarah Ponsonby, describing her visit in the title-poem, 'Llangollen Vale' (1796).

Life in Lichfield continued apace and, always keen to be involved in her beloved city's 'improvements', Anna approached a family friend, Thomas Levett, the Town Clerk, with an idea to stop the Stowe and Minster Pools from 'silting up'. She proposed that the shape of the pools should be changed by digging out and deepening certain parts; that trees, shrubs and flowers should be planted around. The works were eventually carried out with great success. She also wrote a strong letter to the Church Authorities about the Lime Tree Walk fronting the houses on the north side of the Close, whose shade she loved, when they proposed to remove every other tree to let in more light to the houses. She likened such an outrageous idea to removing every other tooth from a mouth!

By the start of the new century, her soulmate, John Saville was ailing. Anna had provided for his family for many years and he had always spent his nights with them in the family home. Now, with children grown, the house was too small for the sick man so she bought one of the other houses in the Close, number eight, so that he could have more space to be cared for by his daughter. The death of this man, her beloved 'Giovanni', in 1803 was a very severe blow and for many months Anna was 'a lost soul'.

Elderly, lame, stout and sickening fast, Anna took as her companion and housekeeper, a Miss Fern, a plain, homely woman whom she had known for some years. From the Bishop's Palace, she still projected herself as the most prominent and formidable writer of the time, but by now, her verse was being criticised for its affectation, long-windedness and obscurity. Wordsworth, however, said he preferred her works 'with all their faults' to those of others.

Seward's last notable publication was her *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin*. (1804), compiled from notes she had kept of him over years and which portrayed the intellectual life of Lichfield, at whose centre she had been for several decades.

Realising that her condition was worsening, she made careful plans for posthumous editions of her poems and letters, involving Walter Scott, who had once visited her, in these arrangements. He edited her *Poetical Works*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1810) but would have nothing to do with her *Letters*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1811) which Seward willed to Archibald Constable. Her will ran to twenty two pages and she was careful to remember everyone who had meant something to her.

Anna Seward died at six fifteen in the evening on Thursday 23 March 1809 and was buried in the Choir in Lichfield Cathedral, alongside her family.

Select Bibliography

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