Title
Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson) and John Waldie

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Lady Morgan [Sydney Owenson] and John Waldie

23. Lady Morgan, Sydney Owenson. Portrait by Rene Theodore Berthon. Reproduced from the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI 133)


23. Lady Morgan, Sydney Owenson

Lady Morgan (ca. 1776–1859), was born Sydney Owenson, eldest daughter of Robert Owenson, a roving Irish actor, and Jane Hill, whom Robert met while on tour in England. The most successful of her early novels was The Wild Irish Girl (1806). She entered the household of John Hamilton, 1st Marquess of Abercorn, and in 1812, persuaded by Anne Jane Gore, Lady Abercorn, she married the surgeon to the household, Thomas Charles Morgan, who received knighthood.

Four months before her death (14 April 1859), she published an autobiography composed of excerpts from her diary and her letters. In it, she recounts that, while residing in Paris in 1818/19, she was visited by John Waldie, whom she described as an intrusive bore. In her snide reference to Waldie wanting to meet the actor of the title role in The Dog of Montargis (Pixérécourt’s Le Chien de Montargis, 1814; see Waldie’s account on 6 August 1817, XL, 170), Lady Morgan deprecated Waldie’s fascination with the stage. In fact, Waldie was eager to meet the great French actor, François Joseph Talma (1763-1826).
Diary. – The gods take care of Cæsar! – that may be said in truth of the profound bore, “who comes, and sees, and conquers!” He knows he is a bore, and he trades upon it. I have two bores who haunt me, male and female. They began in Kildare Street, they continue it in Paris, and they will pursue me to the Pontine Marshes!*

“They stop the chariot, and they board the barge”

[Alexander Pope, Epistle VII. To Dr. Arbuthnot, line 10]

Well, I gave notice to the porter’s lodge that I never would be “at home” to Mr. W—die, and would never be “out” to the Baron Humboldt. “Bien, bien, miladi,” said the porter, writing on his slate, and so I thought myself secure of the reception of the first man in the world in my opinion, and safe to [*This foreboding was realised, for the man-bore actually did overtake us at the Pontine Marshes, whilst we were changing horses at the “Tre Taverne,” and I was talking to a monk who was going to Rome, the most agreeable man I ever met by chance.]

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escape the last man in the world that I ever wished to see. Well, my own servant being out, the frotteur entered this morning announcing Mons. Valdie! And complacently presenting me at the same time, with a little billet written in the lodge from M. Humboldt!* Here it is. “M. Humboldt toujours malheureaux.” After such a contretemps, one has nothing left to do but die, to retire into a convent! Paris abounds in these enforcesurs des portes, as the great central place where bores from all regions most do congregate, every nation sending its contingent, but where I never met a native bore.

Mr. W.’s word on entering always was, “I come to beg you to introduce me to –,” and this was the prologue to a “swelling tale;” for it began with some French minister or English duchess, and ended with the Dog of Montargis, or some other animal celebrity, taking in its course all that was best worth knowing or desiring to know in Paris. One of his modes of procedure was to tread on somebody’s toes, than beg pardon, and ask permission to leave his card the following day! And this was a plagiarism from a certain Mr. “Toe” King, so called from this invention. [*I made use of this incident in my novel of The Princess (1835), the perpetrator being “Lady O’Doherty.”]

p. 218 [Letter to Lady Clarke; Paris, 20 December 1818]

A Mr. W—die has introduced himself to us as an acquaintance of Mr. Hamilton Rowan’s, who would have given him a letter to us. Delighted to show attention to a friend of Mr. Rowan’s, I gave him entrée on Wednesdays, with which he seemed delighted, but he is a bore. Pray mention this to Mr. Rowan as soon as you can, and ask him if he knows such a gentleman.
Waldie recalled meeting with Sir Charles and Lady Morgan in Paris at a musical concert hosted by Alexandre Boucher, where Waldie sang and afterwards had occasion to talk with the Morgans about their Dublin friends, Richard and Maria Waldie Griffith and the Hamilton Rowans. “They asked me to come on Wednesday Evenings when they are at home. She is little, squinting, and commonplace in appearance-- but yet rather good looking and very lively and animated” (XLII, 96; 13 December 1818). Upset by Lady Morgan’s account of his behaviour, Waldie urged Bentley, in a second edition, to delete the uncomplimentary paragraphs and to insert the account he provided in this letter. He claimed that Lady Morgan was jealous of his social connections and his fluency in Italian. While there may well have been some truth in her accusations, it is probable that Lady Morgan was embarrassed by Waldie’s reminders of her father’s acting career and her own humble origins as daughter of an itinerate actor, and her early years as a governess before she became “Lady Morgan.”
Directions to Mr. Bentley.
Begin at Line 10 page 205 with the word “Diary” – & leave out all page 206 except the last 3 lines. –
all contained in the above page & half is false – Mr. W., then young & active, was quick & agile & not at all likely to tread on people’s toes.
I have an idea that I did speak to Lady M. at a midday halt on the Pontine marshes in Novr 1819 – but I saw very little of her during my Winter in Rome in 1819-20. I was certainly not one of the Enforceurs of Lady Morgan’s portes, as I do not remember calling on her above once or twice in the morning during all my winter in Paris in 1819-20.
Lady M. begins again with me at line 14 of page 218 by saying “a Mr. Waldie has introduced himself to us &c. Here
It would be well to leave out the 8 lines following the beginning of the period. She knew perfectly she had seen me in Dublin at Mr. Griffith’s, my brother in law, & now President of the Board of Works, & in February 1858 created a Baronet for 50 years hard service under all the Irish Governments.

She also knew from myself that I was one of the Dep. Lieuts. of Roxburghshire originally appointed by the late Marquis of Lothian & since continued by the present Duke of Buccleuch – so there was no occasion to desire Mr. Rowan Hamilton to enquire about me.

My real crime was that all the winter of 1818 & 19 in Paris I regularly attended the Soirées of Prince Tallyrand, & the Duchess of Courland, which were held on alternate Mondays, & every Thursday I attended the charming reunion of Madame Crawford (Italian by birth) & Grandmother of the late
Conte D’Orsay, & his Sister the Duchess de Guiche who is now living, & is Mother to the Duc de Gramont now ambassador at Rome from Paris, & his beautiful children continue the celebrated beauty of the Gramonts to this day. His Duchess is the eldest daughter of Mr MacKinnon M.P.

As Lady M. says I was frequently asking her to introduce me to people, I must plead guilty to having asked her to present me to M. Talma which afforded that great actor much pleasure, when he found that I had been for many years intimately acquainted with Mrs. Siddons & all her brothers. M. Talma made me the bearer of a valuable packet [a present from himself] for Mr. Kemble then living at Lausanne, although he knew it would have to traverse all Spain before it could arrive at its destination. It arrived safely at Lausanne with Mr Christie &
myself at Lausanne. Mr C. was nephew of Sir William Langham & cousin of the late Marquis of Northampton – & he & I had the pleasure of spending 10 days at Bordeaux on our way to the Pyrenees & Spain, & supped every Evg after the Theatre with M. Talma & Mlle. George who were then acting at the Bordeaux Theatre.

Lady M. was not very well pleased that the principal of her Italian visitors at her reunion, viz. Conte & Contessa Cicognara, (venetian) Conte de Velo di Vicenza, Marchese Capponi of Florence, & Conte Sonfaloniera of Milan, all paid me great attention on account of my speaking Italian with much fluency & having been lately 14 months in Italy. I had early acquired the Italian language in England in order to be able to sing better the high tenor parts of operas, as I was accustomed then frequently to do with Madame Catalani, Mrs. Ashe, Mr Braham all of whom in duets kindly sung below me.
P.S.
Mr. Waldie hopes Mr. Bentley will excuse his circumstantial polity, & would be glad to refer him to the Dukes of Buccleuch & Roxburgh, & to Sir John Pringle Bart, & Sir George Scott Douglas Bart, & Sir William Scott Bart M.P. for the county of Roxburghe – & can also refer to many highly esteemed friends at Paris & Rome particularly.

In 1817 at Rome Mr W. was with his 2 youngest sisters at Rome (one of whom was the author of Rome in the 19th Century & the other of Sketches of Italy in 1818 & 1819 – ) and being very intimate with Cavaliere Tambroni Director of the Austrian academy at Rome, who was Tutor to the present Emperor of the French & his elder brother Napoleon. Mr. W.'s then made acquaintance
with the young Louis Napoleon formed with every talent for his high destiny, & he
afterwards when the Emperor was 20 saw a great deal of
him at Rome in 1827-8
when he was residing with his
most beautiful & talented mother
in the Palazzo Ruspoli, then
inhabited by Conte de Goyon
commanding the French Troops
at Rome in 1856-7 when Mr W. last spent a winter at Rome.—

It may be well to mention
that I have kept a regular
diary of Time & occupation
since I was only 13 years of age
the part of it relating to the
winter in Paris in 1818-19 & to
the summer of 1819 (passed entirely
in Spain) was read by the late Mr. Murray, who wished it to be published
on account of our being the first
travellers who went to Spain after the Peninsular War – but
but I thought it too entirely personal for publication, & was well aware that my personal adventures could only be of interest to my own family.

I perfectly recollect that Lady Morgan’s name was often mentioned in my diary of my winter in Paris in 1818-19, but not having the manuscript volume here, I can only say that I do not believe it contained any observation that could have been given her offence.

John Waldie.
From John Waldie Esqr.
Hendersyde Park, Kelso
N.B. if possible to be printed with the next edition of Lady Morgan’s diary.
Robert Bentley Esq.
8 New Burlington Street
I should like much to have the inclosed remarks & details printed –