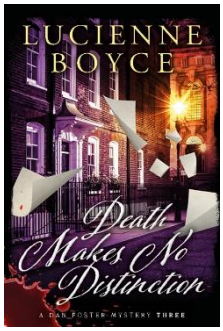
DAN FOSTER AND THE BLUESTOCKINGS



In *Death Makes No Distinction*, Dan Foster investigates a crime in the literary world when Louise Parmeter (author of numerous works including *Memoirs of Herself and Others* and *An Address to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women*) is murdered, leaving her protégée, the poet Agnes Taylor (*Poems on Several Occasions*, *The Afric's Lament*), to grieve the loss of an influential patron.

Louise Parmeter and Agnes Taylor are fictitious, but their stories and writings are based on a group of eighteenth-century women writers and intellectuals who formed literary salons – gatherings at which they discussed philosophical and literary subjects. These women were often labelled "bluestockings", a reference to the informal blue wool (rather than black silk) stockings said to have been worn by the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet when he attended salons run by the author Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800).

Here I explore the lives of the women who were the inspiration for these characters: Mary Robinson, Hannah More, Ann Yearsley and Harriette Wilson.

Mary Robinson (Perdita) (1758?–1800) (Actress, Writer, Feminist)

Mary Robinson as Perdita

Mary Robinson was born Mary Darby in Bristol in 1758 (although there is some uncertainty about the year of her birth). Her father was a sea captain and merchant, and she was brought up in fairly affluent circumstances. She attended Hannah More's school on Park Street. However, the family went down in the world when her father lost his money in an investment in Newfoundland. Her parents separated and he moved in with his mistress. When he stopped sending money to Mrs Darby she tried to make a living by opening a school in London, but he objected to his wife working and she was forced to close the school.

Mary, encouraged by David Garrick, was planning a career on the stage, but met and married Thomas Robinson (1750–1802) instead. Like her father, he proved to be another husband who disapproved of his wife's ability to earn a living and so the acting career was abandoned. He was arrested for debt and in 1775 the Robinson family, which included a daughter born in 1774, lived in the Fleet Prison. Mary published her first book of poems during this period and obtained the patronage of the Duchess of Devonshire.

The experience of debtors' gaol changed Robinson's mind about his wife appearing on the stage, and in 1776 she was taken on by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, manager of the Drury Lane Theatre. She was a success as an actress, and excelled in "breeches" parts – dressing in male clothes, thus showing off her legs. She was playing Perdita in *A Winter's Tale* when she became mistress to George, Prince of Wales. She was afterwards known by the name "Perdita", while he signed his letters to her "Florizel", Perdita's lover in Shakespeare's play. She gave up her stage career when the Prince promised to provide for her, but when he grew tired of her and the promised support failed to materialise, she resorted to threatening to publish his letters. He bought her off with a cash payment and an annuity.

Mary lived an extravagant lifestyle and was often in debt. Joshua Reynolds, John Hoppner, Thomas Gainsborough, George Romney and fellow Bristolian Thomas Lawrence queued up to paint her. The satirists also had a field day, and she featured in an early form of revenge pornography served up by a magazine which invited its male readers to send in contributions to its series of stories about women behaving "badly" which were published with graphic illustrations. She was a fashion icon whose styles were copied by society ladies. Her lovers included Charles James Fox and Colonel Banestre Tarleton, a dashing cavalry officer who as MP for Liverpool supported the slave trade.

In 1783 Mary was partially paralysed, though the cause of her illness is not known. She suffered from ill health for the rest of her life and became dependent on opium to control the pain. She sometimes wrote while under the influence of the drug, several years before Samuel Taylor Coleridge tried the experiment and produced *Kubla Khan*. She and Coleridge later became friends.

In 1784 she went to France to escape her creditors. She returned to England, and began writing poetry, plays and novels in the late 1780s. She was a prolific author, and her works include A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination (1799). Politically she was a radical, and her support for the French Revolution, at least in its early days, is evident in her writing. She was often the subject of attack in the Tory press for her "Jacobin" views. However, she also sympathised with Marie Antoinette who she had seen and admired during a visit to Paris in 1781. Her friends included William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Mary Robinson died in December 1800 and was buried in St Peter and St Andrew Church, Old Windsor.

Find out more:

Perdita: The Life of Mary Robinson by Paula Byrne (Harper Perennial, 2004)

Robinson [née Darby], Mary [Perdita] (1756/1758?–1800) by Martin J Levy, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, https://doi-org.ezproxy2.londonlibrary.co.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/23857
(Published 2004, this version 03 January 2008)

Hannah More (1745–1833) (Patron)

Hannah More

Hannah More was born in Fishponds, Bristol, where her father was a school teacher. He encouraged her to pursue a wider education than that usually allowed to girls. He taught her Latin, and she also learned French, Italian, and Spanish – though her father did stop her learning too much mathematics, which was not considered suitable for girls. The family later moved into Bristol, where her father set up a school for boys which he and his wife ran. He also established a girls' school in Trinity Street. The school later moved to Park Street, and was run by Hannah and her sisters Mary, Elizabeth, Sarah and Martha.

Literary success came early for Hannah, with a popular play promoting the virtues of domesticity aimed at school girls, which was published when she was seventeen. Ever the moralist, she also wrote dramas for girls based on Old Testament stories. After her wealthy fiancé, William Turner (whose property, Belmont House, was part of the Tyntesfield estate until it became the property of the National Trust in 2001), jilted her, he compensated her by settling an annuity on her which gave her financial security and independence.

She became a renowned essayist and playwright, who regarded the theatre as a vehicle for exercising moral influence. She counted Dr Johnson, David Garrick, and Edmund Burke amongst her friends, as well as the bluestockings Elizabeth Montagu, Hester Chapone and Elizabeth Carter. She was an anti-slavery campaigner who was on the committee of the Female Anti-Slavery Society in Bristol, and a friend of William Wilberforce's. In 1788 she wrote the anti-slavery poem, *Slavery*.

She wrote several books exhorting women to lead virtuous, Christian and domestic lives. Her best-selling 1799 book on women's education, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, rejected Mary Wollstonecraft's demand for women's rights.

She later turned her moralising and evangelical attention to the working classes, setting up charity schools for poor children. She drew the line at teaching them to write: being able to read the Bible, work hard, and defer to their social superiors was all they needed to learn. Even this limited curriculum drew criticism from clergymen and employers who thought it inappropriate that those destined to labour should have so much education, and feared it might unsettle them. She lectured the poor on their duties in a series of tracts, and in 1792 published *Village politics: addressed to all the mechanics, journeymen, and day labourers, in Great Britain to counter the ideas coming out of France.* A staunch royalist and conservative, she opposed parliamentary reform, atheism, and women's rights, and she continued to lecture the poor on their duties in a series of moralising tracts.

Poetic Landscape: Hannah More's verse displayed at Tyntesfield

In 1784 she moved to Cowslip in Somerset, where she had a cottage built. By 1801 her sisters had retired from teaching, and she moved into a house in Wrington, Somerset with them. By 1819 all of her sisters were dead. In 1828 she moved to Clifton in Bristol, where she died in 1833. She was buried at All Saints' Church in Wrington with her sisters. The church has a memorial tablet and bust of Hannah More.

Find out more:

Hannah More: The First Victorian, Anne Stott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

More, Hannah (1745–1833) by S J Skedd, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, https://doi-org.ezproxy2.londonlibrary.co.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/19179 (Published 2004, this version 25 September 2014)

Ann Yearsley (c1753–1806) (Working Class Poet)

Ann Yearsley

Ann Yearsley was born Ann Cromartie in Bristol. Her mother was a milkwoman, and it was she and Ann's eldest brother who taught Ann to read and write. Nothing is known about her father. Ann was brought up to take over her mother's trade, which is how she earned the title "Lactilla" when she became a published poet.

Ann married a labourer, John Yearsley, in 1774 and they had six (some sources say seven) children. In 1784, the family was destitute and living in a stable in Clifton. They were rescued by local philanthropists, and Ann found work selling milk on the streets. She was already writing poetry, and it was the cook at the More sisters' school on Park Street who showed Hannah More some of Ann's poetry. Hannah was impressed by the talent of this semi-educated working woman, and set herself up as Ann's patron. She taught her grammar and spelling, and arranged for her first collection, *Poems, on Several Occasions,* to be published by subscription in 1785.

Tensions between the two women soon emerged, however. Although Hannah was happy to promote Ann as a poetic milkwoman, she did not intend that Ann should give up her work or change her station in life. She also decided that Ann and her husband – who was considered feckless – should not have direct access to her earnings. These were tied up in a trust fund. Ann's demands that the money be turned over to her became increasingly bitter and Hannah More's response increasingly high-handed. She refused to return Ann's manuscript poems to her, and told her they had been burned at the printers. Before long their spat became public, and in 1787 Ann published her own version of the disagreement in which she said she had been rushed into signing the Deed of Trust.

The trust was wound up, the two women parted company, and Ann found a new patron, Frederick Augustus Hervey, the earl of Bristol. She used some of the money to set up a circulating library in Hotwells, Bristol. She published more poems, a play and a historical novel. After the death of her husband in 1803, she moved to Melksham, where she died in 1806.

Find out more:

Selected Poems: Ann Yearsley, Tim Burke, ed., (Cheltenham, The Cider Press, 2003)

Yearsley [née Cromartie], Ann (bap. 1753, d. 1806) by Mary Waldron, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, https://doi-org.ezproxy2.londonlibrary.co.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/30206 (Published 23 September 2004)

Harriette Wilson (1786–1845) (Courtesan, Memoirist)

George IV as Prince Regent

Harriette Wilson was born Harriette Dubouchet in Marylebone, Middlesex. Her Swiss father was a clockmaker and her mother a silk-stocking mender. When she was fifteen she left home – possibly she ran away – and became the mistress of Lord Craven. There followed a string of affairs with hons, marquesses and lords. She also had liaisons with the Duke of Wellington and the Prince Regent. Like other women in her situation, she lived on annuities, gifts and cash settlements provided by her wealthy clients, and sometimes by parents wishing to free their sons from her influence.

Eventually, it seems Harriette lost her hold in the fashionable world. In need of money, she hit on the idea of publishing her memoirs which she had written, she claimed, only to "amuse myself". She let it be known that for a price she would leave out the payer's name. Several men paid up, although Wellington is said to have uttered the famous words, "Publish, and be damned!"

However, the first publisher to whom she took the memoirs rejected them. He was John Murray, Byron's publisher. Harriette accused Murray of treating her with contempt at their meeting, and said he did not even look at the manuscript she left with him. As will be seen below, John Murray's did eventually publish the memoirs in 1957!

The Duke of Wellington:
"Publish, and be damned!"

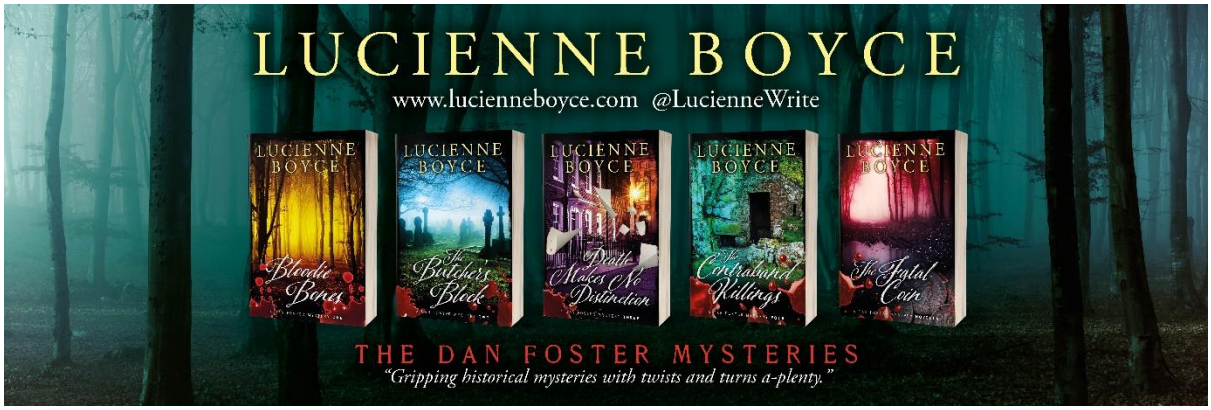
Harriette Wilson then sent the book anonymously to John Joseph Stockdale, who published it in four volumes in 1825, with author and publisher sharing the profits. These were not insubstantial. The memoirs were best sellers and ran into thirty editions in the first year of publication. Yet in spite of their salacious promise, readers discovered that the memoirs were actually rather dull.

The combined book sales and blackmail income made Harriette a fortune, In 1826 she married a soldier called William Henry Rochfort, who was in debtors' prison at the time. They settled in Paris, but she later returned to London a widow. She died in Chelsea in 1845.

Find out more:

Harriette Wilson's Memoirs: The Greatest Courtesan of her Age, Lesley Blanch ed., (London: John Murray, 1957)

Wilson [née Dubouchet], Harriette [known as Mrs Q] (1786–1845) by K D Reynolds, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, https://doi-org.ezproxy2.londonlibrary.co.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/29653 (Published 23 September 2004, this version 23 September 2010)



Picture Credits:

Mary Robinson as Perdita: Richard Cosway, c1779, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Public Domain

Hannah More: British Library on Flickr, No Known Copyright Restrictions

Ann Yearsley: British Library on Flickr, No Known Copyright Restrictions

George IV as Prince Regent: Henry Bone, 1816, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Public Domain

The Duke of Wellington: William Say, 1828, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Public Domain