

BOOK REVIEW

The Pioneering Life of Mary Wortley Montagu. Scientist and Feminist by Jo Willett

Hardback, 288 pages
Pen & Sword History, ISBN 9781526779380
March 2021

This new biography of Lady Mary Montagu by a distinguished, award winning television producer, is a well written, extensively researched and very readable account of a remarkable woman of the Georgian era. She was an early feminist writer of poetry and essays and spent time in Turkey, where her husband, Edward Montagu, was ambassador. There, she befriended many local women in order to understand their culture, customs and way of life, long before it was fashionable to do so. These experiences in Constantinople resulted in her 'Letters from Turkey' one of the early examples of a new genre of travel writing. It is here that she observed the practice of variolation to prevent the scourge of smallpox and decided to introduce this technique on her return to England.

Lady Montagu herself suffered from smallpox in 1715 and recovered but was left scarred. She was courageous enough to practice the technique of variolation on her children in 1721, who were spared the ravages of this disease at the time of a major smallpox epidemic in the UK. The book serves as a reminder to us of what a remarkable woman Lady Montagu was with accomplishments as a lady of letters, a scientist, early feminist, as well as a woman who mixed in the highest echelons of society in her time. She knew the politicians, writers, and leading intellectuals of the day, was a friend of the poet Alexander Pope with whom she collaborated before they fell out. Her feminist drive was perhaps sparked by the poor early education she received as a woman at the hands of governesses. Her daughter married against her wishes, having fallen in love with the impecunious John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute who was later to become Prime Minister in 1762/63.

This biography covers Mary Wortley Montagu's remarkable life and serves to remind us that she should be given credit for her pioneering views on variolation which paved the way for the advances to be made by Jenner almost a century later. It is illustrated and has a bibliography and index. The book will certainly be of interest to historians, as well as the general reader.

Arpan K Banerjee
May 2021

Published online at www.bsham.org.uk