

## Lady Emily Dundas



The Ladies of Llangollen at Plas Newydd

Reference: 10812

Dimensions:

Height: 9.30 cm / 3<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in

Width: 9.40 cm / 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in

Watercolour over traces of pencil, inscribed verso: Llangollen-lan-Llangollen and inscribed on mount: Emily Dundas, a tiny sketch of a girl's head verso

9.3 x 9.4 cm; 3 5/8 x 3 5/8 inches, in a carved wood frame

# KAREN TAYLOR

## FINE ART

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Both the Ladies of Llangollen came from Ireland and it was here that the two women formed a strong emotional bond and attachment that would endure for the rest of their lives and attract the attention of Regency society.

Eleanor Charlotte Butler (1739 -1829) (seated in this drawing and wearing the order of Saint Louis, an order of chivalry founded by the French king) was the youngest daughter of the Earl of Ormonde of Kilkenny Castle. Sarah Ponsonby (1755 - 1831) lived with relatives, Sir William and Lady Elizabeth Fownes, in Woodstock, County Kilkenny and was a second cousin of Frederick Ponsonby, 3rd Earl of Bessborough, father of Lady Caroline Lamb. Ponsonby attended boarding school at Kilkenny, and it was there, aged 13, that she met Butler, who was 16 years her senior. They became fast friends and corresponded regularly.

Rather than face the possibility of being forced into unwanted marriages, or into a convent in the case of Butler, the pair left County Kilkenny together in April 1778 dressed as men, with a pistol and Sarah's beloved dog Frisk. Their families tracked them down and tried to make them give up their plans. They finally succeeded in fleeing together to Wales and established themselves at a cottage near Llangollen, which they renamed Plas Newydd, in 1780, which they refurbished in a Gothick style. Windows were gothicised and old stained glass panels inserted into them. A library was filled with finely bound books and curiosities of all kinds, including a lock of Mary Queen of Scots' hair.

They developed a passion for old, carved wood, from medieval churches to fragments of Elizabethan furniture. The staircase hall was lined with it, and a trio of canopies built on to the door and windows. The extraordinary front porch incorporates carvings of the four evangelists, Latin inscriptions, seventeenth century bedposts and lions donated by the Duke of Wellington (visitors soon learnt that to appear with gifts of carvings ensured a warm welcome). Over the years they added a circular stone dairy and created a garden in the picturesque style. Eleanor kept a diary of their activities.

Living on a modest income they maintained a quiet life, studying literature and languages which they described as their 'system' and improving their estate. They did not actively socialise and were uninterested in fashion, wearing dark riding habits for formal and informal occasions and beaver hats, as seen in Dundas' drawing. Their hair remained cropped in the 'Titus' style, fashionable in the 1790s and they continued to use hair powder, which went out of fashion after the same decade. Many observers commented on their masculine appearance.

Their life began to attract the interest of the outside world and Plas Newydd became a haven for visitors, as they become a celebrated example of 'retirement', leaving society for a rustic idyll, which delighted writers such as Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott. They were also admired for their 'Romantic Friendship'. Visitors including Southey, Wordsworth, Shelley, Lord Byron, Lady Caroline Lamb, Sir Walter Scott, the Duke of Wellington and Josiah Wedgwood visited. The two formed a literary circle that encompassed Mary Tighe, Ann Talbot, Anna Seward, Hester Thrale (otherwise known as Hester Piozzi, Dr. Johnson's friend, was a neighbour), Henrietta Bowdler, Madame de Genlis and William Wordsworth. Copious correspondence resulted, some of which, for example letters to Anna Seward, have been published (Collected Letters of Anna Seward, 1811).

On some days as many as twenty visitors arrived. Their notoriety spread abroad and continental visitors included Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, the German nobleman and landscape designer, who wrote admiringly about them. Queen Charlotte wanted to see their cottage and persuaded George III to grant them a pension.

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There was speculation that there was more than romantic friendship between Eleanor and Sarah in their own lifetime. The diaries of Anne Lister (1791-1840), an English landowner from Halifax, West Yorkshire, record a visit to the Ladies of Llangollen in 1822. Her diaries contain accounts of her own lesbian relationships written in code. She was fascinated by the two women and discreetly tried to establish if they were more than just friends, concluding that it seemed unlikely that their friendship was just platonic. Their queer materiality has been explored by Fiona Brideoak in 'Desire, Indeterminism and the Legacies of Criticism', 2017. Butler and Ponsonby lived together for over fifty years until the end of their lives. Their books and glassware carried both sets of initials and their letters were jointly signed. Eleanor Butler died in 1829, and Sarah Ponsonby two years later. They are both buried at St Collen's Church in Llangollen.

Plas Newydd is now a museum run by Denbighshire County Council and is open to the public.

Although the Ladies of Llangollen's fame was extraordinary, romantic female friendships were common in eighteenth century Europe. Women often spent a great deal of time in each other's company and developed strong, intense relationships. Female friends frequently wrote to one another using passionate, romantic language that can suggest a sexual relationship to modern readers. Some of the relationships reflected in correspondence were no doubt sexual, others may simply have reflected the conventions of friendship. It is impossible to find conclusive proof whether the relationship between Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby was sexual or not, but there is abundant evidence that it was loving.

Not that many images of the pair are known as the ladies disliked having their portrait taken. Lady Mary Leighton (née Parker) sketched them individually in pencil and a lithograph was made by Richard James Lane, after Lady Leighton circa 1830-1840s showing them seated at Plas Newydd. A second pirated version was made by James Henry Lynch, printed by Day & Haghe, circa 1833-1845 and shows the pair full-length wearing riding habits and top hats in their garden. Lady Delamere sketched them in old age showing them walking inside Plas Newydd (see E. Mavor, 'The Ladies of Llangollen- a study in Romantic Friendship', 1971, ill. facing frontispiece and facing p. 97).

Provenance: Augusta Raymond-Barker (step-niece of the artist), Fairford Park, Gloucestershire; thence by family descent until 2016

See also: Fiona Brideoak, 'The Ladies of Llangollen - Desire, Indeterminism and the Legacies of Criticism', 2017.

The artist of this drawing, which lies somewhere between portraiture and caricature, was Lady Emily Dundas, née Reynolds-Moreton, the fourth daughter of Thomas, 1st Earl of Ducie. In 1847 she married Admiral Sir James Whitley Deans Dundas, GCB, (1785-1862) as his second wife. He became the First Naval Lord in the first Russell ministry in July 1847 and they lived at Admiralty House. Thackeray records that during the 1850 season Lady Emily Dundas gave a glittering party.

Lady Emily Dundas is recorded as accompanying her husband on many official engagements such as inspecting the fleet in various places from Cork to Malta and as far afield as New Zealand. He was appointed Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean in 1852 and led all naval operations in the Black Sea, including the bombardment of Sevastopol in October 1854 during the Crimean War. She went with him to Turkey and took a house at Therapia.

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Lady Emily Dundas had four sisters. Her youngest sister, Lady Catherine Reynolds-Moreton (d. 2 Dec. 1892), married in 1841, John Raymond-Barker, of Fairford Park, Gloucestershire (d. 21 May 1888). He had two daughters by his first wife, Harriet Bosanquet (1798-1830) Augusta (1827-1900) and Leonora. Augusta assembled the friendship album from which this watercolour comes which reveals the women of her family and circle as accomplished watercolourists.

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