

Melesina Chenevix St. George Trench (1768-1827)
by Katharine Kittredge

During her lifetime, Melesina Chenevix St. George Trench was known more for her great beauty than for her literary productions. Although she wrote steadily during her lifetime, producing six books, and many poems, pamphlets, and essays, Trench did not find literary fame until thirty-five years after her death, when her son printed selections from her private writings under the titles 'Journal Kept During a Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800' (1861) and published *The Remains of the Late Mrs. Richard Trench* (1862). These volumes were received with rapturous reviews, but they soon disappeared amidst the deluge of 'memoirs of the last century' which flooded the mid-Victorian market.[1] The subsequent neglect of Trench and her writings is unfortunate, since her journals and letters are among the liveliest from this period and directly address issues of gender, class, and nationality. For scholars who study the history of women's writing, there is an even greater loss in the disappearance of Trench's 'Mourning Journal' (1806) and her *Laura's Dream; or, The Moonlanders* (1816), two works which use forms and express ideas that challenged the boundaries of contemporary female authorship.

Born in Dublin on 22 March 1768, Melesina Chenevix was the only child of a well-to-do Irish Huguenot family. Both of her parents were dead by the time she was four, and Melesina was sent to live with her grandfather, the elderly Bishop of Waterford, Richard Chenevix. According to Melesina Chenevix's unfinished autobiography, the bishop detected 'an early promise of genius' in the little girl, and thus rejected all traditional areas of female education as 'unhealthy', promoting 'softness of the mind;' and physical weakness.[2] As a result, 'books became Melesina's business and her pleasure [...] she read Shakespeare and Ovid as an amusement. Few were the bulky folios of her Grandfather's Library which she had not opened, tho' many of the shelves seemed inaccessible to her little form, she contrived to explore them all'(9). When she was twelve, the bishop died, and Melesina Chenevix was placed in the care of Lady Lifford, who immediately 'procured masters [tutors] of all sorts to instruct her in those accomplishments her Grandfather had despised'(15). During this brief interlude, Melesina had a loving mother figure, playmates, and all the music, dancing, and art lessons she desired. Within a year, however, her maternal grandfather, Archdeacon Gervaise was granted custody, and Melesina Chenevix was alone again, her only resource 'every novel and Romance the Circulating Library could afford'(41). From the age of thirteen, Melesina Chenevix was, in her own words 'an independent heiress' and largely conducted her life according to her own tastes and inclinations.

By all accounts, Melesina Chenevix soon blossomed into a beauty, and was soon 'bothered' with offers of marriage. She met Colonel Richard St. George of Carrick-on-Shannon when she was eighteen, and was immediately attracted by his 'thorough knowledge of the heart [...] insinuating address & most engaging figure' (45). Overcoming her family's initial opposition, the two were married on 31 October 1786. The next year, Melesina St. George gave birth to her first son, Charles Manners St. George. In the summer of 1788, St. George's consumptive condition worsened, and he travelled to Europe for his health, leaving his wife behind in Ireland to give birth to

another son who died nine days after his birth. The next spring, the family travelled together to Portugal, where they lived until Richard St. George finally succumbed to his illness on 10 March 1790. A widow at the age of twenty-one, Melesina St. George was (as her biographer, Frances Gerard noted) 'quite alone in the world, so far as near relations were in question. She had, however, troops of friends. No woman ever had more, and of the right sort'.^[3] Among her many cherished friends were Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, the expatriate Irish couple who became famous as the Ladies of Llangollen. It is also around this time that noted Quaker author, Mary Leadbeater records her first impressions of the young widow: 'I was greatly struck by her personal appearance [...] the soft luster of her beautiful black eyes, and the sweetness of her fascinating smile. Her dress was simply elegant, and her fine dark hair, dressed according to present fashion, in rows of curls over one another in front...'.^[4] Melesina St. George's striking looks are also recorded in portraits by George Romney, the Irish painter Hugh Douglas Hamilton, and by Sir Thomas Lawrence, who called his portrait of her 'Evening Star'.

During the next decade, Melesina St. George travelled extensively through Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and the English countryside. Her letters to her cousin Sarah Chenevix Tuite tell of cricket parties at the Duke of Richmond's estate which lasted until the dawn of the next day, many nights of dancing, and hordes of suitors. One of the men hovering around her was the Prince of Wales whom, she writes, 'asked me to be at home for him the next day, and from an unaccountable pique I felt at his manner, looks and words, I so far forgot my situation as to absolutely decline his visit'.^[5] When she was not caught up in the social whirl, Melesina St. George studied Latin and wrote her first volume of poetry, *Mary Queen of Scots, An Historical Ballad and Other Poems* (1800). Although her poetry received praise from bluestocking writers like Anna Seward, the book went largely un-remarked by the contemporary reading public.

In 1799, when her son, Charles, was at boarding school, Melesina St. George embarked on an extended tour of Germany, an activity almost unheard of for a young, unaccompanied widow. Armed with an enthusiasm for new experiences and excellent letters of introduction, she was readily accepted and greatly admired among the highest ranks of European society. In 1802, Melesina St George was taking Charles on a vacation trip to Paris when she met the Irish lawyer Richard Trench. Trench was six years younger than Melesina and is said to have resembled the Apollo Belvedere. They were married in Paris on 3 March 1803, and were subsequently detained in France when Napoleon revoked the Peace of Amiens. Primarily confined to Orleans for the next four years, Melesina Trench suffered from ill health and near-constant pregnancy. Her son, Frederick Trench, was born in October of 1803 and in 1805 she gave birth to a female child who died two weeks after her birth. Unable to find reliable domestic help, Melesina Trench cared for Frederick by herself, and she soon became deeply attached to him. This intimacy made Frederick's sudden death in June of 1806 especially painful. She turned to writing for comfort, creating 'The Mourning Journal', which records her feelings during Frederick's brief illness and death, her memories of him, her subsequent depression, and her progress toward consolation.

'The Mourning Journal' is a radical departure from the period's usual treatment of a child's death. According to historian Ralph Houlbrooke, the early modern fear of grief as a 'snare of impiety' persisted throughout the eighteenth century, when mourning mothers were being warned that '[the bereaved must not] let her thoughts dwell too long on her loss, to the prejudice of her body and soul'. [6] In 'The Mourning Journal' Melesina Trench defies the contemporary dictates that a mother should suffer in silence by giving full voice to her grief. She also uses the journal to evaluate her role as a mother: 'It is only now that I begin to feel the loss of my Frederick as a companion – and to regret every hour I devoted to any other pursuit, or society, while heaven spared him to me'. [7] In the coming years, Trench was to write of Frederick's death as 'the misfortune from which I date my second life, as different, certainly, from the former as two separate modes of being'. [8] Following her period of self-examination, Trench redefined herself as a mother, turning her back on high society and insisting on personally tending and educating her remaining children – an unfashionable choice for a woman of her wealth.

Just over a month after Frederick's death, Melesina Trench bore another son, Francis, and she was again pregnant in 1807 when the family was finally granted passports to leave France. Over the next five years, Trench produced three more children and established herself in a little 'green retreat' in the Hampshire countryside. During this time, Trench used her pen to support various social causes: the abolition of slavery, advocating child labour laws, improving prison conditions, and abolishing the salt tax. She also published four books of poetry.

Three of these volumes contain nondescript if well-crafted poetry, but one book *Laura's Dream, or, The Moonlanders* is a landmark in the writing of science fiction by women. Written in 1816, two years before Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*, *The Moonlanders* is an epic poem which closely follows the conventions of the seventeenth-century lunar voyage texts, and proposes a lunar society which is a pastoral utopia. Trench's Moonlanders are lunar humanoids who are gestated in 'maternal clay' and literally dug up to begin a lifespan that starts in old age and 'youths' backwards until they reach perfect maturity. The male Moonlanders have purple wings, but the females are flightless; they are mated from birth and are also united in the after life. When a Moonland couple decides it is time for them to 'leave this world' that is what they literally do – they go to the top of a mountain, the female kneels in prayer, the male blesses her, she finally sprouts her own purple wings, and then they both fly off to the next sphere of existence. In spite of its originality, this text, too, received little contemporary recognition.

Finally, in her later years, Melesina Trench began to merge her identity as a mother with her role as a 'lady of letters', writing eloquently about parenting in letters, essays, tracts, and a final work which was published after her death, *Thoughts of a Parent on Education* (1837). This text – whose chapters include 'On Instilling Early Notions of Religion', 'On Humanity to Animals', and 'On Courage' – validates the wisdom gained through attentive, involved parenting, and warns that a mother should 'beware of resigning herself wholly to the guidance of any general system'. [9] Instead, Trench urges mothers to trust their own understandings of the nature of their individual children.

Trench died in 1827, attended by two of her sons, and literally in the arms of her devoted husband. She was buried in the Guardian Angel's Chapel in Winchester Cathedral with the epitaph:

Uxori matrique
Ornatissimæ optimæ
Dilectissimæque
Melesina Trench

This may be translated as: 'To the best, most accomplished, and most beloved wife and mother, Melesina Trench'.[10]

After her husband's death in 1860, Melesina Trench's papers passed into the hands of her son, Richard Chenevix Trench, who was then the Dean of Westminster. He prepared an edition of her 'Journal Kept During a Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800' 'printed, not published' for her family and friends. On 9 October 1861, the *London Times* published extensive excerpts from the 'Journal' which featured Trench's very uncharitable description of Emma Hamilton, and an account of a drunken Admiral Lord Nelson using bad language and deriding Queen Charlotte.[11] The *Times* piece created sufficient public interest in Trench's life and her private writing, so that the next year's publication of *The Remains of Mrs. Richard Trench* was extensively reviewed, and immediately sold out its first printing. Trench's Nelson-related writing made her a celebrity thirty-five years after her death, but it may have, ultimately, ruined her chances of having a lasting literary legacy of her own. Although Trench's letters and journals are among the most readable of her generation, and her *Moonlanders* and 'The Mourning Journal' are daringly original, Trench's place in history has been defined by her being the 'prig of the first degree' who wrote unkindly about Nelson and Hamilton.[12] For Melesina Trench, the cost of her proverbial fifteen minutes of Victorian fame has turned out to be a hundred and fifty years of subsequent obscurity.

Select Bibliography of Melesina Trench's works

Unpublished works

'Journal Kept During a Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800'(privately printed in 1861)

'The Mourning Journal'(1806)

Published works

Mary Queen of Scots, an Historical Ballad; with other Poems (London: John Stockdale, 1800)

Laura's Dream; or, The Moonlanders (London: J. Hatchard, 1816)

Thoughts of a Parent on Education (London: John W. Parker, 1837)

The Remains of the Late Mrs. Richard Trench (London: Parker, Son and Bourn, 1862)

- 1 Among the most extensive reviews were: ‘Autobiography of Miss Cornelia Knight’, *The Quarterly Review* 3 (1862) (London: John Murray, 1862) pp. 41-49 and ‘The Remains of the Late Mrs. Richard Trench’, *The Edinburgh Review* 46 (July-Oct. 1862) American edn. (NY: Leonard Scott, 1862) pp.120-132.
- 2 Hampshire Record Office, 23M93/2/1. pp. 8-9. Further references to this manuscript are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.
- 3 Frances Gerard, *Some Fair Hibernians* (London: Wade & Downey, 1897) p.118.
- 4 Quoted in Melesina Trench, *The Remains of the Late Mrs. Richard Trench*, Richard Chenevix Trench, ed. (London: Parker, Son and Bourn, 1862) p.133.
- 5 Hampshire Record Office, 23M93/3/2
- 6 Ralph Houlbrooke, ‘The Age of Decency’, in *Death in England*, Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999) p. 187.
- 7 Hampshire Record Office. 23M93/13
- 8 Hampshire Record Office. 23M93/14/1/A
- 9 Melesina Trench, *Thoughts of a Parent on Education* (London: John W. Parker, 1837) p.7.
- 10 This translation was supplied by my Ithaca College colleague, Professor Michael Twomey.
- 11 ‘The Journal Edited by the Dean of Westminster’, *The London Times*, 9 October 1861. p.5e.
- 12 Mollie Hardwick, *Emma, Lady Hamilton* (NY : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) p. 71.