

Lady Charlotte Bury and Jane Austen

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Lady Charlotte Bury, born in the same year as Jane Austen, 1775, was the youngest daughter of the 5th Duke of Argyll and one of the greatest beauties of her day. "Everybody admires the youngest daughter's person and understanding," wrote Horace Walpole, and there was general agreement in society that she possessed a sweet and excellent character. In 1796 she married her kinsman "handsome Jack Campbell," for love rather than fortune, and bore him nine children. Lady Charlotte published a volume of poetry in 1797 which brought her to the attention of Walter Scott and "Monk" Lewis and, for a few years, she ruled the artistic salons of Edinburgh.¹

Her husband died in 1809 leaving her in uneasy circumstances. A year later she accepted the position of lady-in-waiting to Princess Caroline, Princess of Wales, with whom she had sympathised for some years. Jane Austen was to remark in 1813 of Princess Caroline "Poor Woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a woman, & because I hate her Husband."²

Lady Charlotte was able to witness at first hand the malicious and vindictive behaviour of the Prince Regent, and to deplore the equally foolish actions of her wayward royal mistress. When she was the bearer of a letter to the Prince Regent petitioning him to allow Princess Caroline access to her daughter, Princess Charlotte, poor Lady Charlotte Campbell (as she was then) was received in a most insulting manner.

During the Princess of Wales's journeyings abroad, Lady Charlotte was careful to distance herself from any of the Princess's scandals, and removed herself entirely from Royal service when the occasion demanded. The Rev. Edward John Bury met Lady Charlotte in Florence in 1818, and married her there.³ Her second husband's extravagant tastes forced Lady Charlotte to take up her pen to support them, and her novels came out thick and fast. It is during this period that Lady Charlotte received a letter which mentions Jane Austen's *Emma*, and gives a good idea of the perception contemporary readers had of Jane Austen, as a writer of novels.

On March 6, 1820, Lady Charlotte received this letter from a friend:

This is a wild stormy, snowy day, and I feel as if a mental horror would be very relishing; but the literature of the present day is not of a spirit-stirring, hair-standing sort; everything now is addressed to the reason, nothing to the heart or fancy; and, in consequence, works of imagination are becoming too reasonable to be very entertaining. Formerly, in my time, a heroine was merely a piece of beautiful matter, with long fair hair

and soft blue eyes, who was buffeted up and down the world like a shuttlecock, and visited with all sorts of possible and impossible miseries. Now they are black-haired, sensible women, who do plain work, pay morning visits, and make presents of legs of port; -vide "Emma" which, notwithstanding, I do think a very capital performance: there is no story whatever, nor the slightest pretensions to a moral, but the characters are all so true to life, and the style is so dry and piquant, that it does not require the adventitious aids of mystery and adventure.⁴

The loss of a Richardson seducer or a murderous band of Radcliffe outlaws has blinded Lady Charlotte's friend to the endless subtleties of the Frank Churchill/Jane Fairfax subplot, the roundness of portrayal of all the characters, the truth of feeling in the dialogue, and most importantly the development of the plot within a feasible framework. Emma experiences no rusty daggers or mad scenes in the novel, merely a fumbled pass by Mr. Elton. However, the modern novel was born, even though the author of it was dead by 1820.

Unfortunately, we do not know the identity of Lady Charlotte's correspondent who had such a penchant for the old gothic novels, but we applaud her admiration for *Emma*.

Lady Charlotte fell on hard times in the 1830s and published anonymously the *Diary Illustrative of the Times of George IV*. This work was a sensation and the author came in for much vilification. The book gives a vivid account of life at the court of Princess Caroline, and tells how the Princess found herself being used as a tool by politicians who cared nothing for her circumstances, and how she battled with the Prince Regent over access to her daughter Princess Charlotte. Lady Charlotte's book was reviewed with severity, giving it much useful publicity.

Lady Charlotte Bury died at her Sloane Street, Chelsea home in 1861, aged 86 years. She had published a dozen or so novels, none of which are remembered now. She was beloved by Princess Caroline and her daughter Princess Charlotte (who wanted her as her lady-in-waiting, before she accepted that position with Princess Caroline); both royal friends were dead when she published her diary. As with Jane Austen, Lady Charlotte felt the need to support herself with the pen, against the custom of the time.

NOTES

¹ A. Francis Stuart, ed., *The Diary of a Lady-in-Waiting* by Lady Charlotte Campbell Bury (London and New York: John Lane, 1908), Vol. I. p. v.

² Deirdre Le Faye, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters*, 3rd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Letter 82.

³ Stuart, Vol. I, p. ix.

⁴ Stuart, Vol. II, pp. 260-61.