

# Fanny: A Fiction

Edmund White

## Chapter 1

Now that her life is over I have decided to write it. To be sure I knew her only for a few intense years, but our friendship was central to both of us, if only to indicate the direction each of us did not choose to take. We spent time together on the high seas and in the United States (which she admired and I despised). We seldom agreed on anything and her followers, if there be any left, will doubtless question my right to be her Boswell.

But her numerous enemies, not her few friends, are the readers I address in the hope of vindicating her honour. Nor will I pretend that this is the complete account she merits; I am too burdened with other literary projects to be able to track down the minutiae or verify even the main dates of her passage on earth. And I am writing here in the French countryside, far from a library or the confirming or abetting reminiscences of other civilized English men and women. In fact the road outside this cottage is dusty, the peasant farmer with whom I stay for the moment shouts all day in an incomprehensible patois, there's a particularly boisterous rooster . . . Fortunately in a few days I will be on my way to Florence and my beloved Villino Trollope.

Fanny Wright had undeniable virtues [develop this thought by the bye].

But she had, just as undeniably, some faults which I, as her friend and confidante, was particularly privileged to observe. Picture a blazing, ten-log fire sans fire-screen and you'll have a notion of Fanny Wright's heat and intensity (some would say her glare).

She had red hair, she was tall and slender, her complexion was as pale and lucent as opals – but she was the good kind of redhead, without freckles, though she did have that distinctive scent of the true redhead when she was overexerting herself, or as the French would say, en nage. [Delete remark on her bodily scent? In dubious taste? Though she gave off, in truth, the smell of a wet collie when she was sweating.]

But I anticipate. I am sitting here in déshabille on a broken strawbottomed chair in a room so noisy with clucking and the farmer's screeching to his fowl and the ripe scent of damp straw (this house is covered with thatch) that I might as well lay an egg myself, except I am not up to it and am waiting here until my fever subsides and my son Tom sends additional funds to complete my overland trip to Tuscany.

Frances Wright . . .

Well, I should begin at the beginning. Her problems began with her parents and then their early exit from her life. She was born on 6 September 1795 [verify? I'm certain this is correct] in Dundee, a city almost as crowded and filthy as Edinburgh before the New City was constructed. In Edinburgh, in the Old City, though the streets were only five feet wide and the buildings ten storeys tall, the 'gentle folk' waited until ten of the evening and then, when the last watch was called, all had permission to throw their slops out the window onto the street below. Whoever was passing would be foully bespattered and the rising stench was so great one could sleep only with rose petals pressed to the nostrils. Mind you, Dundee was just as dark and densely settled as Edinburgh but the Wrights lived on a floor of an ancient house, since torn down, by the Nethergate, I believe, whence the fields and gardens were visible and where the citizens would descend and bathe directly in the cold waters of the Tay.

Fanny was preceded by an older brother and followed by her beloved little sister Camilla, but when Fanny was only three her mother died and her father passed away three short months later. Despite this early disappearance her father, James Wright, a prosperous Dundee merchant, left his mark on the child, for James was the worst sort of freethinker. He had paid to have Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* reprinted in a ha'penny edition available to the poor, and this infamous egalitarian tract, full of mischievous sophistry, could have condemned the rash man to Botany Bay had he not been so well connected. Mr Wright belonged to several numismatics clubs and possessed very valuable coins; typical of his Jacobin views, he wondered why the public mints employed 'the silly morsels of heraldry' in designing coins rather than 'emblems of industry and commerce.' Doubtless he wanted our shillings not to present the royal profiles but to show milkmaids plying swollen teats, and our crowns to enshrine dustmen wading through ordure.

Mr Wright would also have been arrested for belonging to the infamous Friends of the People, a communistical phalanstary in Edinburgh, had he not ridden, all alone, one misty night, out into the murky Tay, where he drowned his devilish papers . . . Years later, Fanny Wright read through the few notes her father had jotted down that had not been destroyed that night – and naturally found surprising similarities in

their turn of mind. He had written, 'The spirit of law and the tenor of the conduct of governments in order to be well adapted to the mutable and ever-varying state of human affairs ought continually to change according to existing circumstances and the temper of the age.' Notice his emphasis on mutable Circumstance rather than eternal Nature and its Laws. Fanny later told me she marvelled at the 'coincidence in views between father and daughter, separated by death when the first had not reached the age of twenty-nine, and when the latter was in infancy.' I, too, alas, find a terrifying symmetry there, a family habit of reckless disregard of tradition and a total capitulation to Wanton Flux!

Fanny's older brother was engaged in the navy and died in a sea battle with the French off Madeira when he was not yet seventeen. Long before, Fanny and her sister Camilla (Fan and Cam as they were called) had been parcelled out to various relatives. They lived for a while in London with their maternal grandfather, Major General Duncan Campbell, an indolent and convivial man who expressed intense satisfaction that he never dined alone and that he knew nobody but lords and generals. When he dined with them, it was always with ten or twelve wines and a gaggle of tired, opinionated women in brocaded gowns and lop-sided coiffures, for his circle kept very late hours indeed.

Miss Wright was repelled by these bibulous Tory relatives in London, for if her father died when she was still only an infant, none the less she clung to her idea of him, and an Idea is always more tenacious than a Reality. I myself have always rejected long evenings at table with the great and good in favour of gay family gatherings, amateur theatricals, meals on the wing and ardent conviviality. I far prefer a simple farmhouse, a mulled cider, the cries of happy children and the drolleries of artistic friends to the dull panelled majesty of the Mayfair dining room with its twelve wines. Of course I did become an intimate of Prince Metternich in Vienna long after I went to America with Fanny Wright, but the prince was so temperate he ate nothing but brown bread and butter while his guests feasted. Apparently even Napoleon III hates lingering at table and gets everyone up after an hour in order to play charades and dance Scottish jigs.

We have the record (from her own hand, d'ailleurs) of but one conversation between Fanny, still a child, and her florid-faced old beau of a kinsman, General Campbell. One day when a starving beggar woman and her dirty child were turned away from her grandfather's door, Fanny asked him, 'Why are those people so poor?'

'Because they are too lazy to work,' the good general replied.

‘But you don’t work, Grandfather.’

‘Certainly not,’ said the indignant old man. ‘I could not associate with the rich if I worked. It is a shame for a rich man to work.’

What a pity she did not grow up, as I did, the child of a sensible if impecunious clergyman. My dear mother died when I was only five, but Nature saw fit to spare my father, who instructed me in the beauty and moral superiority of Dante and Petrarch and introduced us, his children, to a wide circle of Bristol merchants and his fellow alumni of Winchester and New College. I spent my whole girlhood dancing, and I would have gladly made dancing more general and of more frequent occurrence than it already was.

Frances Wright’s sufferings as a girl were indisputable, since she was deprived of the comfort and love of her own hearth. I myself knew the sorrow of growing up without a mother to help me dress, to advise me on my corsage, to set the bon ton, to warn me against the advances of one rash youth or other. But perhaps because all those clergymen surrounding my father as well as all those scientists (for Papa was also an inventor, and invented plates lined with silver to soften the scraping sound of cutlery on porcelain, a noise he could not tolerate) – because all these men had wives and I a sister, I was never deprived of female counsel and company.

No wonder Fanny, who had no gift for feminine companionship, irritated her young aunt, her mother’s only sister, who took her and Camilla in charge and moved them, when Fanny was eleven and Cam nine, to the Devonshire village of Dawlish along the coast of Lyme Bay, there where the English Channel debouches into the Atlantic. This young aunt, Miss Frances Campbell, lived there in some state in a twenty-room house called ‘The Cottage,’ for she was an heiress, especially after the sudden, some say apoplectic, death of her father, General Campbell. Miss Campbell’s brother, Major William Campbell, also died soon before or shortly after, I forget which. He was killed in action somewhere in India, and left vast estates in Bengal, Behar and Benares [I remember these three B’s] to his sister and his two nieces. Ironical that Fanny Wright’s future freedom to hand down lessons to her inferiors was based on a colonial fortune founded in the Orient.

Miss Campbell hoped to raise Fan and Cam in the highly feminine eighteenth-century manner to which she herself had been submitted, but Fanny bitterly resented it. She said, speaking of herself in the priggish third person, that ‘experience taught her, in early childhood, how little was to be learned in drawing-rooms, and inspired

her with a disgust for frivolous reading, conversation and occupation.' Oh la! The truth of it is that this tall, redhaired girl with the low voice and solid, confronting gaze, the thin body and overly frank manner – the truth is that this paragon had no sense of humour. She knew no rhymes, played no games, sang no songs, never ogled a man or giggled at an absurdity; she alternated between noble complacency and nobler rage; if she had found a young man to her liking she would have matter-offactly taken his hand and led him off to a corner, though in saying that I do not mean to impugn her modesty. Quite the contrary. She was lamentably without coquetry and as innocent as the wheat standing in the field.

Miss Campbell in her stately Cottage deeply offended Fanny in attempting to make her conventional. She was a lady who knew how to say three words in approximate French and rattle off a rondo on the spinet, but she took no interest in the American or French Revolutions, Fanny's recently acquired hobbyhorses. She dared to instruct her, and Fanny never forgave her for that! Fanny, after all, was Brilliant, she told us so herself, though she knew no Latin and less Greek, but Brilliant in the way of her great-great-aunt, Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, Doctor Johnson's blue-stockings muse, the woman who had defended Shakespeare when his extravagances had come under attack from the overly nice Mr Voltaire. Lucky Shakespeare to have a Montagu; fortunate America to have a Fanny!