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## Reviews

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## REVIEWS

**Michael John Franklin, *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020). Pp. 216. £16.99.**

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Michael J. Franklin's *Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi* (2020) is a welcome addition to the University of Wales Press's canon-forming series 'Writers of Wales'. The productive Mrs Thrale, later Mrs Piozzi, is perhaps an unexpected writer to feature in the series. The hostess of a London bluestocking salon at Streatham and prolific writer, Hester Thrale Piozzi's intimate association with Dr Johnson and renown as his biographer align her with an Anglophone and London-focused literary world. However, Welsh-born Hester Thrale Piozzi also drew on her Welsh heritage, love of travel and European connections, not only in her literary works but also in her self-fashioning. In turn, Franklin draws on these various strands and, as the series rubric requires, discusses the ways in which they interplay in Hester's life and writing: he claims Hester Thrale Piozzi for Wales and for the Welsh writing in English canon, and demonstrates how she merits her place 'in the pantheon of great Welsh writers' (p. ix).

The series' chronological rubric allows literary biographers to amplify individual publications and themes alongside the narrative arc of their subject's biography. Hester Thrale Piozzi's life is a compelling read, made all the more readable by Franklin's affable and companionable style, for which I (rather fancifully) imagine him holding his own at Streatham with both Dr Johnson and Hester Thrale Piozzi! A copious note taker and correspondent, as well as an innovator of discursive literary genres, Hester has certainly left plenty of public and private sources on which to draw for eloquent insights into her own life and works. In appreciation of his subject's renown for articulacy, Franklin never speaks for Hester, and one of the strengths of this particular literary biography is the ample use it makes of quotations from Hester's works and correspondence that give readers a keen sense of her voice throughout.

Hester Thrale Piozzi was born at Bodfel Hall, Caernarfonshire, in 1741. She belonged to an Anglicised Welsh landowning family, the Salusburys of Lleweni, Denbighshire. The young family lived at Lleweni Hall briefly with Hester's maternal uncle, Sir Richard Salusbury Cotton.

Her father, Sir John Salusbury, a relative of Thomas Pennant, lost his fortune investing in Nova Scotia, and her mother Hester Maria Lynch Cotton pressed for Hester's 'passionless marriage of convenience' (p. 22) to wealthy brewer Henry Thrale in 1763. Hester lived in London for most of her unhappy married life but also spent periods travelling. She toured Wales with Henry Thrale and Dr Johnson (1774) and toured Italy and France with her second husband Gabriel Piozzi (1784–7). She spent her happy second marriage at London, Brynbella in Denbighshire in Wales, and also Bath. She died at Bristol in 1821.

The author gives an even-handed account of the relative financial precariousness – or 'genteel poverty' – into which she was born, as well as the abusive and toxic relationship of her parents. The former may account for Hester's somewhat peripatetic life, while the latter (being her parents' 'Joynt Play Thyng') shaped her performative gifts and capacity to please others:

My Mother nursed her Infant Daughter my simple Self, to play a thousand pretty Tricks, & tell a Thousand pretty Stories and repeat a Thousand pretty Verses to divert Papa at his Return. Rakish men seldom make tender Fathers, but a Man must Fondle something, and nature pleads her own Cause powerfully when a little Art is likewise used to help it forward. (p. 2)

Franklin also makes judicious use of Hester's own words to bolster his discussion of her unhappy marriage to Henry Thrale. He shows that, despite being an emotionally unfulfilling marriage for Hester, the marriage was ultimately enabling, for Thrale brought her financial stability which she, indeed, repaid through keeping the brewery viable (Chapter 4) and buoying up Henry Thrale's parliamentary ambitions (Chapter 5). Her first husband also provided commercial, social, and literary connections; it was through Henry Thrale that Hester became acquainted with Dr Johnson, who would shape her reputation and literary ambitions.

Over several chapters that chart the long friendship between Hester and Dr Johnson, Franklin shows how the young Hester, who penned poems and translations from Romance languages, was more focused on gaining literary fame than gaining a husband, despite her family's precarious financial position. She was able to fulfil this youthful ambition through the environment of the Streatham salon and Dr Johnson's prom-

inence in her life. However, Franklin explains that self-actualisation and realising her literary ambitions were fraught with complexity for Hester:

Hester had the key to Johnson's padlock but no key to her own. Streatham had become a salon, but it was also a nursing home and an asylum; her fetters, forged by her sense of duty, were self-imposed and manifold. When she was not indulging a negligent and serially unfaithful husband; mothering her children, together with her aged friend and her demanding mother, who loathed and were jealous of each other; or being a governess to them all; she was expected to sparkle in distinguished company. (p. 50)

Franklin nails the complex dynamic between Johnson and Hester: he argues that Johnson's presence was, ultimately, 'inhibiting' and that Hester's confidence blossomed, not only through her loving marriage to Gabriel Piozzi but also following Dr Johnson's death. After Dr Johnson's death, Hester not only drew on her intimate friendship with him for what she called her 'little book', *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D. during the Last Twenty Years of His Life* (1786), but also found her authorial voice:

Without being able to draw on her correspondence, and with only *Thraliana* to check her facts, *Anecdotes* could not aspire to the scholarly authority which Boswell assumed by virtue of the care and time he and Malone devoted to the task. So Hester made a virtue out of necessity by addressing the reader directly in an informal, indeed intimate and conversational style that also startled contemporary critics. She also deliberately created a feminine authorial persona, based on her role of bluestocking hostess. This would contrast completely with that of Boswell's man about town. (p. 96)

Hester's distinctive discursive position, honed over two decades during which her primary role as hostess had been 'to generate conversation', is clear in other sociable and non-fiction prose genres which she championed. Franklin also stresses Hester's personal drive and good instincts for producing innovative and marketable books, and provides pithy summaries of Hester's main literary works that certainly piqued my interest in rereading familiar texts and turning anew to others.

Franklin engages with existing and current scholarship in his narrative about Hester's life and in the readings of her works whilst also presenting valuable new insights. In addition to those already mentioned above, Hester's Welshness is a new strand that runs through this literary biography as it claims her for Wales and for the Welsh writing in English canon. Hester's Welshness is understood in the context of her own self-fashioning, developed in response to a manipulative mother and indifferent husband, as well as the layered regional and national identities at work in eighteenth-century Britain. In death, the woman who had tied Hester to Henry Thrale provided a lifeline to her daughter in the form of the Bachegraig estate at Tremeirchion, Flintshire. With this Hester's links with Wales were renewed and also came to form an increasingly significant part of her self-identity. Hester embarked on a Welsh tour with her husband and Dr Johnson, ostensibly to visit her mother's estate. Thrale and Johnson's open lack of enthusiasm for Wales may have augmented Hester's own delight in her native country. Wales, and her estate there, gave Hester a measure of freedom and self-determination; Wales also became a welcome retreat from London gossip and rising costs for Hester and her second husband, Gabriel Piozzi, as well as a refuge from the fear of a French invasion. The promise of low living costs were certainly part of Wales's lure for Hester, and Franklin rightly frames this in the complex four nations narrative, since 'Wales was trapped in a colonial dependence on the English economy' (p. 147). Although Hester's Welshness is sometimes projected or rhetorical – for instance, her 'Celtic courage' (p. 24), 'Welsh *hwy!*' (p. 38), and 'north Welsh Calvinist guilt' (p. 67) – the account of her engagement with Wales and Welshness reflects the complex and layered nature of contemporary Welshness and Britishness. The discussion of Hester's tour of Italy is a case in point (Chapter 6), as are the loyalist mythologising of *British Synonymy* (1789) and vociferous crown loyalism of later political verses (Chapter 7). Further research might pick up where this literary biography takes off and explore whether Hester's Welsh self-fashioning was defensive and tied up with self-actuation; the extent to which her Welshness was enabling; and how significant her literary awareness was to the delight she took in Wales. Welshness was, indeed, a multi-layered issue for Hester, and her obsession with ensuring a male heir, Gabriel Piozzi's nephew, for her Welsh estate, with 'echoes of King Lear', put further strain on Hester's relationship with her daughters: 'Little is the *all I have to bestow* compared to their and their Father's

noble Fortunes: nor had I reason to think they esteemed that little as of any Value; to no Mortal did I ever say that I would *give him all*' (p. 144).

In conclusion, this literary biography of Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi is a valuable addition to the 'Writers of Wales' series; a series that not only forms, but also interrogates, the literary canons of Wales. In this respect, the series provides a new interpretive context for the critical evaluation of a writer who is usually discussed on Dr Johnson's coat-tails or in the context of women's writing and salon culture. The author has therefore, not only produced an accessible and informative introduction to the life and works of an under-researched writer, but also produced a book that, as all good books should, motivates readers to engage critically with the subject's work and stimulates further research questions, particularly the Welsh context and Welsh-British dynamic.

Cathryn A. Charnell-White,  
Aberystwyth University

