

Frances Brooke (1724-1789)
by Rebecca Garwood

The journalist, translator, playwright and novelist Frances Moore Brooke was baptised in the parish of Claypole, Lincolnshire, on 24 January 1724. She was the eldest of three daughters born to the Revd Thomas Moore and Mary Knowles Moore. Brooke's father died in 1727, leaving her mother with a newborn baby and two infant girls to care for alone. Deprived of the income and home Thomas Moore's curacy had provided, Mary and her children went to live with her widowed mother in Peterborough. Brooke's grandmother died in 1736 and in the following year Mary Moore also passed away, leaving the thirteen-year old Frances and the younger Catherine (b. 1725) and Sarah (b.1727) orphans.

The sisters were taken in by their maternal aunt, Sarah Knowles Steevens, and her husband Roger Steevens, rector of Tydd St. Mary, Lincolnshire where sadly Brooke's sister, Catherine, was also to die. Despite these tragedies, there is evidence that Frances and Sarah were happy and contented living with their aunt and uncle. Both sisters had an excellent education; they were brought up in homes that gave them virtually unlimited access to the libraries of their clergyman forebears and relatives, most of whom had been educated at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. From a young age Brooke was surrounded with opportunities to cultivate her mind. The translations, essays and novels she would later produce demonstrate a wide reading and fluency in French and Italian. When her sister reached her twenty-first birthday, Brooke received the sum of £1000 that her Father had left for her in trust. Supplemented by a possible legacy left by her mother, this sum left Frances with a fairly substantial provision, enough perhaps to tempt a prospective husband with a comfortable dowry.

However, the young Frances Moore had literary ambitions and was determined to become a writer. This genteel clergyman's daughter decided to pursue her dream, and by 1748 she was living in London. Here, Brooke's open, affable and witty character proved greatly to her advantage, allowing her to become an integral part of the respectable and tightly-knit literary circles that flourished in the capital. Her career was undoubtedly aided by her new friends' willingness to circulate her manuscripts and discuss her work. This select form of publishing must have given her an invaluable insight into current literary tastes and opinions, as well as being a useful form of networking. During this period, Brooke came into contact with Samuel Johnson, Samuel Richardson, Hannah More, and [Anna Seward](#).

By the 1750s a space had been prised open for respectable female authors who, like Brooke, wrote for a predominantly female audience and could capitalise upon the invaluable approval and patronage of successful male literary figures such as Richardson and Johnson. With the emergence of the sentimental 'Lady Novelist', writers such as Frances Brooke, [Charlotte Lennox](#) and [Sarah Fielding](#) gained a significant cultural currency in the mid-century as they had, according to one critic, 'supported the cause of virtue'.

Brooke's first publication was a weekly periodical called *The Old Maid*, written under the pseudonym, 'Mary Singleton, Spinster'. The periodical ran for twenty-two issues from November 1755 until July 1756, and was later collated as a single volume in 1764. In *The Old Maid* Brooke counters widespread prejudice against unmarried women with the eccentric, robust but savvy and self-reliant character of Mary. The 'Old Maid' discusses experiences of courtship and marriage through keen, often ironic observations on manners, society, the clergy and the state of the nation.

In 1756, the year in which the final numbers of *The Old Maid* appeared, Frances Moore married the Revd John Brooke, a clergyman who held several benefices in the Norfolk area. Frances does not appear to have spent much time in her husband's rural parishes. She continued to live mainly in London and carried on writing novels, plays and translations throughout her married life. Despite her evident ambition, economic need may well have motivated her decision to write as the Brookes were not wealthy. In 1756, Brooke published a play called *Virginia: A Tragedy*. Sadly, the work, which had earlier been rejected by Garrick, was never performed. The actor-manager's refusal to stage *Virginia* resulted in bad feeling between the two. Brooke's bitterness is clearly apparent in her brilliant third novel, *The Excursion* (1777), which includes a searingly satirical portrait of the great actor-manager that incurred hostile reviews in such august journals as *Monthly Review*.

On 10 June 1757 Frances gave birth to her only surviving child, John Moore Brooke, commonly known as Jack. In the same year, Frances' husband was appointed as acting chaplain to the British Army and spent three months on a hospital ship. In a similar capacity, he travelled to America, and from there he went on to Nova Scotia, Canada. By 1760, he was chaplain to the British Army garrison based in Quebec while his wife pursued her writing career in England. The couple's personal life was deeply affected by the Seven Years War, which began in 1756. The conflict entailed a global battle for power, riches and trade against the French, in which Britain aimed to take strategic bases from the French in Canada. Britain was on the brink of forging a new empire, and Brooke's novels reflect the growing national optimism which resulted from the acquisition of the Canadian territories.

For economic as well as personal reasons, Brooke embarked on a profitable English translation of Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's 1759 French bestseller, *Letters from Juliet, Lady Catesby, to Her friend, Lady Henrietta Campley* in 1760. Madame Riccoboni's sentimental novels were extremely popular, and much admired for their purity, grace of style and attention to detail. The translation was thus considered ideal reading for the genteel young female reader. Brooke has been credited with introducing Riccoboni to an English readership and her own work was influenced by Riccoboni's style. Indeed, more generally, Riccoboni's work played a significant role in the development and structure of the mid-century epistolary novel (a novel written as a series of letters), a genre made fashionable by the likes of Richardson.

The *Letters* sold well and ran to a third edition. Soon afterwards, Brooke published her first original epistolary novel, *The History of Lady Julia Mandeville* (1763). The novel

was a commercial and critical success, and ran to six editions by 1773. Reviewers praised Brooke's elegance of style, truth of character, delicacy and purity of sentiment and when, in 1764, the novel was translated into French, it was favourably reviewed by Voltaire. The hero of Brooke's work is in many ways typical of the popular mid-century figure of the man of feeling. The cultured but poor Harry is timid and sensitive and falls hopelessly in love with his rich benefactor's daughter, Julia. Their courtship is thwarted however by a series of misunderstandings provoked by a delayed letter, which allow the doomed hero and heroine to demonstrate their capacity for virtuous feeling and warm sensibility.

In the year that saw the publication of *Julia Mandeville*, Frances Brooke sailed to Canada along with her sister and son to join her husband in Quebec. The following year, she published *The History of Emily Montague*, a novel set in Canada. Often described as the first North American novel, *Emily Montague* contains lush descriptions of a Canadian landscape peopled with strongly drawn characters. The novel reflects upon the politics and customs of the French, Indian, Canadian and English while also exploring women's vulnerability in courtship and marriage. Brooke would leave Canada for a year in the autumn of 1764 and in late 1767, ahead of her husband, returned to her homeland for good.

Following the publication of two further French translations, in 1773 Frances Brooke purchased the King's Theatre with her brother-in-law, the actress Mary Ann Yates and her husband Richard. Brooke and Mary Ann Yates co-managed the theatre (commonly known as the Haymarket Opera House) until 1778. Sadly the Opera House could not be used to showcase Brooke's own writing for the stage. The theatre was refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain to mount plays forcing Brooke and Yates to rely exclusively on musical concerts and popular French and Italian operas. After the Opera House was sold in 1778, Brooke continued to try and get her plays performed. Finally, with the help of Covent Garden's theatre manager Thomas Harris, a production of her tragedy, *The Siege of Sinope*, was mounted in 1781. After this moderate success, Brooke also succeeded in having her comic opera *Rosina* performed at Covent Garden in 1782. It was a spectacular and resounding success, proving hugely popular with audiences. The light pastoral musical entertainment was performed two hundred times before 1800, and when it was published in 1783 it went to fourteen editions.

In 1777 Frances Brooke published her third novel *The Excursion*, a work which brilliantly satirises the self-serving and heartless world of fashionable society. Like [Frances Burney's *Evelina*](#) (1778), the novel follows the heroine's introduction to the world of fashionable London. Like *Evelina* too, the genteel but naïve heroine, Maria Villiers, risks personal ruin when she finds herself committing various social blunders and being plunged into a series of unfortunate encounters with rakes. The novel experiments with subplots and unconventional secondary characters, but most unusually of all centres around a young woman who desires literary fame. Maria is a sparky and resourceful girl, who not unlike Brooke, arrives in London with a trunk containing manuscripts that she hopes to have published.

Frances Brooke left London and returned to her native Lincolnshire in 1785. Her husband remained in his parish of Colney, Norfolk where he eventually died in January 1789. Frances Brooke died just two days later on 23 January at Sleaford, Lincolnshire, and was buried at the local church of St. Denys. Brooke's memorial plaque attests to her virtue as a woman and also as a writer: 'The union of superior literary talents with goodness of heart, rendered her works serviceable to the cause of those virtues of which her life was shining example'.

By the time of her death, Frances Brooke was highly esteemed by the public and contemporary critics. She was a remarkable and remarkably talented woman, who managed to walk a tightrope on which many women writers faltered. Though she actively sought literary fame, Brooke always maintained her reputation as a respectable woman. Today her literary and historical legacy lies in the contribution she made to the development of the English novel. She experimented with form and clearly regarded the novel as a relevant and important part of a wider cultural agenda. Brooke's witty sentimental novels conferred a new respectability onto the novel when it was still in its infancy. The enhanced status of female authorship combined with commercial success that Brooke attained would have been encouraging to other aspiring female writers. To the women writers who directly followed, such as < link to Frances Burney biography > **Frances Burney**, < link to Ann Radcliffe biography > **Ann Radcliffe** and < link to Charlotte Smith biography > **Charlotte Smith**, Frances Brooke's career set an admirable example.

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