

*Mrs Delany*  
A LIFE

CLARISSA CAMPBELL ORR

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Granville Family Tree</i>	<i>xvi</i>
Introduction	1
<i>Part I The Early Years</i>	
1 Miss Mary Granville	7
2 Cornish Bride	22
3 The New Widow and the American Prince	44
4 Irish Idyll	65
5 Woman of Fashion	84
6 Contented Aspasia	108
<i>Part II A Dean's Wife</i>	
7 Mrs Delany	131
8 The Duties of a Dean's Wife	146
9 Life, Love and Literature in the Wellesbourne Circle	168
10 The Lawsuit Years	188
11 From Gladness to Sadness	211

## CONTENTS

- 12 Bernard and the Duchess Befriend Rousseau and  
Patrick Passes Away 224

### *Part III New Horizons*

- 13 Seven Widows and the Friendship Circle 243  
14 The First Collages and Bluestocking Initiatives 264  
15 Reviewing the Collages and Glimpsing Royal  
Felicity 281  
16 Poignant Farewells and New Developments 306  
Coda 345
- Cast of Characters* 346  
*Notes* 359  
*Select Bibliography* 385  
*Index* 388

## *Introduction*

A grey-haired woman, shrouded in black, Mary Granville Delany sits for her portrait. Superficially she seems isolated, impoverished and resigned to her fate as long-grieving widow. John Opie's 1782 painting of Mary as an elderly woman would memorialise her in history, but shows Mary in only one light, and, as such, misrepresents her.

Opie was not alone in perceiving Mary to be a poor, friendless widow. Her friend, Lady Louisa Stuart, when recollecting who had benefited from George III, drily observed:

We are told that the king heard by chance of an old gentlewoman of the name of Delany in distress and made some provision for her . . . All in *charity* you would think – the old *gentlewoman* who bye-the-bye was née Granville and the last of that noble family had been familiarly known to the K and Q for several years, and peculiarly the object of their respect and affection.<sup>1</sup>

Mary was far from the charitable case she was made out to be by her later contemporaries – an image that has held fast in public perception. She was, in fact, a vibrant, multi-talented and well-connected woman throughout her long life. She was not solitary: she was constantly at the heart of family life and something of a matriarch with four nieces and nephews, several great-nieces and nephews and two godchildren who had children of their own. Mary took her role as godmother seriously, and among her own kin ensured the Granville name was preserved. Most importantly, in her later years, between



## MRS DELANY

1772 and 1782, the time of Opie's portrait, Mary Delany invented an extraordinary new kind of flower portraiture by using collaged paper cut-outs on a black ground. This new art form in turn gave her great esteem in her circle of intimates, who also admired her skill as a letter-writer.

Mary Delany's collages are the achievement for which she is best known today, a result of Ruth Hayden's 1992 charming biography, still the best short introduction to her, and the 2009 Yale Center for British Art exhibition. But despite her success, Mary did not regard the collages as true art, and was always of a mind that friends like the connoisseur and scientific patron Margaret Cavendish-Bentinck, 2nd Duchess of Portland, or her sister Anne, were much more knowledgeable than she was about plants. Arguably, Mary even preferred collecting fossils and shells to making what became known as the *Flora Delanica*, twenty of which were given to the queen. Far from being the central achievement of Mary's existence, her paper cut-outs were a by-product of her life as an amateur artist working in oils, pencil and crayons, and as a talented decorative artist who enriched her homes and those of her friends.

As a young woman, Mary Delany defied expectation. She first became a widow at the young age of 24, and, instead of quickly remarrying as would have been the norm in Georgian society, soon adapted to single life and relished her independence. In about 1742 Mary's Anglo-Irish friend Anne Donnellan wrote a pen-portrait of Mary as a 'Contented Aspasia'. The term was derived from a legendary classical figure, the companion of the Greek statesman Pericles, but in the eighteenth century was used to denote a cultured, wise woman with great conversational gifts, and with no overtones of a sexual nature. But Mary's contentment was hard won, and seemed especially unlikely after her uncle, Lord George Lansdowne, had mismanaged her original marriage settlement.

As a happy single woman, Mary may not have had to earn her living in the modern sense, but she hated being idle and was extremely self-disciplined with her time. She was a keen observer of fashion and designed many of the dresses she wore at court. She was also as keenly observant of manners and morals as she was of landscapes pictures and gardens. She was a stickler for propriety but did not believe that being a good Christian meant leading an ascetic life. Being profoundly devout did not mean being dull. Mary was well-read and interested

## INTRODUCTION

in the status and education of women, the nature of marriage and even whether women ought to marry at all. The term ‘feminist’ had yet to be invented, but there were already conversations between moralists, opinion formers and theologians about how to regulate sexual behaviour and what made a happy marriage. These were directed more to women than to men, but questions about both sexes were in the air, and Mary never stopped pondering them and observing how variously women experienced wedlock. And so a portrait of Mary’s life, and the circles in which she moved, sheds much light on the wider issues and debates of the day.

The first part of this biography will explore how Mary’s talents developed and how her familial and personal resources, spiritual, intellectual and cultural, enabled her to become a pattern gentlewoman in a libertine age, an era that could be brutally exploitative of young women, many of whom were more vulnerable than Mary. She never found herself in financial straits (even so her relatives tried to obtain a courtier role for her, with a salary and a pension); indeed she was more worried about how to find formal positions and thus financial security for two of her Granville cousins. As to marriage, Mary had more than eight proposals during the course of her lifetime, and most of them were from entirely suitable and sometimes well-off suitors. But she turned them all down, sometimes to the annoyance of men who thought they knew what she wanted better than she did herself, and often to the frustration of her family.

The question then arises, if she was so happy to stay unmarried, what was it about Patrick Delany, an Anglo-Irish clergyman and noted public intellectual in Dublin, that in 1743 he persuaded her to change her mind? The second part of the book explores how Mary became an Anglo-Irish wife, how her new husband put his egalitarian principles into practice, how their marriage turned out, what their households in Dublin and County Down were like and how much her nieces, nephews and godchildren meant to her, as well as friends of long standing who recurred during her long life.

The third and final part of this book looks at how Mary became a matriarch, and how she ensured that the Granville name would be perpetuated. She was pleased to be an artist praised by Horace Walpole for inventing her new form of art. Not everyone in her extensive network of relatives and connections will be

## MRS DELANY

discussed – if they were, this book would be too heavy to pick up – but I hope something of an intricate web of kin and friendship can be glimpsed, as well as the many-faceted character of her simultaneous interests, as we follow her dance through the music of time.

In 1861–2 Mary's great-great-niece Lady Llanover introduced her to the mid-Victorian reading public by publishing two substantial volumes of letters from the family's collection. This is a great resource, which will be drawn on throughout the book. Although the oeuvre has been endlessly cherry-picked for quotes on Georgian social and cultural life (frequently cited out of context by subsequent historians), it nonetheless sheds light on the wide number of figures Mary was related to and met, including the young John Wesley; the flamboyant Georgiana, 5th Duchess of Devonshire; and composers, writers and philosophers such as G.F. Handel, Jonathan Swift, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Burney together with his daughter Frances. The Llanover volumes present a rich selective picture, as so many intimate letters were destroyed because of conventions of decorum, and still others because they revealed too much of a patron–client society constantly engaged in string pulling. The biographer becomes constantly aware of these gaps, but nonetheless hopes her readers will enjoy this exercise in making Mary's wider context, and particularly her musings on marriage and family life, more evident.

**Mrs Delany**  
**Clarissa Campbell Orr**

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

**Part 1: The Early Years**

Chapter 1 Miss Mary Granville

Chapter 2 Cornish Bride

Chapter 3 The New Widow and the American Prince

Chapter 4 Irish Idyll

Chapter 5 Woman of Fashion

Chapter 6 Contented Aspasia

**Part 2: A Dean's Wife**

Chapter 7 Mrs. Delany

Chapter 8 Life Love and Literature in the Wellesbourne Circle

Chapter 9 The Law Suit Years

Chapter 10 From Gladness to Sadness

Chapter 11 Bernard and the Duchess Befriend Rousseau and Patrick Passes Away

**Part 3: New Horizons**

Chapter 12 Seven Widows and the Friendship Circle

Chapter 13 The First Collages and Bluestocking Initiatives

Chapter 14 Reviewing the Collages and Glimpsing Royal Felicity 1775-78

Chapter 15 Poignant Farewells and New Developments 1782-86

Chapter 16 Windsor and Kew, 1786-1788

Coda

Gazeteer: Mrs Delany's Family and Friends



26. This was the very first collage, composed in 1773 when Mary noticed the vibrant red of a scarlet geranium's similarity to a silk garment in the duchess's dressing room at Bulstrode and decided almost on a whim to try and 'draw' it by using coloured papers. Mary did not consider it high art but 'frippery' because of its use of perishable materials, and had no intention of depicting nearly a thousand specimens for the 'Flora Delanica', as it subsequently came to be known.





27. This drawing by Susanna Highmore depicts the circle of the publisher and novelist Samuel Richardson. It included his daughters and their friends, who were all in contact with Anne Dewes and Mary, and are thus a link between the 'feminism' of women such as Judith Drake and Mary Astell and a more constrictive middle class 'feminism'.



28. This print of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, based on Allan Ramsay's famous painting of him in Armenian costume, depicts him almost as a saint blessed from heaven. This is not so far from how his disciples regarded him, of whom Mary's brother Bernard was one.



29. The Shakespeare Temple in the actor David Garrick's Thameside garden. Garrick created a Shakespeare Festival in 1769, much discussed by Mary's niece as well as the Bulstrode circle.



30. Wright's depiction of Boothby includes a book labelled 'Rousseau', as he had been entrusted with publishing one of his hero's autobiographical writings. Wright has also depicted him reclining in thoughtful contemplation, in the style of Elizabethan portrait miniatures.





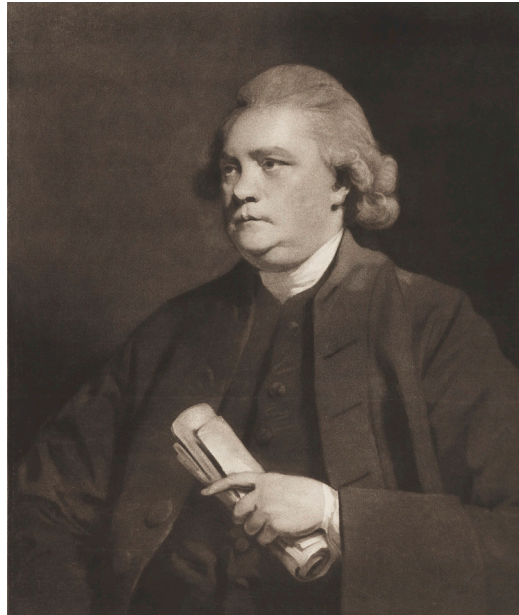
31. Bishop Hurd was very much a part of Mary's inner coterie. He had tutored the older sons of George III and Queen Charlotte. His portrait hung in the queen's bedchamber in Buckingham Palace, alongside one of Mrs Delany.



32. This is a portrait by one of Queen Charlotte's favourite painters, the German-born Johan Zoffany. The queen's robe hangs on the back of a chair, suggesting she is happy to discard it once ceremonial duties are over. The cockatoo and the flowers hint at the queen's interests in natural history and botany.



33. William Mason was also a part of Mary's inner circle, although his radical Whig views were not in harmony with her Tory loyalism. However, they had common views on poetry and garden aesthetics, suggesting that these were significant literary influences on the creation of the famous collages.



34. Queen Charlotte's gifts show how closely she had observed Mary's methods. The bodkin was used to manipulate the paper components on their flour-paste foundation. The purse, which would hang from a belt, evoked the summer visits between Windsor and Bulstrode when there was respite for Charlotte from court ceremony and time for shared creativity with a trusted friend.





35-7. This white knotted bedspread was designed by Mary as a bedcover for Thomas, eldest son of Sally Sandford and her husband Daniel. Several people probably worked on this, following the inked in pattern with different success. The three images show the whole bedspread, a single flower, and a section where the inked pattern is incomplete.

38.



39.



40.



41.



38–41. Even if Mary regarded her ‘paper mosaics’ only as fripperies, she did aim to be botanically accurate. Her first ‘essay’ combined samples from South Africa and North America, demonstrating the wide horizons already available to British gardeners and plant collectors in the 1770s. In her own day, it was only shown to a select group of friends, including the royal family.



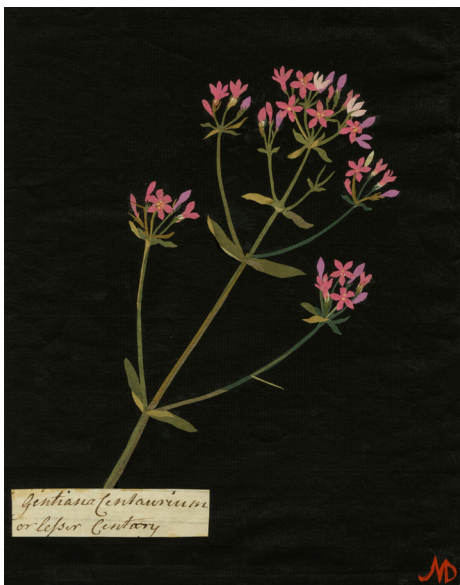
42.



43.



44.



45.



42–5. The duchess's admiration helped the making of collages become an absorbing project, keeping Mary happily occupied and self-reliant whether she was in London, Wellesbourne, Bulstrode or elsewhere. The collages constituted an album amicorum created through the enthusiasm of her friends' providing her with specimens, and in devotional terms, a homage to the Creator.



46. This spectacular specimen was a gift from a friend of whom nothing is known, and was made at Mary's London home, St James's Place in June 1778.



47.



48.



49.



50.



47–50. In the top left, American nightshade cradles the deep purple flowers in its heart. Green leaves highlight similar colour in the veins and flowers. In the top right, delicate silvery tones reveal a deeper pink centre. In the bottom left is one of Mary's most flamboyant collages: a bay-leaved passion flower shades from purple to pink, with citrus yellow highlighting the buds. To the right is a quieter essay, offsetting amber-pink and smoky blue. Though complex structurally it was only her twenty-second collage, one of nine dianthus in total.



51. The Great Magnolia was grown in greenhouses, sometimes with great difficulty. A variety of enthusiasts tried their hand at it and shared notes about their successes and failures, as well as discussing their original specimens, the 'mother plants' (see pp. 285–6). Just as men selectively bred horses or hunting dogs, women could observe which plants produced.





52. Sarah Trimmer was the daughter of Joshua Kirby, who had taught perspectival drawing to George III and Queen Charlotte. The queen asked her to advise Mrs Boscawen, one of Mary's closest friends, on setting up a Sunday school in Windsor. Her *Story of the Robins* was a bestseller for over 200 years.



53. Leonard Smelt was much liked by George III. He was a military engineer who had worked in Halifax, Canada, and subsequently in the Scottish Highlands after the defeat of the 1745 Jacobite rising. He had also tutored the king's eldest two sons. George III gave him and his wife a cottage at Kew where Mary stayed when the royal couple was resident there, and she was with the Smelts when she contracted her last illness.