

Manuscript of the Month
May 2014

Portrait of Lady Frances Brudenell Bruce by William Hoare RA, c.1775



Among the more recent additions to the collections at C. Hoare & Co. is this pastel portrait. Painted by one of the most fashionable artists of the day, William Hoare of Bath RA (who despite the shared surname was related only by marriage), it depicts the youngest of bank partner Henry Hoare II of Stourhead's three granddaughters, Lady Frances Brudenell Bruce. But while every picture may tell a story, it does not always tell the whole story. For the serenity displayed here would be sorely lacking during Frances's adult life.

Lady Frances Elizabeth Brudenell Bruce, third child and second daughter of Thomas, Baron Bruce, by his wife Susanna, daughter of Henry Hoare (Magnificent), was born in London in the early hours of 31st May 1765. Later that day a delighted Bruce wrote to his agent instructing him to plant some new trees in honour of *a very fine Girl that is likely to be worthy of being Queen of the Crabtree Clump, where some young Maiden Hollys may be mixed amongst*

the Fir. (Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre, ref: 1300/2094) How much Frances and her siblings (an older sister and one of three brothers would survive into adulthood) actually saw of their father during their early years, though, is questionable. A career courtier, at the time of Frances's birth Lord Bruce was serving as a Gentleman of the Bedchamber to George III. In 1776 he was created Earl of Ailesbury and went on to act (briefly) as Governor to the Prince of Wales and Prince Frederick before spending nearly thirty five years as Lord Chamberlain (1780-92) and Treasurer (1792-1814) to Queen Charlotte. This rise was viewed as a mixed blessing by Susanna, however. While acknowledging the prestige that accompanied her husband's success, she resented the prolonged absences from home it entailed, particularly as they meant the burden of child-rearing fell almost entirely upon herself.

By the late 1780s, Frances had also become a familiar face at Court. Early in 1788 she appeared at the Queen's Birthday Drawing Room and Ball: *In the dress of Lady Frances Bruce much taste was displayed, the petticoat was of pale pink, covered with a white crape, and ornamented with bunches of gold wheat ears, white corn flowers, and green and gold foil, the fringe very superb, with silver tassels.* (BL, Burney Collection, London Chronicle, 17th Jan 1788) And in April 1793, the Sun reported that one Sunday evening: *His Majesty, the Duchess of York, and four of the Princesses, walked from Windsor to Clewer, attended by Lady Frances Bruce, General Bude, Colonel Garth, and Mr Digby.* (Ibid, Sun, 9th April 1793) But behind this seemingly tranquil picture, things were far from idyllic. For at the very time the Sun was noting Frances's walk to Clewer, years of simmering tension within her family had erupted into an open and acrimonious dispute.

Much of this tension stemmed from Lord Ailesbury's marriage to Lady Anne Howard, daughter of the 1st Earl of Moira, early in 1788, five years after the death of Frances's mother Susanna. Frances and her sister Caroline never took to their new stepmother. But it was not until their brother's engagement in 1793 that things came to a head. For it was then that the two sisters – aged nearly 28

and 30 respectively – made a determined bid for independence by refusing to live with their father any longer. Instead they insisted on being allowed to take a house of their own. Both Caroline and Frances were under the impression that their parents' marriage settlement entitled them to £20,000 apiece (c.£2M today) from the time they came of age or married. But this was not the case. For the settlement stipulated that they be allotted no more than £20,000 between them. Crucially, it also gave Ailesbury the power to increase or reduce this sum as he saw fit and even to withhold payment altogether during his lifetime. Lady Elgin, a close friend and confidante of Ailesbury's, commented that on explaining this to the two sisters she was met with *an Astonishment beyond anything I ever saw*. (WSHC 1300/3221) But while lamenting *the sad variance in Your Family [which] I own I despair of ever seeing conquer'd* (Ibid, 1300/3210), Lady Elgin recommended that Ailesbury increase his daughters' allowances from £1 a month, which she regarded as no more than a child might expect, to £30 or even £50 per annum, thus relieving them from the embarrassment of having to ask their father's agent for every penny they might require.

In the end a compromise was reached. To avoid the gossip that their taking a separate house would arouse, it was agreed that the two sisters could stop at the family's London residence for the summer instead of travelling to Lord Ailesbury's country seat, Tottenham Park, Wiltshire, as usual. This set the pattern for the next few years, during which time an uneasy truce prevailed. Caroline and Frances remained mostly in London, but continued to write regular letters to their father in which they regaled him with the latest scandal – everything from duels to elopements – kept him up to date with the newest novels – Mrs Radcliffe's 'Mysteries of Udolpho' was too long and tedious, apparently, Miss Gummings' 'Lord Fitzhenry' rather more palatable – and informed him of their doings – tea parties, phaeton rides and visits to the opera. Frances in particular became an avid opera goer, attending two or three times a week during the season and filling her letters with vivid descriptions of performers and audiences alike. Such a fragile peace could not last, however, and by 1799 the subject of marriage had once again plunged the family into crisis.

Frances's engagement, to former army captain Sir Henry Wilson Kt of Crofton Park, Yorkshire, was greeted with universal dismay by her family and led to an irreparable rift with her father. Money again played its part, for Ailesbury refused to pay the £10,000 Frances still believed she was entitled to. Instead he proposed an annuity of £200. A bigger stumbling block, though, was Caroline, who refused either to return to her father or to continue living with her sister. At the age of 36, Caroline wanted a home of her own, a 'chimerical notion' according to Ailesbury's agent. In desperation Caroline begged Ailesbury: *Do only have the goodness to satisfy me You will settle something to make me tolerably comfortable, my present situation, and what it has been many months far surpasses all Language to describe, though my Sister has forfeited your Favor Heaven knows I never meant it, and have done everything to prevent her Unfortunate Destination. God Grant it may prove a happier one than from Circumstances there is reason to hope*. Her father though was unmoved: *There is no act of Kindness you may not have under My roof, but if the rooted aversion you have been worked up to against living with me continues, you will be drove to live in a way not creditable to yourself or kind by your Ever Affectionate Brother*. (Ibid, 1300/4215)

In an effort to break the deadlock, Ailesbury's agent suggested that Caroline be allowed £300 p.a. on condition that she continued to live with Frances – an offer he thought could not fail to please. To his amazement, however, it was roundly denounced by both sisters. Frances declared her father meant to be rid of them for a derisory £500 p.a., while Caroline remained adamant that she would not live with her sister or her father. Nor would she submit to living in reduced circumstances in lodgings. In short, nothing but a house of her own would satisfy her. Faced with such implacable resolve, Ailesbury was forced to give way. Armed with an allowance of £150 per quarter, later

raised to £200, Caroline took up residence in a modern villa at Holles Place, Chelsea, a stone's throw from her new brother-in-law's five-acre estate, Chelsea Park.

Frances's financial woes were less easily resolved. In 1809 she made an anguished appeal to her brother, imploring him to intercede with their father and secure her an allowance at least equal to that of her sister: *for put it to yourself – born as I am – Your Sister – and to be connected with a Family for ten Years without having received one Shilling of Fortune when entitled to one – how would you esteem such a Connection.* (Ibid, 1300/5158A) A week later came an even more impassioned plea: *...I feel I am not conscious of deserving ten years persecution and hatred.* (Ibid 1300/5160A) While these letters might smack of hysteria, there are indications that Frances's husband's views about money were as decided as those of her father. During the two decades following his marriage, Sir Henry had become embroiled in several lawsuits, culminating in 1823 in one brought by a Miss Harriet Wilson, described as 'a near relation', who claimed he had reneged on a promise to provide her with a £200 annuity if she gave up her situation as governess to the Countess of Sandwich's children, a position Sir Henry regarded as 'derogatory to himself'. Miss Wilson had duly resigned, but the annuity never materialised, leaving her entirely unprovided for. Frances's pleas regarding her allowance were similarly unproductive. Ailesbury informed his son: *Instead of Ten years if it had been double that time the impressions of my mind would have been the same as it was at the first, and having now Grandchildren I am the more not to countenance in any degree disobedience to Parents.* (Ibid, 1300/5159B)

The answer to Frances's predicament ultimately came from an entirely unforeseen quarter. Early in 1814, a solicitor called at Chelsea Park to inform her that she had been named as the chief beneficiary in the will of his recently deceased client, William Wright Esq. At first Frances assumed there had been a mistake, for she knew no one of that name. But on being assured that there was indeed no mistake, she agreed to accompany the solicitor to Wright's lodgings in Pimlico. Gazing down into the coffin, Frances immediately recognized its occupant as a man who, twenty years earlier, had stared up at her from the pit of the opera house with such dogged persistence that she had been compelled to change her box. Wright's will dated back to 1800, and while there had been numerous codicils since that time the main beneficiary – Frances – never altered.

Naturally it was supposed that Wright's relations would contest the will. But for whatever reason they chose not to do so. Within a few months, therefore, Frances found herself taking possession of a large estate at Barton Stacey, Hampshire, together with its associated farms, woods, deer parks and fisheries, smaller properties in Essex and Oxfordshire and a set of Inner Temple chambers. The press optimistically put this new found wealth at £20-£30K p.a., although a more realistic income was probably £2-£3K (c.£120K-£185K today). Whatever the total, the result was the same. Frances at last had means of her own, although because she had acquired the properties after her marriage, outright control once again lay just beyond her reach: the law dictated that they pass to her husband during his lifetime.

Wright's death was followed a few weeks later by that of Frances's father. Although he and Frances were never fully reconciled, Ailesbury had a month or so earlier finally agreed to increase her allowance. But his will opened up fresh wounds. For instead of inheriting £10,000 apiece, Frances and Caroline were each left a lump sum of £1,000, annuities totalling £1,000 (c.£61K today) and a share of their mother's jewels. From Ailesbury's point of view, this made sound financial sense. Far better to provide his daughters with annuities – most of which could be raised from the interest on the £20,000 set aside for them – thereby relieving his son from the burden of raising such a large sum all at once. But for Caroline and Frances, it was another bitter blow. They promptly consulted a lawyer about overturning the will on the grounds that it contravened the terms

of their parents' marriage settlement. While admitting that the terms of the settlement had been rather loosely worded, however, the lawyer cautioned against any action. After twenty years of anticipation and frustration, Caroline and Frances finally had to accept that they would never gain control over their fortunes.

Life for both sisters after this appears to have become more settled. Caroline remained at Holles Place until her death in 1824, while Frances and her husband, who had assumed the name of Wright in addition to Wilson, shuttled between their London home, Chelsea Park, Sir Henry's Yorkshire estate, Crofton Hall, and Frances's newly inherited property at Barton Stacey. On their deaths, in 1832 and 1836 respectively, all three estates passed to the former's niece, who had lived with the couple since childhood. At the age of 45, therefore, Mary Wright Wilson, the orphaned, illegitimate and otherwise penniless daughter of Sir Henry's brother Edward, found herself mistress of several properties and an annual income of over £5,000 (c.£410K today).