

Melesina Trench – a writer with talons

Although the Irish Huguenot writer Melesina Trench has been memorialised on a marble plaque on the south wall of the Cathedral's North Transept for nearly two hundred years, she only recently came to popular notice when a new female peregrine arrived by the transept's rose window in early spring 2024. The bird was named "Mel" after her and so focus has turned to this largely forgotten writer.

She was born in Dublin on 22 March 1768, as the only child of the Rev Philip and Mary Chenevix. Her parents were both dead by her fourth birthday and she was then raised by her widowed grandfather, the Rev Richard Chenevix, Bishop of Waterford until his death in 1779, then a kinswoman Lady Lifford and finally her maternal grandfather Archdeacon Henry Gervais. Always a bright and good-looking child, she was married at eighteen to Colonel Richard St George, an Irish officer, in October 1786.

Two children were born to the marriage, but Richard died of consumption in 1790 which left Melesina a widow at the age of twenty-one. Although one writer claimed she was 'alone in the world',¹ her striking good looks were recorded in portraits by George Romney, Hugh Douglas Hamilton and Sir Thomas Lawrence. The best-known image of her is a later engraving of Romney's 1792 portrait which shows a fashionably dressed young woman, 'with beautiful black eyes and ... [a] fascinating smile'.²



The young Melesina Trench (after George Romney, 1792)

For the next decade, she travelled extensively. It was her travels in Germany starting in 1799 that turned her into a writer and diarist for which she is best known, although her *A Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800* was not published until 1861.³

¹ Katharine Kittredge, "Melesina Chenevix St. George Trench (1768-1827)", Chawton House Library, p. 2. <https://chawtonhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Melesina-Chenevix-St.-George-Trench.pdf>

² *Ibid.*

³ Melesina Chenevix St George Trench, *Journal Kept During a Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800*, edited by Richard Chenevix Trench (London: Savill & Edwards printers, 1861).

EDITORS NOTE

The section of the diary in which she exhibits peregrine-like talons⁴ is concerned with a ‘very uncharitable’ description of Lady Emma Hamilton and a drunken Lord Nelson whom she met in Dresden.⁵ Referring to Lady Hamilton’s attempts to befriend her, Melesina commented that ‘she does not gain upon me. I think her bold, daring, vain even to folly, and stamped with manners of her first situation [as a courtesan]’.⁶ Nelson who is a ‘little man, without any dignity’ has a vanity ‘so undisguised that it wears the form of frankness’.⁷

Having dined with the couple, Melesina found they were besotted with each other and added that Emma Hamilton was ‘bold, forward, coarse, assuming, and vain.’ Adding brutally that ‘her figure is colossal, but, excepting her feet, which are hideous, well shaped. Her bones are large and she is exceedingly *embonpoint* ...’⁸

In 1803, she married again, this time in Paris to Richard Trench, a younger lawyer. Trench was classically good-looking and ‘was said to have resembled the Apollo Belvedere’.⁹ After being interned in France for several years during the Napoleonic wars, the Trenches returned to England and set up home at Bursledon in a house which they renamed Elm Lodge. While in France, she had lost two children, Frederick and an unnamed daughter. To cope with her grief, she resumed her diarising and created *The Mourning Journal* which records her responses to the children’s early deaths and her progress through depression to consolation. Another daughter died in 1816 but three surviving sons, Richard, Francis and Philip, were educated at Twyford and Harrow. Richard and Francis later entered the church.

During her remaining years in England, Melesina Trench campaigned for the welfare of chimney-sweeps and the itinerant poor in England and Ireland.¹⁰ In 1816, she also wrote *Laura’s Dream or, The Moonlanders*, an epic poem in a science fiction style which preceded Mary Shelley’s better-known *Frankenstein* by two years.

During the 1820s, her health declined and she died on 27 May 1827 at Malvern where she had gone to take the waters. Melesina Trench was buried in the Guardian Chapel and the

⁴ Frank McNally, “Birds of a Feather”, *Irish Times*, 21 March 2024; <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/an-irish-diary/2024/03/21/birds-of-a-feather-frank-mcnally-on-an-unusual-english-tribute-to-the-irish-writer-melesina-trench/>

⁵ Kittredge, *Melesina Trench*, p. 4.

⁶ Trench, *Journal*, p. 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁹ Kittredge, *Melesina Trench*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Sheila Gray, “Mrs Melesina Trench 1768-1827”, *Winchester Cathedral Record* 68 (1999), p. 21.

EDITORS NOTE

commemorative marble plaque was placed in the North Transept. Its Latin text can be translated as ‘To the best, most accomplished, and most beloved wife and mother, Melesina Trench.’



Melesina Trench memorial tablet

It was not until 1860 when Richard Trench died, that his wife’s papers were passed to their son, the Rev Richard Chenevix Trench, who was then Dean of Westminster. He prepared an edition of his mother’s *Journal Kept During a Visit to Germany in 1799, 1800*, extensive excerpts of which, including her biting comments on Emma Hamilton and Horatio Nelson, were published with fanfare in the *Times* during October 1861. In the following year, a collection of her writings, *The Remains of Mrs. Richard Trench*, was widely reviewed and sold out on its first printing. Her diary writing about Nelson made her ‘a celebrity thirty-five years after her death’,¹¹ but the fame was not lasting and she quickly faded from literary notice. Perhaps ‘Mel’ the peregrine will revive interest in her writing and personal history.

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- For a fuller biography of Melesina Trench, see Sheila Gray’s article, “Mrs Melesina Trench 1768-1827”, *Winchester Cathedral Record*, 68 (1999), pp. 17-23.

Illustrations

Engraving by William Holl the Younger, dated 1862, after portrait by George Romney.
Source: *The Remains of the Late Mrs Richard Trench being Selections from her Journals, Letters and Other Papers*, 1862. (Public Domain).

Memorial Tablet for Melesina Trench, south wall of North Transept, Winchester Cathedral (Author).

¹¹ Kittredge, *Melesina Trench*, p. 4.