

Sarah Fielding (1710-1768)
by Rebecca Garwood

Sarah Fielding was born on November 8 1710 at East Stour in Dorset. She was the fourth of seven children born to Edmund Fielding and Sarah Gould Fielding. Edmund was an impoverished descendent of the Earl of Denbigh, and his family claimed to be of the same lineage as the aristocratic Hapsburgs. In reality, Edmund was a penniless and pleasure-loving soldier. Although he had seen action with the great Duke of Marlborough his circumstances were greatly reduced by the time his children were born. Sarah Gould came from modestly affluent Somerset gentry. Her father, Sir Henry Gould, was a Judge of the Queen's Bench. It was he who endowed his daughter with the East Stour farmhouse in which Fielding was born. Sarah Fielding had three surviving sisters, with whom she always had a strong bond: Catherine, Ursula and Beatrice. There were also two brothers. The younger brother, Edmund, followed in his father's footsteps and became a soldier and had little contact with his family as an adult. Her elder brother was Henry Fielding, the author of *Tom Jones* (1749), who became famous as a magistrate and playwright as well as a celebrated novelist. Henry was to play an important role in Sarah's own career as a writer.

Sarah's mother died in 1718 when she was just seven years old. The six surviving children remained at East Stour under the care of their great-aunt. Sarah's father moved on his own to London and within nine months he had married for a second time. Edmund's new wife was a Catholic widow, Anne Rapha. Through her father's marriage Sarah gained six stepbrothers including the magistrate and social reformer John Fielding. Soon after the marriage the couple moved back to East Stour. However this new domestic arrangement was disastrous. Sarah's new stepmother was disliked and thoroughly distrusted by both her grandmother Lady Gould, and her great-aunt. This dislike was probably grounded in the anti-Catholic sentiment and religious prejudice that was so prevalent in the eighteenth century. Whatever the reason, the children were encouraged by their older relatives to be deliberately unruly and disrespectful toward their stepmother. When Lady Gould eventually moved away, she took the children with her and sent them off to various schools. Henry was sent to Eton and the older girls, including Sarah, were sent to a local private boarding school in Salisbury. Sarah's education was sporadic and much of her knowledge was acquired through private study. In 1721, Lady Gould embarked on legal action to claim custody of the children and the East Stour estate. She eventually won the case after much bitter and protracted wrangling. As a result, Sarah and her siblings saw little of their father in the ensuing years.

Little is known of Sarah's movements during the 1730s, although it appears that for some of this period she resided with her sisters and aunt in Salisbury. By the 1740s she was living in London. During this period she would alternate her domestic arrangements, sometimes living with her sisters, sometimes with her brother Henry and his family. None of the Fielding sisters married. Although the family considered themselves 'gentry', their status and rank were insufficient to compensate for their lack of wealth, and the sisters had no dowry to tempt a husband from their own class. On the death of

Lady Gould in 1733 the division of the proceeds from her will left Sarah with a small sum, but the amount was not enough to support and sustain her.

With few respectable routes to earning a living open to women, Sarah turned to novel writing as a legitimate way to supplement her income. Today Henry Fielding is still better known and more widely admired than his sister. In her own lifetime, however, Sarah was rated highly by such popular writers as Clara Reeve and the great and influential Samuel Richardson, who believed Sarah and her brother to be equally gifted. Richardson had revolutionised the novel with his best-selling *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) which consciously privileged religion, moral improvement and virtue over aristocratic libertinism. Richardson paved the way for numerous women writers, including Sarah Fielding, by elevating the status of the novel, and setting the pattern for moral tales of love that were more respectable for a genteel lady to read or write. More directly, Richardson aided Sarah by printing and publishing many of her works. Clearly being the sister to Henry Fielding and the friend of Samuel Richardson helped Sarah in her writing career and conferred a literary acceptance on her work. Regrettably, however, these connections have also tended to obscure her own considerable achievements as novelist in her own right.

Sarah's writing career began when she lodged with her brother and acted as his housekeeper in the period after the death of his first wife. In 1742 Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* was published, to which Sarah possibly contributed the letter to Leonora from Horatio. She is also thought to have contributed a narrative of the life of Anne Boleyn to Fielding's *Miscellanies* published in 1743. 1744 saw the publication of Sarah Fielding's first novel, *The Adventures of David Simple*. In the following twenty years she would produce a sequel to *David Simple* (*Volume the Last*) and a spin-off entitled *Familiar Letters*. Throughout the rest of her career she regularly published as 'the author of David Simple' - a sign of the popularity of her most enduring work. Throughout the rest of the career, Fielding would produce at least three more novels, including *The History of the Countess of Dellwyn* (1759), *The History of Ophelia* (1760), which Fielding claimed to have revised from an extant manuscript, and a work for children. This first-known, full-length English novel written specifically for children, entitled *The Governess, or, Little Female Academy*, was published in 1749, and later rewritten (without the inset fairy tales) by Martha Sherwood in 1820. It has also been suggested, though never proven, that Sarah authored the anonymously published *Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House* (1762), a sentimental novel containing a group of fictionalised accounts of the lives of some of the prostitutes admitted into the Magdalen House charity.

In addition to writing novels, Sarah revealed herself to an astute literary critic in her influential *Remarks on Clarissa* (1749) and a skilled translator - Sarah had been taught Latin and Greek by Arthur Collier, the brother of her friend Jane Collier - in her *Xenophon's Memoirs of Socrates* (1762). This translation would remain the standard text until the beginning of this century. She also collaborated with her close companion Jane Collier in an experimentally allegorical tale called *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* (1754).

The Adventures of David Simple was published anonymously and cost the same as *Joseph Andrews*, six shillings. The novel proved very popular. It sold well. A second edition was available within ten weeks of the publication of the first, and the novel was quickly translated into French and German. *David Simple* is a moral romance, in which the main protagonist, cheated out of an inheritance by his brother, leaves home in search of sincere and honest friendship. It is also a sentimental novel, in which effusive feeling, benevolence and sympathy evidence the hero's good and virtuous heart. The hero rises above corruption and social injustice and eventually finds happiness in marriage and in setting up a rural community, in which an idyllic rural life can be lived without the taint of the hostile modern world. The novel is not as widely read as it was in the eighteenth century, and the modern reader often feels that the characterisation is one-dimensional and not developed thoroughly enough. Yet this is to misread the novel and the author's intent. As well as providing entertainment, Fielding argued that novels should inculcate virtue. Her works offer a powerful social critique and reflect the position of women within eighteenth-century society. In her unsettling sequel to the novel, *Volume the Last* the reader enters a dark world in which moral goodness offers no immunity from destruction.

Between 1750 and 1751 Sarah's sisters died in tragically quick succession, their deaths followed closely by Henry Fielding's in 1754. In her grief, and in a bid to save money, Sarah withdrew from London society. Even though she continued to write and publish, she still struggled to make ends meet. In 1758 she moved to a small cottage at Walcot, just outside Bath, where she lived until her death. Her financial difficulties were partially alleviated by the support of a local wealthy philanthropist Ralph Allen, and from the famous bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu, and her sister Sarah Scott. In Fielding's later years, Sarah Scott invited her friend to live with her and a group of women in a community which would resemble the fictional society of women in Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762). Fielding declined and Scott's plans were never realised.

Following her death in 1768, a tablet was erected in the west porch at Bath Abbey. It remains there today and is reportedly large and attractive. Sadly the commemorative inscription contains many errors about Sarah Fielding's life, and concentrates firmly on her virtues as a person rather than her career as a writer. However, Sarah Fielding is now seen as a key figure in the development and history of the English novel, and not merely a sister and friend to two of the most well-known male novelists of the eighteenth century.

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