

**An Introduction to *The History of Lucy Wellers*,
from the Chawton House Library Collection**

During the eighteenth-century the novel began to become popular as a literary form, and yet it was at the centre of a heated debate about the propriety of such works and their suitability for the private perusal of impressionable young ladies. Some of the earliest examples of the novel form emerged as didactic fiction, in order to avoid the censure of the society in which they were circulated. These works had a firm moral message, and often dealt with very one-dimensional characters; that is, they were either purely good or entirely bad. Many literary works produced during this period remain famous and widely read to this day. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are two of the major classics; Frances Burney and Ann Radcliffe are amongst the successful women writers who emerged during the second half of the century. However, many other eighteenth-century works have by now drifted into obscurity, and *The History of Lucy Wellers*, by Miss Smythies, is one of these. This essay will examine Smythies' novel in the framework of the century in which it was published, as well as its relevance to today's readers. It will also explore the wider context of book history, and the physical aspects of the book as viewed at Chawton House Library.

The History of Lucy Wellers tells the story of a young orphan lady rescued by a generous widow, Mrs Goodall, from the dishonourable designs of her guardian, Mr Searls. Mrs Goodall takes Miss Wellers into her protection, and introduces her to a group of respectable and welcoming people, including Dr Wright and his niece, Miss Burton, with whom Miss Wellers becomes firm friends. The novel tells the story of the life and loves of these two young ladies and their acquaintance, including visits to London, kidnaps, proposals, and mysteries.

The novel is a comic yet moral illustration of eighteenth-century society; it mocks those who, like Lady Dumiel, are of high birth and therefore believe everyone is beneath them, and praises those who are consistently kind and generous. Comedy is introduced through characters such as Jack Shooter, a country squire who is innocent in the ways of society; he greets women with 'a hearty smack' on the lips, causing general discomposure amongst them,¹ and is utterly confused by London and its entertainments (II: 130-2).

Smythies' novel takes the lover-mentor theme present in much didactic fiction of the time, and inverts it by making it sordid and allowing the heroine to refuse her guardian's advances. Instead, Mrs Goodall's protection is presented as the preferable alternative; as Jane

¹ Miss Smythies, *The History of Lucy Wellers*, (London: R. Baldwin, 1754), Vol. I, p. 130 [subsequent quotations are taken from this edition will be indicated in the text]

Spencer notes, 'wise women often appear as mentors in didactic novels', and Mrs Goodall's advice and behaviour is held up as a model throughout the novel.² Given these two examples, and the morality of the novel's overall message, it would be easy to classify *The History of Lucy Wellers* as a didactic novel. However, Smythies' comic, light-hearted tone develops it rather into a novel of manners - the novel is moral, but the author's advice to her young readers is subtly given, rather than overtly expressed in the manner of truly didactic fiction.

Lucy Wellers is witty and lively in its development, although it can be hard (at least for the modern reader) to keep up with the connections the various characters have with one another, as people believed dead or disappeared repeatedly turn up through accidental or previous acquaintance. These rather implausible series of coincidences reflect the writing of Henry Fielding, who 'valued such devices because they made it possible to weave the whole narrative into a very neat and entertaining formal structure.'³ This, it seems, was also Smythies' aim in using similar sets of coincidences in the connections between her characters, as it allows her to tie up each character's individual story neatly and definitively. Miss Smythies' sharply comic social observations foreshadow those of Jane Austen, although the influence of Samuel Richardson in particular shows through in the development of the novel's moral plotlines.

The History of Lucy Wellers was published in London by R. Baldwin, 'at the Rose in Pater-noster-Row', in 1754 (I: Title Page). Paternoster Row was an area in which booksellers had long been operating; Baldwin, therefore, was very likely a respectable and reputable bookseller and publisher.⁴ This hypothesis is confirmed when we look at the other titles published at the Rose during the period: Baldwin largely printed historical, geographical and scientific texts, for example *Some Thoughts Relating to Trade in General, and to the East India Trade in Particular*, published in 1754. However, there is evidence that Baldwin also published some fictional works, and in 1753 he was one of several booksellers to publish Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; in 1755 he printed *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, by Tobias Smollet. He published little women's writing, and so may have been induced to print *Lucy Wellers* by the influence of someone like Richardson or Smollett (both of whom subscribed to the author's later novel, *The Brothers*), or perhaps merely by luck or perseverance on the part of Smythies herself.⁵

The novel consists of two volumes, each printed in duodecimo, as was standard of novels at the time. This indicated the shift from public to private reading that had begun to take place

² Jane Spencer, *The Rise of The Woman Novelist, from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen*, (London: Blackwell, 1986), p. 145

³ Ian Watts, *The Rise of the Novel*, (London: Pimlico, 2000 [1957]), p. 253

⁴ Edward Jacobs, 'Eighteenth-Century British Circulating Libraries and Cultural Book History', in *Book History*, Vol. 6, (2003), p. 4

⁵ Information from ECCO, www.galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO [accessed 28.11.08]

earlier in the eighteenth century, the smaller pages being more convenient for personal use than the larger octavo or folio sizes.⁶ There was no price printed on the title page, but James Raven cites it as six shillings - that is, three shillings per volume.⁷ This is the same price that was asked for Mary Davys' *The Reform'd Coquet* thirty years earlier, and the same as each volume of Richardson's *Clarissa*, printed in 1748. These similarities suggest a fairly standard price for novels of this length during the period (each of Richardson's volumes averaged about 300 pages, equivalent to those of Smythies) and, although we do not know how many copies of *Lucy Wellers* were sold, the publication of a second edition in 1755 argues for the novel's popularity.

Looking at the copy of the novel at Chawton House Library, the paper is of a thick, good quality, probably of linen or cotton fibre, as was 'virtually all European paper' at the time.⁸ It is possible that the printing was done in a hurry (or simply carelessly), as on several pages of both volumes the ink has been transferred to the opposing side (see, for example, Vol. I, p. 146). The binding has a leather effect, and is of a dark red colour, indicating that it may be russia leather, which was commonly used from the middle of the eighteenth century.⁹ The edges of the boards are gold-tooled and the spine of both volumes is also decorated with gilt flowers along its length. The time and effort involved in manually decorating a book's binding in this manner may signify that our copy was privately bound, particularly if the binding is leather, as Bernard Middleton notes that 'few gentlemen of substance would accommodate on their shelves books not bound in leather.'¹⁰ However, Middleton also observes that 'a [gilt] roll...on the edges of the boards,' as seen on our copy of *Lucy Wellers*, was fairly common during the eighteenth century, and therefore the book may well have been bound by the retailer.¹¹ The lettering on the spine reads 'Lucy Wellers', with the volume number printed underneath. This suggests that the books were bound close to the time of publication, as small letters for binding were not available during the eighteenth century, leading to the contraction of the titles when printed on the spine.¹² Each volume bears a bookplate reading, 'From the Library of John Charles Hardy'; Hardy was a collector of early eighteenth century novels by obscure writers, and 'took a strong interest in novels written by women'.¹³ It is thanks to him, then, that we have access to this book at Chawton

⁶ Emma Clery, *The Novel in the Literary Marketplace*, Lecture 2, University of Southampton, 13.10.08

⁷ James Raven, *British Fiction 1750-1770, A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland*, (London: Associated University Press 1987), p. 106

⁸ Bernard C. Middleton, *A History of English Craft Bookbinding Technique*, (London: Hafner Publishing Company, 1963), p. 4

⁹ Bernard C. Middleton, *ibid.*, p. 286

¹⁰ Bernard C. Middleton, *ibid.*, p. 287

¹¹ Bernard C. Middleton, *ibid.*, p. 289

¹² Bernard C. Middleton, *ibid.*, pp. 182-3

¹³ Stuart Bennett, 'The Hardy Collection', in *The Female Spectator*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring 1998), p. 8

House Library today, as it might otherwise have been lost to us.

Although her name did not initially appear on the title page of the novel, Miss Smythies' authorship of *The History of Lucy Wellers* was probably first revealed in 1758, when she acknowledged herself as the author of her third novel, *The Brothers*, which also bore the caption 'by the author of *The History of Lucy Wellers*'.¹⁴ At the time of the publication of *Lucy Wellers* in 1754, the author remained anonymous, though she was keen to define her gender by attaching 'Written by a Lady' to the title page. Edward Jacobs suggests that works with a label such as this would appear 'even more gendered to eighteenth-century readers...precisely because an epithet like "by a lady" minimized personal identity in favor of a corporate, gendered identity.'¹⁵ The author, therefore, although choosing not to reveal her full identity, may have opted for 'Written by a Lady' rather than simply 'Anonymous' in order to further the cause of contemporary women's writing. However, when *The Brothers* was published in 1758, Miss Smythies revealed herself as the author, '[noting] in the *Advertisement to the Reader* that at this time "even women set out to write".'¹⁶ Her initial secrecy, then, was most probably due to negative contemporary attitudes to women writers, who were widely regarded as disreputable creatures with loose morals during the early eighteenth century. By mid-century, public opinion had begun to shift towards a view of the female author as 'the sentimental virtuous victim' rather than the 'seduced maiden, lascivious aggressor or prostitute,' therefore enabling women writers to be more open about their work.¹⁷ Smythies had also, by 1778, published both *The Stage-Coach* (1753) and *The History of Lucy Wellers* (1754) with some degree of success. Indeed, a second edition of *Lucy Wellers* appeared in 1755, and the novel was also published in German in four separate editions during 1754 and 1755.¹⁸ The novel was mentioned in the *Monthly Review* of January 1754 (X, 75) although this has not been accessible for inclusion in this study.¹⁹ This success was in all probability the encouragement needed for Smythies to allow her name to appear in the publication of her third novel.

The list of subscribers to *The Brothers* runs to twenty-six pages and 675 names, registering the support of 'among others Richardson, Smollet, [and] Garrick'.²⁰ David Garrick, an

¹⁴ F.G. Black, 'Miss Smythies', *TLS*, 26 Sept 1935, p. 596

¹⁵ Edward Jacobs, *ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁶ F.G. Black, *ibid.*, p. 596

¹⁷ Felicity Nussbaum, 'Women Novelists 1740s-1780s', in Richetti, J., *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 755

¹⁸ F.G. Black, *ibid.*, p. 596

¹⁹ James Raven, *ibid.*, p. 106

²⁰ F.G. Black, *ibid.*, p. 596

'actor and manager... [of] Shakespearean productions'²¹, appears in a flattering light in *Lucy Wellers* when Miss Patty Searls exclaims, 'I die, if I don't see him' (I:19), which may have disposed him to support the author in subscribing to *The Brothers* (suggesting, therefore, that he had perhaps read the previous novel or heard about it from a female acquaintance). Duncan Eaves and Ben Kimpel suggest that 'It must have been charity which made [Richardson] subscribe for copies of...*The Brothers* for himself, his wife, and all four of his daughters.'²² Nevertheless, however much truth there is in this statement, it must be argued from what we know of his character that Richardson would not have ordered copies of the novel for his wife and daughters had he not approved of its contents and its author; it is therefore possible that Richardson may also have enjoyed *The History of Lucy Wellers*. Samuel Richardson encouraged women writers²³, but he was also a man of strong morals and firm opinions who 'avoided controversy'²⁴, and therefore his support for Smythies' work is one of the most decisive pieces of evidence available for the novel's good reception at the time of publication.

By 1754 Richardson had published all three of his major works,²⁵ and Smythies would therefore have had a wealth of his material to refer to for inspiration. Alan D. McKillop describes Miss Smythies as 'a disciple of Richardson'²⁶ who expressed a desire (again in the prefatory material to *The Brothers*) 'to pursue the same honest intention of promoting the interest of good-manners and amiable dispositions by a story of common, though not vulgar, life.' If we assume that Smythies' ideas and values had not altered vastly in the four years between this assertion and the earlier publication of *Lucy Wellers*, we can further infer that her motives were the same in publishing our focus text. This encouragement of 'good-manners' can be seen in Smythies' mocking presentation of Sir Andrew and Lady Dumiel as high-society, unmannered snobs, in contrast with the kinder, more generous dispositions of lower-ranked characters such as Mrs Goodall and Mr Godfrey.

Lady Dumiel is satirised mercilessly in the second volume of *Lucy Wellers*, in a chapter which 'Contains the most grievous afflictions that can affect the heart of a fine lady' (II: 230). She declares herself 'the most unfortunate woman in the world', only for Mrs Goodall to discover that the cause of her distress is the death of her pet monkey, at which the latter notes that if Lady

²¹ Robert Gale Noyes, 'Shakespeare in the Eighteenth-Century Novel', *ELH*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Sept 1944), p. 224

²² Duncan T.C. Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson, A Biography*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 531

²³ Felicity Nussbaum, *ibid.*, p. 750

²⁴ John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), p. 126

²⁵ [*Pamela* (1740), *Clarissa* (1748) and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753)]

²⁶ Alan Dugald McKillop, *Samuel Richardson, Printer and Novelist*, (USA: The Shoestring Press, 1960), p. 230, pp. 243-4

Dumiel 'continue[s] to afflict [herself]...about such a trifle, [Mrs Goodall] must laugh' (II: 233). The second cause of this 'fine lady's' distress is soon revealed to be the marriage of her brother, Sir Harry, to 'a little insignificant creature' which has 'perk[ed] her up above his sister' in social status (II: 234-6). As the reader has, by this stage, already been acquainted with the details of Sir Harry's marriage, we know that the marriage is in fact advantageous both to him and the lady in question. For this reason, when Lady Dumiel goes so far as to state that it would have been 'very natural for him to have taken such a creature for a mistress' (II: 236), the reader is encouraged to be appalled, not only at her snobbery, but also at her lack of solidarity with the female cause. Mrs Goodall, as the novel's female mentor, is always shown to support other women in need, and her behaviour is held up by the author in sharp contrast to that of Lady Dumiel.

Miss Smythies also uses the characters of the Searls family, in particular the women, to illustrate how false aspirations to, and delusions of, grandeur are to be ridiculed, rather than respected. As the heading to Chapter 6 (Book I) demonstrates, they illustrate 'the possibility of high people's being descended from low people' (I: 50). However, the Searls women are desperately trying to be something that they are not (that is, 'high people'), and Smythies illustrates this comically in her depiction of Miss Patty's figure. Miss Patty has inherited her mother's 'corpulency [*sic*]', but in her attempts to imitate her sister's 'extremely thin' figure, 'that bulk, which would have had no disagreeable effect, if she had but allowed it room to diffuse itself, had a quite contrary one, as [due to her corsetry]...it all centered [*sic*] in her left shoulder' (I: 4-5). At age eighteen, she is said to have 'attained all that insipid pertness, which in vulgar minds passes for vivacity and wit' (I: 5). In this way, and by comparison with Miss Wellers, whose face expresses her inner 'innocence and sensibility' (I: 5), Smythies intimates to her (young, female) readers that true gentility comes from within, and cannot be imitated, but must be inherent. In contrast to Richardson, however, Smythies uses humour to deliver her message, as her description of the rearrangement of Miss Patty's 'bulk' illustrates.

The elder sister, Miss Searls, is the opposite of Miss Patty, in that she is very thin and 'not over talkative', but she is described as 'the most complete piece of affectation that ever was beheld' (I: 4). She only speaks in order to express her disgust with men and young women's attitude towards them, and is therefore 'esteemed an oracle in the family' (I: 4), although it is clear from Smythies' description of her that she is not to be admired, and is rather a bitter and unpleasant character. Miss Smythies' presentation of these two young ladies gives her readers an example of behaviour which is *not* to be aspired to, whilst not dictating or lecturing in the manner of a didactic novel. The humour with which Mrs Goodall views the scene and in the way in which it is described allows the reader to enjoy it whilst at the same time gaining a moral lesson.

The vulgarity of the Searls women is further expressed through Mrs Searls' 'contemptuous sneer' at Mrs Goodall when she discovers that lady to be 'a scholar', going on to enquire 'what signifies what was done seven or eight hundred years ago, when there was no people of fashion breathing?' (I: 7). Although at this point in the novel (being only a few pages in) Mrs Goodall's own character has not been validated by the author, yet her suppression of a 'risible inclination' (I: 7) at Mrs Searls' ridiculous notions shows the reader that she is to be trusted; further, the hyperbolic offensiveness of the Searls women's characters leaves us in no doubt that their manners are not to be followed as a good example. Mrs Goodall's very name, in fact, implies to the reader that she is 'good'; characters' names in the early eighteenth century would often give the reader clues as to their nature (for example, Eliza Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless*, and even Richardson's *Grandison*).

The introduction of Lucy Wellers herself in the same scene in the novel shows her to be of an entirely different grade of character to her guardian's family. In contrast to the Searls sisters, Miss Wellers' 'face, and shape, [are]...faultless' (I: 5), she is 'extremely pretty' (I: 9), and she sits quietly sewing at the window. Her character is full of 'piety, humility, good-nature and good-sense' (I: 30), which, coming as it does from her former governess, is praise enough to prove to the reader the merit of her character. Smythies has used the characters' outward facial and physical features to represent the quality of their temperament, in order for there to be no doubt as to the good and the bad: the Misses Searls are ugly and unpleasant to look upon, which is reflected in their inherent bad manners, whilst Miss Wellers' beauty signals her much sweeter disposition. This technique assists the moral purpose of her novel without being oppressive in its development.

The use of humour in *Lucy Wellers* reveals Henry Fielding as another possible influence for the Miss Smythies. Fielding's use of humour in his novels developed 'a new species of writing' which other authors began to imitate.²⁷ Comedy in *Lucy Wellers* is mainly created in the character of the country squire, Jack Shooter. However, Jack's ignorance of 'proper' manners is presented as acceptable because 'he is an honest, well-meaning man...who...performs a *good* action upon principle' (I: 139), contrary to the Searls family who set out simply to please themselves. Therefore, Jack's blustering disapproval of the 'Rout' at his neighbour's house (I: 133-6) and his total bewilderment when taken to see *Romeo and Juliet* (II: 130-2), is gently made fun of by the novel's characters, and provides abundant entertainment for its readers. Jack's London experiences, including some confusion at an auction (II: 156), provides a source of gentle

²⁷ Susan G. Auty, *The Comic Spirit of Eighteenth Century Novels*, (London: National University Publications, 1975), p. 34

entertainment for the ladies, who can ‘not suppress their laughter’ (II: 158), and, we can safely assume, for the young ladies who would have been the target audience of Smythies’ novel. These episodes are also entertaining for the modern reader, as anyone who has felt out of their depth in any form of social situation can sympathise with poor Jack and appreciate Smythies’ skilfully humorous presentation of his experiences.

Richardson’s influence can further be seen in *Lucy Wellers* in Smythies’ presentation of London in the novel. Richardson’s own works ‘express...a deep personal distrust and even fear of the urban environment,’ which is reaffirmed by Smythies in *Lucy Wellers* when the bad experiences of all the characters take place in the city.²⁸ Both kidnaps suffered by the heroine find her in unfamiliar London surroundings, whilst Jack Shooter, as explored above, finds the capital an uncomfortable and perplexing experience. As we have seen above, Smythies was keen to follow in Richardson’s footsteps as an author; this most likely explains her representation of London in his style. The dangers of London in the novel are perhaps also a warning to her readers to remain in reputable company and not to risk their honour or even their lives by venturing too often into town.

Auty notes that Fielding’s ‘mirth softened the hard blows of morality,’ in contrast to the strict moralising of Richardson’s *Clarissa*.²⁹ In this way, *The History of Lucy Wellers*, whilst being overall a comic novel, also delivers a moral message. Miss Wellers is commended in her strength of character when she refuses to become the mistress of first Mr Searls, and later Sir Harry Wilsmore, and instead chooses to marry Mr Godfrey, even though at first it appears that they will not have very much money. Mr Searls offers her ‘two hundred pounds per annum...for life’ (I: 81) if she ‘will bestow some favours upon [him]’ (I: 84), but Miss Wellers cannot be induced to part with her principles and destroy her reputation. Instead, having conceived of a scheme of escape, and following the auspicious intervention of Mr Godfrey, Miss Wellers is rescued by Mrs Goodall having suffered no injury to her honour. This lucky escape is imputed by Mrs Goodall to ‘the goodness of that over-ruling providence which ever protects defenceless innocence’ (I: 81), thus implying that Miss Wellers’ inherent integrity and piety has earned her the protection of the heavens. In Volume II, Miss Wellers refuses ‘more than a thousand pounds a year’ from Sir Harry, who ‘has no intentions of marrying her’ (II: 54-5). Her resistance of this temptation is all the more commendable as she is encouraged by the woman she believes to be her sister, but refuse it she does, and her morality is once more rewarded when Mr Godfrey accidentally learns of her situation and again comes to her rescue. In both of these situations,

²⁸ Ian Watts, *ibid.*, p. 181

²⁹ Susan G. Auty, *ibid.*, p. 34

Miss Wellers has put her honour and virtue before any aspiration to wealth, being rewarded in the end with an unexpected inheritance and marriage to a man who truly loves her.

Smythies shows the reader in no uncertain terms the outcome of the wrong decision in this situation, firstly with the character of Brett and secondly with the woman pretending to be Mrs Brown. Both of these women, in their youth, succumbed to the temptation of wealth in exchange for their bodies, without the security of marriage; each of them suffers in poverty, lacking the respect of society, as her punishment. Whilst this happening twice in a reasonably short novel may seem rather superfluous to a modern reader, it was perceived to be a very real risk for young women of the period. The *Rambler* of November 1751 published a letter, written by Samuel Johnson, purporting to be from a prostitute named 'Misella', who 'was first seduced by a man she trusted, and has since known the depths of poverty.'³⁰ As this letter was created by Johnson, it is difficult to tell whether or not this was a common accident during the eighteenth century, but the fear of it was clearly very real, and authors felt the need to protect their young readers by advising them of the dangers of such a seduction. Miss Smythies, then, writing three years later, uses the fallen women in her novel as a warning to her readers of the consequences of being enticed out of one's honour in return for money. Once again, the influence of Richardson's work on Smythies' novel is evident; his novels attempt to present an ideology 'in which honour is internal, spiritual, and available without distinction of class or sex to all who had the will to act morally.'³¹ It is better, Smythies implies, to be poor and yet respectable, like Mrs Hope (another character whose name reflects her nature), who is eventually rewarded (II: 198), than to give in to temptation and live the rest of one's days in disgraced poverty.

Smythies' novel, therefore, explores the difficulties of growing up and becoming a respectable young lady in a way that is both entertaining and sensitive. The author encourages generosity of heart and female solidarity, whilst at the same time promoting marriage as the best end to any tale (II: 308). The novel's popularity at the time of its publication is evident in its second edition, as well as its translation into German. Whilst following Richardson's example quite closely, Miss Smythies foreshadows Jane Austen's social satire and, although her neatly-tied-up ending may well have provoked Austen's scorn, had she published perhaps a century later her work might be more widely read today. *The History of Lucy Wellers* is moral, without being didactic; comic, without being irreverent; and is a novel of manners which could not have failed to entertain its eighteenth-century readers whilst avoiding public censure; nor can it fail to

³⁰ *Rambler*, Nos. 170 & 171, (Nov. 1751), from Orlando database, www.orlando.cambridge.org, [accessed 24.11.08]

³¹ Ian Watts, *ibid.*, p. 244

entertain a modern reader with its humorous depiction of human relationships and mishaps.

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