

PONSONBY, SARAH (1755 - 1831), one of the 'Ladies of Llangollen'

Name: Sarah Ponsonby
Date of birth: 1755
Date of death: 1831
Spouse: Eleanor Charlotte Butler
Parent: Louisa Ponsonby (née Lyons)
Parent: Chambré Brabazon Ponsonby
Gender: Female
Occupation: one of the 'Ladies of Llangollen'
Area of activity: Royalty and Society; Anti-Establishment
Author: Norena Shopland

Sarah Ponsonby was born in 1755 in Dublin, the daughter of Chambré Brabazon Ponsonby (d. 1762), a cousin of the Earl of Bessborough and an Irish Member of Parliament, and his second wife Louisa (née Lyons, 1730-1758). She became an orphan at the age of seven and went to live with relatives in Woodstock, County Kilkenny. She attended school in Kilkenny, and was plagued by unwanted attention from her uncle. In 1768, **Eleanor Butler**, who was sixteen years older than Ponsonby, was asked to befriend the orphan and they became extremely close.

In April 1778, they made plans to elope. Ponsonby, dressed in men's clothing, armed herself with a pistol and taking her small dog Frisk, had climbed out of a downstairs window. Butler had left her house around 10pm, also in men's clothes, and had ridden to join Ponsonby with the intention to ride to Waterford and get a boat to England. However, they missed the boat and had to shelter in a barn for the night. The families caught up with them the following day and they were returned home.

They made a second attempt to escape, with Butler hiding for a time in Ponsonby's wardrobe and food being brought to her by Ponsonby's servant, Mary Carryl. They were discovered and despite many attempts to keep them apart, the families relented and they were allowed to leave on 9 May 1778.

They arrived in Milford Haven, and made their way north finally arriving in Llangollen where they set up home in 1780 at a cottage known as Plas Newydd and were later joined by Mary Carryl who served them faithfully until her death in 1809. Local people referred to them as 'the ladies', and they soon became known as 'The Ladies of Llangollen'.

During their time the Ladies were often seen as 'romantic friends', a close platonic non-sexual relationship despite rumours of their being Sapphists, or same-sex lovers. Having been lauded as examples of high friendship and sacrificing marriage and children, the women's reputation spread far and they were visited and contacted by many leading figures of the day.

They shared the same bed for 50 years, a large four-poster of richly carved oak. In their diaries and letters to friends they constantly referred to each other as 'beloved' or the matrimonial implication 'my better half'. In her will, Butler left everything 'to the beloved of my heart' and when she was ill was tended by 'My Sweet Love'. Everything they owned was embossed with their intertwined initials and their letters were jointly signed. They spoke of 'we' and 'our'. Since the twentieth century the exact nature of the relationship between the women has been debated but now it is generally accepted that they were in a same-sex life partnership.

As the years passed Butler became almost blind and was led around the house by Ponsonby as depicted in a painting by Lady Delamere. Butler died on 2 June 1829, and Ponsonby two years later on 9 December 1831. They were interred under the triangular monument in St Collen's Church, Llangollen next to their faithful friend Carryl.

The Ladies were adamant about not having their portraits done but in 1828 Mary Parker (later Lady Leighton) made two sketches of their faces from under the library table. Ponsonby was in profile but as Butler was now very blind it was possible to sketch her full face without being seen. The picture was not completed until three years later after both women had died. Parker visited Plas Newydd and sketched the library with all the items on the table exactly as it had been and then transposed her sketches of their faces onto imagined bodies. The completed picture was then engraved by Richard James Lane and sold by Parker to raise money for charity.

However, the most famous image of the ladies is by James Henry Lynch. Taking Parker's image, he made a pirated copy between 1833-1845 of the two women standing outside in riding habits. This was widely circulated in the latter part of the nineteenth century and is now the defining image of the Ladies of Llangollen.

Author

Norena Shopland

Sources

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Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen* (London 1971)

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Further reading

'The Ladies of Llangollen: Sarah Butler (1739-1829) and Eleanor Ponsonby (1755-1831); People's Collection Wales

Wikipedia Article: Ladies of Llangollen

Archives

NLW Archives: Llyfr Ffoto Merched Llangollen/Ladies of Llangollen Album

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