

### **Assignment 1.3: Author Biography of Sarah Harriet Burney**

Sarah Harriet Burney was born on 29th August 1772 in King's Lynn, Norfolk to music scholar and historian Charles Burney and his wife Elizabeth Allen. The second child of Charles Burney's second marriage, Sarah Harriet Burney was born into a family of great literary and musical scholars.

Sarah can be principally identified as the half-sister of Frances Burney, who was lauded as 'the Mother of English Fiction'<sup>1</sup>. Having gained much of the public attention for her novels in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Frances Burney is still admired for her brilliance to this day. Perhaps as a consequence, the achievements of Sarah Harriet Burney have become nothing more than a shadow in her half-sister's success.

In the early years of her life and as a result of her father's success as a musical scholar, Sarah enjoyed the advantages of socialising with high society. At an early age her intelligence and spirited nature was recognised by her father and half-sister Frances. However, the latter's reference to the young Sarah as 'a queer little thing' also emphasises the eccentric nature that she demonstrates in later life<sup>2</sup>. Unlike her sister Frances, Sarah was very well educated. During the years 1781-83 she was formally educated in Switzerland, enhancing her skills in French.

Sarah's relationship with her half-siblings was notably good, having accompanied Frances Burney to visit the Queen in 1788 and to the Hastings trial more than once. Despite evidence of a creditable social life, Sarah appeared to have led a rather solitary life. She focused much of her attention upon the needs of others; acting as nurse to her mother until her death in 1796 and then transferring her energy as companion and house-keeper to her widowed father. It is perhaps due to her placidity

that the events of her life, until the publication of her first novel *Clarentine* in 1796, are somewhat limited.

The only indication of a romantic acquaintance for Sarah was with her half-brother, James Burney, a man twenty-two years her senior. Although there is little evidence to suggest that the two were romantically involved, their closeness established a degree of hostility between Dr. Burney and his youngest daughter, encouraging her to finally leave her father in 1798, to live with her half-brother James. Despite Sarah Harriet's insistence that James Burney should return to his wife and children and her efforts to take care of her father during his final years, Dr. Burney's hostility continued to the extent that he left almost none of his estate to his youngest daughter.

In 1803, Sarah left the financial and domestic pressures of life with her half-brother James to become the governess for the Wilbraham family. As governess she was able to occupy her time with less arduous activities, such as drawing and etching. However, in 1807 she returned to her father's Chelsea apartments, as a result of her half-sister Esther's encouragement. Sarah's second and third novels, which were written around this time, provide evidence of the isolation experienced by Sarah while in the company of her father. Dr. Burney eventually died in 1814, leaving Sarah next to nothing. Consequently, Sarah remained in Chelsea and was forced to publish her novels in order to gain a sufficient income.

In 1821, Sarah was appointed companion to a young heiress. It was during her stay at the house owned by William Hamilton that Sarah developed an interest in travelling, a pursuit she was to follow within the next few years of her life. The death of her half-brother James had a devastating effect on Sarah leading to severe illness and the end of her employment in 1822. Later that year Sarah reached the pinnacle of

her career by educating the two granddaughters of family friend Lord Crewe, giving her a salary of £300 a year. However, her life at Crewe Hall was cut short by her resignation in 1829, leaving her with very little funds to live on.

After leaving Crewe Hall Sarah was able to satisfy her earlier interest in travel and began her solitary journey to Florence. During her travels she met Henry Crabb Robinson, English diarist and friend of her brother's, who introduced Sarah to a group of travellers. The two remained exceptionally good friends until her death in 1844. In Florence, Sarah met with her past employers the Wilbrahams and with her niece, Charlotte Barrett.

After three years in Florence, the experience of isolation finally became too much for Sarah and she returned to England in 1833, situating herself in a ladies boarding house in Bath where her health slowly deteriorated. She was forced to publish her final novel to cover her costs incurred by her illness, together with an annuity given to her by Frances Burney and in 1841 made her final move to a boarding house in Cheltenham, where she died on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1844.

Sarah Harriet Burney published five successful novels during her lifetime:

**1796** *Clarentine*. The story of an orphan who is under-appreciated by her rich cousins. It is suggested that the sailor and protective guardian to the heroine is based upon Sarah's half-brother, James Burney.

**1808** *Geraldine Fauconberg*. An epistolary novel that explores the priggish behaviour of the superior hero who is won over by the sweetness and unselfishness of his bride.

**1812** *Traits of Nature*. Sarah Harriet Burney's most successful novel about a dysfunctional family in which the heroine is turned away from her father's home. The novel identifies much of the agony that Sarah experienced in her own life.

**1816-20** *Tales of Fancy*. Combines two tales, *The Shipwreck* (1816) and *Country Neighbours* (1820). Explores the life of a mother and daughter castaway on a tropical island. The dominant figure of a woman is said to have inspired poetry by Charles Lamb. Dedicated to Princess Elizabeth.

**1939** *Romance of Private Life*. Combines two tales, *The Renunciation* and *The Hermitage*. Both draw on the travel experiences of Sarah's own life.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew McNeillie, ed., *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, (London: Hogarth Press 1986-94), II, p.314.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Morley, *Sarah Harriet Burney 1770-1844*, The University of Chicago Press <http://www.jstor.org/about/>, 2000-2006 JSTOR.