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Frances Burney's Adventure at Ilfracombe

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Abstract: This article concerns an incident, recounted in Frances Burney's *Journals*, about a visit to the Devon coast in 1817. While staying in the seaside town of Ilfracombe, Burney was caught by the tides on a solitary walk and had to climb onto a high rock for safety, where she remained for several hours in tempestuous conditions in serious danger of drowning. She was accompanied only by her small dog Diane, who plays a significant role in the story. Ever since it was published, her "Ilfracombe Journal" has been popular amongst readers, and new layers of meaning are added when it is read alongside artistic representations of women at the seashore. The unique features of Burney's account include a sense of suspense and danger that draws on narrative elements from the Gothic tradition, in combination with a realistic rendering of a woman's confrontation with the elements.

At the age of sixty-five, Frances Burney almost drowned on a visit to the small coastal town of Ilfracombe in North Devon. Some years later in a letter of 1-7 September 1824, she wrote to her sister Esther of her "narrow" escape on the stormy day when no one knew where she was, and she feared "abruptly ending my career unknown & unheard of, in becoming food to Whales or Sharks" (*JL* 11: 550-553; 552). She can half joke about it after the fact, of course, but it is still true that she was very nearly a casualty to the sea. To use her words, this "extraordinary adventure" occurred in late September 1817 (*JL* 10: 691) when Burney was near the end of a three-month stay at Ilfracombe where her son Alexander participated in a summer study group preparing for his Cambridge exams. Meanwhile, her husband, General d'Arblay, was away in France. Burney and her son had arrived in Ilfracombe (from their home in Bath) in early July, and they found lodgings with the family of a local businessman, Robert Ramsay. They were wrapping up their visit when this incident occurred, and, as this essay argues, Burney's journal account is both historically significant and written with a narrative force that illustrates the power—and the dangers—of the sea. Kate Chisholm has rightly compared it to a stand-alone short story (264). Its real-life elements of suspense at times cast a Gothic chill over the narrative. To summarize what happened, Burney

had been walking alone on the beach when she was caught by the tide and had to climb onto a rock for shelter, where she remained for many hours in stormy conditions and in constant danger of being washed out to sea. Her account of being trapped by the rising tide is nothing short of riveting and is a contribution to several different narrative traditions, including depictions of the sea, animals, and the Gothic.

There are two substantial references to the incident in surviving Burney letters: one is to Princess Elizabeth, written soon after the event in October 1817, and the other is to her sister Esther written in September 1824 and quoted above.[1] The third and major source is known as the "Ilfracombe Journal," a detailed account written in a separate notebook in which she states "it is now 1823."[2] A few weeks after the incident, when Burney reunited with her husband in Bath, he made her promise to write to his friends in France about the experience. His terminal illness and death in 1818 prevented Burney from doing so at the time, but she finally wrote out the story in 1823. It was not unusual for years to pass before one of Burney's journal accounts was finished, as her Waterloo diary took many years to complete (*JL* 6: 702). This practice was a type of "delayed writing," which Hilary Havens has analyzed in light of other journals and notebooks ("Memorializing" 32). Lorna Clark similarly comments on Burney "re-reading and re-writing the old stories of triumph and pain and trying retrospectively to bring them to conclusion" (296). As for Burney's time in North Devon, the surviving manuscript is annotated on the first page with the words: "1817 / Adventures at Ilfracomb. / (written at a subsequent period)" (*JL* 10: 691). It was first published posthumously in 1846 in the seventh and last volume of her *Diaries*, edited by her niece Charlotte Barrett (7: 282-301). It proved a popular story, and it was immediately taken up by reviewers and reprinted in the press in an abridged form. One journal called it "Perilous Position:—Surrounded by the Tide," and another titled it "Perilous Adventure of Miss Burney,"[3] following Barrett's own use of the term "Perilous Position" (7: 269), and highlighting Burney's indebtedness to the adventure tale.

Ilfracombe, a small fishing town, was just beginning to become a tourist destination in 1817, one that was less expensive for travelers on a budget looking for a holiday at the seashore (Worth 49). Burney and her son (along with their dog, Diane) had taken a coach from Bath, stopping for tea in Taunton before travelling overnight to Barnstaple,

where they hired a chaise for the last ten miles to Ilfracombe (*JL* 10: 534-35). Upon arrival, visitors could see across the water to places like Rhossili on the Welsh coast, and Burney was impressed by the sea views, noting that from her apartment "we can behold all the Vessels that pass to & from Bristol & Ireland, or Wales" (*JL* 10: 581). In the 1820s, Ilfracombe became an even more popular destination, and tunnels were built for easier access to the beaches for vacationers, with separate bathing coves in which women and men could swim (Figure 1).[4] The region became a magnet for those interested in marine biology, including a parade of well-known figures such as Philip Gosse, Charles Kingsley, and George Henry Lewes (Lamplugh 69-76). The latter was accompanied by George Eliot, who wrote in her 1856 "Ilfracombe Recollections" that she was astonished by the coastline, the "steep precipitous rocks" and the "sharply cut fragments of dark rocks jutting out from the sea" (264). Even with more visitors, amenities, and hotels from the Victorian period onward, one aspect never changed, namely the crashing waves that to this day are perilous and that have long fueled tales about drownings and shipwrecks.

Ilfracombe is located on the Bristol Channel, which has the second highest tidal range in the world after Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy. High tide at Ilfracombe is normally in excess of twenty feet; low tide usually finds vessels in the harbor resting "in the mud" (*Hunt's* 246). Burney scholar Hester Davenport consulted the Hydrographic Office of the United Kingdom about records for the day of Burney's ordeal, likely Thursday, 25 September 1817, and ascertained that the tide at Ilfracombe then would have been 9.4 meters or thirty feet high (2). This height was dangerous, as any number of news reports—past and present—indicate. To cite just a few examples, on 11 August 1825, a young woman named Emma Vidal drowned "whilst bathing at Wildersmouth," the exact location of Burney's ordeal.[5] A turn-of-the-century guidebook features a photograph of "A Rough Sea at Wildersmouth" (*Ilfracombe* 62). The cliffs, too, were dangerous, and a young boy searching for birds' nests died from injuries sustained when he fell "over a tremendous precipice at Wildersmouth" in 1824.[6] In August 1859, a local woman was carried out to the sea by the tide and, until help arrived, held onto a rock that "rose almost perpendicularly from the water," an incident reminiscent of what happened to Burney.[7] As a reporter opined, "If sea bathing has its pleasures, it also has its

perils."[8] Shipwrecks were not uncommon, and one newspaper article reported a first-hand account of a storm in 1795 when a passing ship sent out distress signals in the middle of the night after encountering "waves like mountains breaking with terrific roar upon the rocks."[9] In October of the following year, a ship called *The London* sank in a cove off of Ilfracombe. It is alleged that approximately fifty people drowned, some of whom could have been either slaves or French prisoners of war (Lloyd). Thus, there were tales enough of drownings and shipwrecks in recent memory, close to the time of Burney's 1817 visit.

Coincidentally, the great landscape painter J. M. W. Turner had visited the area in February of the same year, making sketches and paintings to be used for a book of engravings about the coastlines of England.[10] His father's family was from the nearby inland town of South Moulton in North Devon. While working in the county in 1817, Turner made a sketch of Ilfracombe that depicts a shipwreck in a storm. John Ruskin called it the precursor for the other sea paintings that Turner would undertake (48-50). Ferocious waves dominate the picture with the remains of the ship appearing as insignificant as broken twigs. As people watch from atop the cliff, menacing clouds and a louring sky complete the darkened landscape. Turner's *Ilfracomb, North Devon* was an ur-text for his future work, depicting the power and fury of the natural elements. Little did he know that his drawing would make an apt illustration for the stormy conditions that Burney would endure.

Turner left Ilfracombe a few months before Burney's arrival, and she was similarly drawn to its seascape: one of the first things she detailed was two ships sending out distress signals in a summer storm. Only one of the two ships was saved. The local rescue boat failed to reach the other, and "after several vain & dangerous struggles against the foaming & roaring Waves, it was nearly lost itself" (*JL* 10: 590). Burney's son Alexander went outside to watch, buffeted by the wind and the rain: "Alex ran up to the light house, to see what was doing; but was glad to return, as he could with difficulty keep his feet, & was on the point of being lifted off them down the precipice, which was steep, from the path way, which was narrow, into the sea" (*JL* 10: 546). This moment eerily prefigures what Burney herself went through three months later, when she had to keep her feet steady on a jagged rock to avoid tumbling into the tidal waves.

This scene at the seashore also reflects Burney's ongoing

worries about her son Alexander.[11] He was twenty-two at the time and not as committed to his studies as his parents would have liked, so his time in Ilfracombe included the pleasures of socializing with the other Cambridge students in the study group run by Edward Jacob, Senior Wrangler in 1816. On several occasions Burney, alluding to Part Three of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, jokingly described herself as her son's "flapper," having to keep him on track and literally wake him up to his duties (*JL* 9: 231, 441; 10: 282). She was frustrated by his "Zig Zag Fancies" (*JL* 10: 515), but, ultimately, Alexander would perform well at Cambridge, earning the position of Tenth Wrangler in his exams in January 1818, and would eventually be ordained as an Anglican priest. Burney's son had a reputation for being sociable and well-liked, and even Jane Austen wrote a flirtatious comment about him in 1813. She perhaps knew of him through her second Kentish cousin John Thomas Austen, who was Alexander's contemporary at Cambridge and graduated as Senior Wrangler in 1817. As she wrote to her sister Cassandra, "perhaps I may marry young Mr. D'arblay."[12]

Jane Austen and Frances Burney had fictional and personal associations with the seaside. In Austen's *Persuasion* (1817), Louisa Musgrove famously falls down the steps of the Cobb in the Lyme Regis harbor, and the unfinished novel *Sanditon* takes place at a holiday resort. Moreover, Austen and Burney both had brothers in the British Navy. Burney herself was born in 1752 in King's Lynn, a seaside town in Norfolk, and had been raised there for the first eight years of her life before the family returned to London. At the age of twenty-one she experienced sea-bathing for the first time on a visit to Teignmouth in South Devon in 1773, and she noted several other instances of swimming in her letters and diaries, including travels with the Royal family to Weymouth in 1788 (Radford 281).[13] On one trip to Brighton in 1782, she (along with Samuel Johnson) stayed with Mrs. Thrale and her daughters, and the ladies enjoyed an early morning swim (*EJL* 5: 175-76). Later on, travel by boat across the English Channel became not only a feature of her married life but also a key theme in her novel *The Wanderer* (1814) (see Landau). Nonetheless, no boat rides, dips, or walks by the seashore could have prepared her for the ordeal she would undergo in North Devon.

Burney's September 1817 day in Ifracombe started out innocently enough. At one o'clock, while her son was at his study group,

Burney went out to look for rocks for her husband's collection, carrying with her "an empty large silk Bag" (*JL* 10: 692) or reticule in which to deposit any of the interesting pebbles that the beach was known for. She was accompanied by the family's "favourite little Dog, Diane" (*JL* 10: 692), who, fortuitously, had a major role to play in this story. Diane was about two years old and adored by General d'Arblay and by Alexander, who would take her out to the seashore in a bath chair or rolling chaise (*JL* 10: 593; 610). Although her exact breed is not mentioned, she is described as having a "feathery Coat" and skipping about (*JL* 10: 713), so she was perhaps a papillon or a toy spaniel or a terrier (Chisholm 263). Often Burney would take walks with little Diane and visit nearby Capstone Hill, a formidable landmark that on one side "is a rude craggy Rock, descending, in rugged broken precipices, to the Ocean" (*JL* 10: 577). On this September day, as soon as they made their way to Capstone, the sinister side of the ocean made itself known, for, as she recounts, "a sudden gust of Wind dashed its force so violently against us, that in the danger of being blown into the sea, I dropt on the turf, at full length, & saw Diane do the same, with her 4 paws spread as widely as possible, to flatten her body more completely to the Ground" (*JL* 10: 692). This was, perhaps, a warning of what was yet to come.

Burney then went to the sandy part of Wildersmouth cove, adjacent to Capstone and a popular spot from which to view the sea. However, she did not know that it could also be very dangerous. A friend of Burney's son later remarked that "one of his comrades had narrowly escaped destruction by a surprize there of the Sea" (*JL* 10: 712). A travel book gives the following description:

> The sands and beach have beautiful pebbles on them, and other sea spoils, and the Wildersmouth, which is the name given to a series of recesses formed by the rocks and open to the sea, is well worth visiting. But the visitor must be careful to ascertain whether the tide is near running in, as otherwise the expedition might be attended with danger, as the caves can only be entered by way of the sands, and the tide comes in rapidly. (Valentine 483)

Burney went to the beach at a quiet time of the day, but even she was startled that on that afternoon "NOT a soul was in sight" (*JL* 10: 693). And it was this solitude, which in other circumstances might seem like a Wordsworthian chance to commune with nature, that would increase her

danger. The tension of her account escalates when Burney spotted what looked like a gleaming white rock suitable for her husband's collection, but it turned out to be a set of teeth belonging to a dead animal that had washed ashore—an example of the tidal disgorging of skeletal remains (*JL* 10: 693-94). Mistaking the teeth for a pleasing rock was a startling and ominous disruption. Its discovery, along with her fear of the reptiles that might dart out of the caverns, makes the atmosphere seem menacing and contributes to the Gothic undertones of the account.

So preoccupied was she with collecting rocks that it was only when Diane started whining and pulling at Burney's gown that she stopped to look up and notice that the neighboring cove where she had entered was covered with water. Burney now found herself and her dog to be truly alone, for she had seen only one person on her walk, a woman holding a book who was looking for a place to sit and read. Yet when Burney went to look for help, the woman was gone:

> I recollected in my passage to the Cavern having had a glympse, as I thought, of the lady who was reading in the neighbouring Recess. I hastily scrambled to the spot, to look for her, & entreat her assistance—but—how was I then startled, to find that she was gone—and that her Recess, which was on less elevated ground than mine, was fast filling with Water. (*JL* 10: 694)

This unidentified woman's presence in the account is rather like that of a phantom, and even a kind of double of Burney herself, who would often read "on the Beach or on the Rocks or on the Heights" (*JL* 12: 592). She appeared quietly—this determined woman reader—but then could not be found. Her disappearance accentuated Burney's Gothic sense of isolation, and she was determined, in her words, to "risk a wet Jerkin, by wading through a Wave or two" (*JL* 10: 694), but every cove was filling up with water. Running from side to side, she found no way to escape the pounding tide. Her dog Diane became frightened and squeezed through an aperture in a rock, barking for Burney to follow her, but it was too small for her to get through, and with gallows humor she compared it to putting her head in a pillory (*JL* 10: 695; 699). Diane ran off at this point, perhaps to feed her newly born puppy back at the Ramsays' house (*JL* 10: 700). Now truly alone, Burney searched for a way out: "But there was none" (*JL* 10: 694). This charged statement contributes to the plotting of suspense and exemplifies one way that, as Judy Simons has observed, Burney "imposed order" on her recollections (122).

With the water rising, Burney's only recourse was to climb onto a craggy rock, the account of which had the heightened emotions of a real-life adventure tale. Her "Rock of refuge" (*JL* 10: 701) had to be carefully chosen, as it was hard to get a handhold or a foothold on the slippery moss and the slick slate surfaces (*JL* 10: 695-96). She spotted a tall boulder topped with a tuft of grass, meaning the water would not reach that height, and she realized "to reach that tuft would be safety" (*JL* 10: 696). She did this, tearing her clothes on the sharp points of the slate and bruising herself as a result of her "perilous clambering" (*JL* 10: 698). Even though Burney was sixty-five years old and wearing a Regency dress, she kept her wits about her—as she usually did—and made use of what few things she had on hand, one of which was a parasol or umbrella, which ladies customarily carried while out walking. An 1824 fashion plate of a woman in a yellow dress leaning over a lookout point and clutching her cap in the wind has a thematic resemblance to Burney's situation on the rock (Figure 2). Although it has the generic title *Morning Dress*, it conveys a sense of uncertainty as the woman perches on the rough terrain. Yet, the lady in yellow is positioned just on the side of safety and not imperiled.

Burney, however, was in some danger, and in order to reach a high enough point on the rock-face, she had to climb carefully. Her dainty shoes got stuck in wet crevices, but she devised a method to pick up each shoe again with her parasol. Such practical details provide an unusual example for the social history of fashion in the eighteenth century. Burney also had a near-sighted glass (a type of monocle also known as a quizzing glass) that dangled from a string around her neck, which she used to get her bearings (*JL* 10: 698-99). As Kate Chisholm notes, "the picture she creates of the 65-year-old matron scrambling up the steep, crumbling rockface, parasol aloft, is inimitable" (265).

Readers are drawn into Burney's story as her first-hand account presents the tangible realities she must confront: the moss and slate, the wind and rain; in other words, elements that are at odds with the usual experience of a Regency lady. This is not a tale of the drawing room but of the wilderness, of a person struggling to survive, all of a sudden and ill-equipped, against the life-threatening forces of nature. Burney's Ilfracombe episode is indebted to the adventure story genre, and indeed, her desolation evokes fictions like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.[14] Julia Epstein points out the sheer "physicality of the experience" (37). There

was no place to sit down, and Burney had to stand for hours, shifting positions every so often to alleviate the pain of "the sharp points of the Rock" (*JL* 10: 700). Little did she know that she would be stranded there from about one in the afternoon till 8:00 p.m. Her 1817 letter to Princess Elizabeth specifies "7 Hours" (*JL* 10: 735); and her 1824 letter to her sister remembered it as "the awful *10 Hours* of Danger & Affright" (*JL* 11: 552). Burney mentions having no watch, but the dwindling sunlight marked the long passage of time.

It is surely a testimony to Burney's personal strength that, with no one to assist her, she managed to climb the rock and not fall into the water, for the situation could easily have had a different and tragic outcome. However, it was the return of her little dog that gave Burney hope:

> In this terrible state, painful, affrighting, dangerous, & more than all, solitary—who could paint the transport of my joy, when suddenly, re-entering by the aperture in the Rock through which she had quitted me, I perceived my dear little Diane! For an instant, I felt as if restored to safety—I no longer seemed abandonned, all my terrours were chaced by the most lively hopes, & with a heartfelt gaiety—such as rarely, alas! I have since experienced, I called upon her to join me, in accents the most carressing, & which evidently convinced her of her even exquisite Welcome. Nevertheless, though her tail wagged responsive pleasure, she hesitated, looking amazed, embarrassed, & frightened to see me perched at such a height, & the sea so near me. (*JL* 10: 699)

Once Diane scrambled part way up the rock, Burney was able to use her parasol to hook on Diane's collar and hoist her up to the ledge. When reunited, Burney remarked that "to have at my side my dear little faithful Diane was a comfort, an enlivening comfort, which no one not planted, & for a term that seemed indefinite, in so unknown a solitude can conceive" (*JL* 10: 700). When Burney's late diaries were published in 1846, their bond was one of the highlights of the story, with the *Hereford Journal* titling their review "The Lady and Her Dog." As the waves crashed and rose against the rock, Diane became distraught, and Burney wrapped her in her shawl, and later used her silk purse as a pillow for the dog (*JL* 10: 702; 705). Thus, Burney's womanly wardrobe, from purse to parasol, was put to as much practical use as possible.

Burney's wardrobe and position on the rock also evoke an array of artistic and sartorial representations. The idea of a woman standing by the ocean in the middle of a tempest is the subject of numerous artistic portrayals, such as Shakespeare's *Miranda* begging her father to calm the waves, as depicted by John William Waterhouse in his masterful painting of 1916. Miranda watches from the rocky shore as the waves surge in front of her. A 1797 illustration called "Bathing Place" shows two women from the back view, holding onto each other for support on the cliff-side, while gazing at the bathers on the beach below (Heideloff). It is similar to Cassandra Austen's watercolor depicting Jane Austen looking out to the sea on a holiday in 1804 (Byrne 326-29; Kirkham 68-69). These both, in turn, remind one of the popular Regency-era fashion plates that offered advice on appropriate clothes to wear for the outdoors with, for instance, *Public Promenade Dress* (1831) portraying a lady in a lavender dress and large green bonnet, turning her head from the wind and equipped with a parasol (Figure 3).

Burney's account provides a literary narrative that can be read alongside such artistic renderings of the sea—and of women at the seashore. One such example is the 1837 landscape painting *Wildersmouth, Ilfracombe*, by the female artist Annette Ludlow, several of whose paintings are held in the collection of Devon Heritage.[15] This watercolor depicts a more placid day than that which Burney describes, with sailboats in the background, though the harshness of the rocky coastline still dominates the image. Another painting of a later date that parallels Burney's experience is by the Anglo-American artist John George Brown whose 1877 oil-on-canvas entitled *Reading on the Rocks* depicts a woman somewhat awkwardly perched on a boulder. She is also by the sea, but it is a calm day, the sun is out, and she blends into the landscape, her feminine form and dress in a greyish-brown coloration like that of the rocks. If the subject's dress seems too clean, it only accentuates the uncanny bridging of feminine and masculine forces in this painting. The sublimity and danger just hinted at in Brown's painting is fully unleashed in the experience that Burney underwent at Ilfracombe in 1817.

Her nightmarish narrative transposes elements of Gothic entrapment unto the maritime setting. The clock of the sea, the timing of the tide, was not in Burney's favor. She felt trapped, and in order to describe her bleak and noisy place of refuge, with waves crashing all around her, she used a series of different phrases that evoke the Gothic,

including "my spiral residence," "this savage Chamber," and "my wild Asylum" (*JL* 10: 707; 703; 696). Such imagery echoes the language of Ann Radcliffe's novels in which her heroines are chased or threatened in isolated locations. When Burney expresses the fear that she might see smugglers or banditti in the "gloom of Night" (*JL* 10: 706), one is reminded of the caves at Chateau-le-Blanc in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (629-36), a novel that Burney knew well, as Havens has shown (*Revising* 80-84). In light of these eighteenth-century Gothic influences, Epstein has also commented on parallel forms of pursuit and enclosure in Burney's fiction (7). Here, though, in this real-life situation, Burney is pursued by the waves, describing "the horrours of a tempest" (*JL* 10: 702), so that the natural world becomes monstrous. What she experienced transcends fictional frameworks—the "Ilfracombe Journal" is not a novel—and her description of the unpredictable forces of nature is all the more valuable for its raw immediacy.

As the hours passed, Burney was acutely aware of her danger and remarked too on being an older woman in this situation. This has a particular resonance today, as interest has grown in the documentation of the lived experience of aging. Although this passage was not included in the 1846 abridged version edited by her niece, it can be found in the standard edition of her journals and letters: "What a situation for a Female Alone—without power to make known her danger—without any resource for escaping its tremendous menace . . . without any human being knowing where to find her, or suspecting where she might be—a Female, & past 60 years of age" (*JL* 10: 701-02). Burney's commentary exemplifies the discourse of the survivor who can look back on a situation that required all of her practical skills and attention. With the resilience that belied the facts of her age, her gender, and the social proprieties, she literally rose to the occasion, keeping her post on the top of the rock in order to survive the slashing of the sea. As she described it, she had to resist being overwhelmed by "the dreadful sight of Sea, Sea, Sea all around, & Sea still, to the utmost extent of the View beyond" (*JL* 10: 702). Yet nothing about the ocean is static, and when the waves raced towards her with a great roaring sound, she was splashed and feared for her life. She prayed, and it was only when she suddenly and very briefly saw sand—or as she called it "the sea-hidden sands"—that she knew the tide must at last be starting to recede (*JL* 10: 704).

The latter part of the account details the rescue mission. Alexander had been looking everywhere for her and even feared she had wandered into nearby fields and been murdered by banditti (*JL* 10: 710). Eventually, as other search parties scoured the area, Alexander's Cambridge friend John LeFevre recalled the dangers of Wildersmouth and suggested they look there. Burney was spotted by her son and his friend who said that they could only see the pale glow of her face, like a shadow in the darkness of the night sky, while she, in turn, thought they looked like "spectres" (*JL* 10: 712; 709). Other townspeople came to assist with the rescue. Carrying a lantern, a sailor made his way down "the precipice" towards her (*JL* 10: 709). Burney's son soon followed, and as she saw him, Burney was all mother, telling Alexander not to use a rowboat to get to her, nor to give her his coat, or he would catch cold. Indeed, once help arrived, Burney was more interested in taking care of him, despite her bruises and cuts. Guided around the "pools and mud," Burney walked home leaning on the arm of her distraught son and helped by her landlord's daughter, Mary Ramsay (*JL* 10: 713). Diane barked, waved her tail, and "capered till she was covered with mire, & splashed us all over with the glad shakings of her feathery Coat" (*JL* 10: 713). People crowded around, and when they got home to the Ramsays', the now burnt roast beef was the best thing they had ever tasted (*JL* 10: 714).

Was that an overstatement? Was the flavor of the roast beef or any other detail in her account exaggerated? The nature of telling a story relies on the selection of facts and even on some embellishment, which are necessary for a story to be told well and in such a gripping manner. When Alexander's friend John Lefevre, who helped rescue Burney, read the account in her posthumously published *Diary* of 1846, he thought she had "exaggerated" and that she was not in any "real danger" according to his son, George Lefevre.[16] George recounted that when he and his father visited Lord Macaulay in 1857, Macaulay (who had reviewed Burney's early journals) asked about "the Ilfracombe incident," and the elder Lefevre said that Burney was found sitting on the sand, and that the story about her dog was invented (*JL* 10: 714n). This disparaging comment has been heartily rejected by Hester Davenport, herself very familiar with the Devon coastline, who praised Burney's "vivid recall of real, not imagined, experience" (2).

Not only did Burney stand on a rock surrounded by water, but also Diane's loyal presence was one of the reasons that Burney's husband wanted her to write about it to his friend in France "the Marquis Victor de La Tour Maubourg—on account of his great fondness for Dogs" (*JL* 11: 552). For further confirmation, one need only look at the surviving letter to Princess Elizabeth, written a few weeks after the ordeal at Ilfracombe. On 17 October 1817, Burney summarized what had happened to her, and all the facts accord with those in the long journal account. She even repeats the term "Watry Grave" in both the letter and the journal (*JL* 10: 701). Burney told Princess Elizabeth that she had just returned from Ilfracombe, where, after an ill-advised walk, she almost met

> a Watery Grave, from a terrible mistake I made in wandering, to pick up pebbles for Gen d'Arblay, who has a passion for all sort of curiosities, within a range of broken Cliffs, called Wilders'mouth, when the tide, which I had tht. going out, was coming in. I received no real injury, for I climbed up a Rock of sufficient height to guard me from the approaching foaming element; but I was detained 7 Hours, on a small spot, surrounded by the Sea, with only a faithful little Dog, in a most dreadful alarm. (*JL* 10: 734-35)

This summary is an important contemporaneous account, providing corroboration of the journal and of the role of Diane, whose prominence connects it to other animal narrative traditions.

But what happened to Diane, the loyal dog for whom there is no statue, but for whom the "Ilfracombe Journal" remains a literary tribute to her fidelity? For the next decade, the little dog remained at Burney's side. Her companionship was especially valuable after the death of General d'Arblay in 1818. From her Mayfair home on Bolton Street, Burney would take walks with Diane in "the quiet part of Hyde Park," and she wrote in March 1819 that "I walk out daily with Diane—& nothing so quietizes my shattered nerves" (*JL* 11: 40; 52). She would even take Diane with her when out on business, as seen, for instance, in an amusing anecdote about a visit to her lawyer's chambers in September 1821 (*JL* 11: 270). Often they were joined by Elizabeth Ramsay, another daughter of her Ilfracombe landlord, who worked as Burney's live-in companion for a few years, a connection that kept her ties to North Devon alive (*JL* 11: 551; Hemlow 416). In December 1823, Burney

mentions being alone in London, except for the companionship of her "dear, faithful Diane," and in August 1824, she wrote, "I have always a delighted companion in Diane" (*JL* 11: 471; 542). There is no further mention of the dog except for a note in the Berg collection. A page torn from Burney's Memorandum book for the week of 11 May 1828 and attached in strips to a letter of June 1828 refers to an incident of Diane surviving a fall into a well (*JL* 1: li): "I have been very near losing one of the most faithful of my humble friends" (Burney, Letter).[17] This 1828 note is the last known surviving record of the enduring bond between Burney and her loyal canine companion.[18] In effect, the *Hereford Journal* had it right when they entitled their review of the Ilfracombe episode in the Burney *Diary*, "The Lady and Her Dog" with the apt subtitle describing their shared ordeal at Wildersmouth as "An Agonising Occurrence."

Burney's adventure remained talked of in the area for years to come. So much was it known that in 1851 an article in Dickens's *Household Words* referred to it in passing as "the narrow escape of Madame D'Arblay, near Ilfracombe" ("Gallop" 577). It still appears in records of the area, from Lois Lamplugh's *History of Ilfracombe* (46-51) to the town's Wikipedia page. A few days after the incident, Burney went with a sailor to visit her "rock" only to see that the top of it from which she had clung had been shattered by the force of the sea. "All Ilfracomb" went to visit the place, and she was the talk of the town, even though she had tried throughout the summer to keep a low profile when people wanted to meet "Miss Burney" (*JL* 10: 714; 575; 660). A week later, she and Alexander returned home to Bath, where she reunited with her then mortally ill husband on October 5th. The year was overshadowed by other tragedies as well, as her brother the Reverend Charles Burney, Jr., died in December 1817. In November, the nation had mourned the loss of Princess Charlotte, and across the country, letters and clothes were beribboned with black, while memorial chinaware commemorated the *Memory of Princess Charlotte*. This somber period culminated in the death of Burney's husband on 3 May 1818 (Doody 372).

After a few years had passed, in 1823 a friend asked Burney about the "reports" she had heard in Ilfracombe, which perhaps hastened the completion of the *Diary* account, which had been delayed by her husband's death (*JL* 10: 714). External factors often played a

part in the writing of Burney's journals as she constructed "a dramatic sequence out of them, thereby giving them coherence and significance" as John Wiltshire has shown (217-18). As rumors circulated about what one might call "the lady on the rock," Burney's own sister Esther visited North Devon in 1824 and met Elizabeth Ramsay, who related what had happened. Until that time, Burney had not discussed the traumatic incident with Esther, and, thus, she wrote the letter quoted at the beginning of this article, explaining why she had waited so long to tell her. In October 1817, Burney had informed her husband about what happened at Ilfracombe, and in her summative Memorandum book she noted: "I recount my rock escape" (*JL* 10: 949). As she told Esther, "it so much affected him, that he could scarcely hear its detail" (*JL* 11: 552). Ill as he was, her husband wanted to hear her tell the story to her sisters once he was better, but "Alas that better never came—& my narration to you was never made!" (*JL* 11: 552).

Telling the story of Ilfracombe, thus, had a long, complicated, and disrupted history. Yet tell it she did, presenting herself as the solitary heroine clocking the hours and the power of the natural elements. It is a long, minute-by-minute account, in which she becomes the Everyman or Everywoman facing the terror of the sea. On that memorable day in 1817, while the wind, water, and darkness exuded a Gothic terror, Burney had to talk herself out of fainting. She would become soaking wet, hang onto the rock in torn clothes, drop her shoes, save her dog, and live long past sixty-five to tell the tale. What an adventure, indeed, for a renowned woman writer to almost drown on a trip to the North Devon coast. The "Ilfracombe Journal" is a singular work, unique in Burney's vast oeuvre in its generic experimentations and as a tribute to her animal companion. It is a timeless tale of survival, one that is not easily forgotten in its portrait of the power of the sea.[19]

NOTES

[1]Frances Burney, letter to H.R.H. Princess Elizabeth, 17 October 1817 (*JL* 10: 731-35).

[2]For the primary source, see *JL* 10: 690-714, 714. The title "Ilfracombe Journal" appears in this edition and in Burney, *Journals and Letters* 510.

[3]The Ilfracombe adventure took up about eighteen pages in Charlotte Barrett's 1846 edition of the *Diary* (7: 282-301). Newspapers reprinted the seven-page section (7: 287-94) that described the intense moments when Burney was trapped on the rock. This section on her "perilous position" (7: 269) accords with *JL* 10: 696-704.

[4] The illustrations for this article are original engravings from a private collection, reprinted with permission.

[5]"Wildersmouth in Ilfracombe," *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 27 Aug. 1825, p. 2.

[6]See the *North Devon Journal*, 13 May 1825, p. 4.

[7]See the *North Devon Journal*, 11 Aug.1859, p. 5; and for an illustrated history, see *Tunnels* 40, 44.

[8]See the *North Devon Journal*, 11 Aug. 1859, p. 5.

[9]See the *North Devon Journal*, 27 Jan. 1842, p. 4.

[10]J. M. W. Turner was hired to do drawings for a series of books with engraved illustrations, published by W. B. [William Bernard] Cooke. *Ilfracomb, North Devon*, appeared separately in 1818 and was then included as "Ilfracomb" in Cooke's 1826 *Picturesque Views*.

[11]For more on her son Alexander, see the informative study by Peter Sabor.

[12]Jane Austen, letter to Cassandra Austen, 3 November 1813 (Austen 257-61; 260). Alexander was 19 at the time and Austen was 37; she died in Winchester in July 1817, the same summer that the d'Arblays were in North Devon.

[13]The author thanks Dr. Bridget Gillard, Registrar, Devonshire Association, for assistance with this reference.

[14]In a similar vein, her half-sister Sarah Harriet Burney published a novel in 1816 called *The Shipwreck*.

[15]The author thanks Jan Wood, Archivist, Devon Heritage Centre, for information on the artist Annette Ludlow.

[16]This material is quoted in a letter of George Lefevre of 1912 (*JL* 10: 714n).

[17]Assistance with this material was kindly provided by the staff at the New York Public Library.

[18]On the tradition of great dogs in literature and on the field of animal studies, see, respectively, "The Pets of Authors" and Landry.

[19]The author expresses her gratitude to Professor Kevin L. Cope, who organized the session on Shorelines for the 2021 ASECS Conference, at which a shorter version of this essay was presented.

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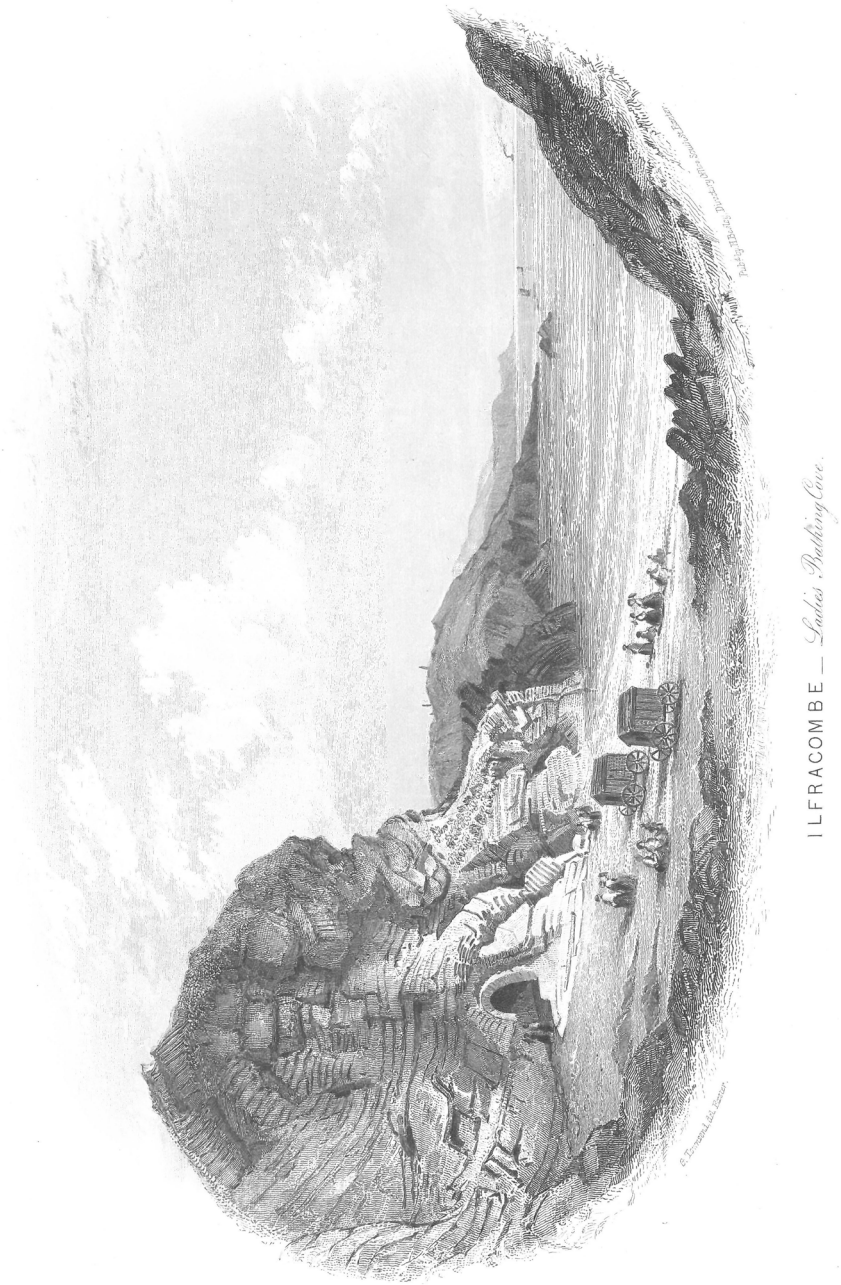

Figure 1. *Ilfracombe—Ladies Bathing Cove*, by George Townsend. Steel Engraving. 1860. Private Collection.

Figure 2. "Morning Dress." *Repository of the Arts*, September 1824
Stipple Engraving. Private Collection.

Figure 3. "Public Promenade Dress." *Ladies Pocket Magazine*, Part Two, 1831. Stipple Engraving. Private Collection.