



CYNTHIA CAMPBELL – CONSULTANT LECTURER AND FORMER HEAD OF PUBLIC SERVICES

AT THE ROYAL PAVILION

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Dear Mr Franklin,

Your letter to the Public Services Section of the Royal Pavilion has been passed on to me, and I shall be happy to tell you anything I can about the Conyngham family's connection with George IV. I am, of course, not certain how much detail you want, so you must forgive me if I repeat facts that you are already familiar with, or come up with too much scandal and gossip.

Elizabeth, Marchioness of Conyngham was born about 1770, (d.1861), the daughter of Joseph Denison, a city banker from a modest Yorkshire family, who became extremely rich. She had already been married for over twenty five years to Henry, 1st Marquess Conyngham, and had two sons, Lord Mount Charles and Lord Francis, and two daughters, Lady Elizabeth and Lady Maria, when the Prince Regent became infatuated with her, shortly before he became king in 1820, though they met have known each other slightly since 1805.

Madame De Lieven, the wife of the Russian Ambassador, in her letters to Prince Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, is a great source of the many slightly scandalous stories about the relationship between the King and Lady Conyngham. So too are the memoirs of John Wilson Croker, Charles Greville, and Lady Harriet Granville. My quotations are taken from them. The reason that I have these quotations to hand is that I have recently finished, though not yet published, a book, "The Most Polished Gentleman", which deals with George IV and the women in his life.

Lady Conyngham was said to be fat, handsome, kindly, shrewd, and extremely fond of jewels. One story, repeated by two different observers, illustrates this fondness. Croker's version is; "A curious story going about that the King gave Princess Charlotte a remarkably fine sapphire on her marriage, and that after her death he asked it back as being a royal jewel, that Prince Leopold returned it reluctantly, but that, lo! Lady Darnley has recognised it on Lady Conyngham's neck." Greville also told his version; "..... Lady C. had on her head a sapphire which belonged to the Stuarts, and was given by the Cardinal of York (Henry Stuart, grandson of James II) to the King. He gave it to the Ps. Charlotte and when she died he

desired to have it back,..... this crown jewel sparkled in the headdress of the Marchioness at the ball."

A rhyme suggesting that they spent their time

"Quaffing their claret, then mingling their lips,
Or tickling the fat about each other's hips"

seems to have caught the atmosphere of their relationship.

There was certainly no shortage of mutual fat, so that she and the King together were referred to as 'their Obeseties'.

It is very possible that, like her predecessor Lady Hertford, Lady Conyngham was a 'favourite' rather than a 'mistress', as there was a distinct family atmosphere about their relationship, and Lord Conyngham seems to have had no objection when his wife and the King spent their evenings "sitting on a sofa together, holding each other's hands, whispering and kissing." George IV certainly adored her, and she had a great influence on him, which could sometimes cause problems; if she did not wish to do something, he would not do it either. Lady Conyngham and Lady Londonderry, whose husband was the Foreign Secretary, disliked each other intensely; Madame de Lieven described some of the convolutions of this dislike; "..... the King is to give a large dinner-party for the Prince and Princess of Denmark. When making out the list, he included Lord and Lady Londonderry. Lady Conyngham declared that if the latter was at dinner, she would not come. The King on his side, declared that, if she did not come, he would not give a dinner for the Princess. Lady Conyngham persisted. Finally, he agreed to invite neither Lord nor Lady Londonderry; but at the end of the argument he persuaded Lady C. to ask me to arbitrate between them.....It was a long battle, but I won, and now, thank Heaven, a quarrel of two years' standing is ended, at any rate as far as appearances go. I can think of no more difficult job than getting round a woman's vanity, when one can appeal neither to her reason nor to her decent feelings." Londonderry was very upset, and did not forgive Lady Conyngham.

But her influence could also be for the good. Harriet Granville, who had seen the King at the theatre shortly after the tremendous scandal of the Bill of Pains and Penalties, - the so-called 'Trial of Queen Caroline', when his popularity was at a very low ebb, - wrote to her sister, Lady Morpeth; "I heard the other day that the King is more in love with your friend Lady C(onyngham) than ever, and that he sits kissing her hand with a look of the most devoted submission. I suppose she persuaded him to go to the play. It is very wise and answered perfectly".

The King visited the Conynghams at Slane Castle in Ireland, on his first visit outside England, - in fact the first to Ireland of any Hanoverian king. And the Conyngham family spent

a great deal of time in Brighton, where Greville frequently saw them; "Lady C. lives in one of the houses in Marlbro' Row. All the members of her family are continually there, and are supplied with horse, carriages, etc., from the King's stables. She rides out with her daughter, but never with the King, who always rides with one of his gentlemen. They never appear in public together. She dines there (at the Pavilion) every day; before the King comes into the room she and Lady Elizabeth join him in another room, and he always walks in with one on each arm. She comports herself entirely as Mistress of the House, but never suffers her daughter to leave her. She has received magnificent presents; Lady Eliz. the same; particularly the mother has strings of pearls of enormous value. Madame de Lieven said she had seen the pearls of the Grand Duchesses and the Russian Princesses, but had never seen any nearly so fine as Lady C.'s. The other night Lady Bath was coming to the Pavilion. After dinner Lady C. called to Sir Wm. Keppel and said, 'Sir Wm., do desire them to light up the Saloon' [this Saloon is lit by hundreds of candles]. When the King came in she said to him, 'Sir, I told them to light the Saloon, as Lady Bath is coming this evening.' The King seized her arm and said with the greatest tenderness, 'Thank you, thank you, My Dear; you always do what is right; you cannot please me so much as by doing everything you please, everything to show that you are Mistress here.' Madame de L. was sitting by her when this scene took place and repeated it to Ly. Harrowby who told it to me." And on another occasion; "the King was gazing at Lady Conyngham with an expression in which somnolence battled against love; Lady Conyngham was gazing at a beautiful emerald on her arm; her daughter was toying with a ruby hanging round her neck;...."

Lady Harriet Granville spent Christmas 1823 at the Pavilion, and wrote of it to her brother; ".... I went after it (Divine service) to Lady Conyngham, and saw her Christmas gifts, which made my mouth water, and made me almost wish for a situation. A magnificent cross, siezed from the expiring body of a murdered bishop in the island of Scio. An almanack, gold with flowers embossed on it of precious stones. A gold melon, which being touched by a spring falls into compartments like the quarters of an orange, each containing different perfumes. I returned like Alladdin after the cave, only empty-handed, which, I believe, he was not."

Madame de Lieven continued to find the whole affair ridiculous; "...The King has seen nobody. Love which allows nothing to interfere with it is all very fine; but how extraordinary when its object is Lady Conyngham! Not an idea in her head; not a word to say for herself; nothing but a hand to accept pearls and diamonds with, and an enormous balcony to wear them on..... The favourite does nothing but yawn; the King is in a frightful state of melancholy". Observers felt that magnificent jewels were the Conyngham Ladies' only interest, but the King obviously enjoyed sitting by her playing at patience the

whole evening. De Lieven noted that he sometimes seemed to be bored with his 'inamorata', particularly as neither she nor her daughter shared his love of music. When the King gave a musical evening, never leaving the piano, "Lady Conyngham and Lady Elizabeth did not conceal their dissatisfaction at all this music."

The King took a great interest in the affairs of the whole Conyngham family, and it seems that it was the domestic atmosphere that was one of the main attractions for him. His attentions to the elder daughter, Elizabeth, were very marked, and some thought that he was as much in love with her as with her mother, even suggesting that he was going to marry her, though she finally married the Earl of Huntley. He also wrote many fatherly and effusively sentimental letters to the younger daughter, Lady Maria; "My dearest Maria, As a proof that I have not forgotten You, that I never could forget You, I now send You dear Child, a little trifle by way of a keepsake; may it be the means of affording You, be it only, half the pleasure it does me, in offering it to You, & I shall be amply rewarded & gratified. That when you arrive at her years, You may as exactly as possible, resemble, your dear and perfect Sister, my dearest Elizabeth, is, the best wish my Heart can frame for you (and) at the same time be the best proof to You, my dearest Child, of the never ceasing regard and Love, of Your ever affectionate....."

Apart from an occasional escape into music, the King concentrated on pleasing the favourite in every way possible. He wished to appoint Lord Conyngham as Lord Chamberlain, but Lord Liverpool (the Prime Minister) objected, and suggested that Conyngham should become Groom of the Stole, a rather low-ranking position. Eventually a compromise was reached, Conyngham becoming Lord Steward of the Household. A further upset occurred when the King decided to bestow the Canonry of Windsor on the tutor of Lady Conyngham's children. The Ministers would not tolerate such an infringement of their privileges, for such places were in their gift. This became so serious that the Duke of Wellington was afraid that the Ministers would be turned out. The King claimed he had promised, and could not with honour withdraw. Liverpool maintained that as it was the Ministers' prerogative, the King's honour was not involved. The King said, "Then you want your King to be dishonoured?" Liverpool replied "On the contrary, but if he persists, I can no longer serve him." The King gave way, and the affair blew over. Such were the problems of Court etiquette.

But the King could be jealous if he felt that the favourite had other interests; a bone of contention was that "twenty-five years ago Lord Ponsonby was Lady Conyngham's favoured lover." He was away from England when her liaison with the King began, and she had not seen him since. When they did meet

again, she was much moved, and the King was jealous; he got the Government to find a post abroad for him as Ambassador to Brazil, to Ponsonby's great delight.

In 1824 the King wanted to go to Italy with Lady Conyngham, whose eldest son, Lord Mount Charles, was seriously ill there. Wellington was against the idea, and it was finally dropped, after much mockery from de Lieven. There was gossip, after Mount Charles died in 1825, that he had married and fathered a child there, and that Lady Conyngham had bribed the doctors to keep this a secret, so that her second son could inherit.

Lady Conyngham continued to be nearly all-powerful throughout the rest of the King's life, second only to Sir William Knighton, the King's private secretary; she did not dare have anybody to dine there without previously ascertaining that Knighton would not disapprove of it. "In the meantime the influence of Knighton and that of Lady Conyngham continue as great as ever; nothing can be done but by their permission, and they understand one another and play into each other's hands. Knighton opposes every kind of expense, except that which is lavished on her. The wealth she has accumulated by savings and presents must be enormous. The King continues to heap all kinds of presents on her, and she lives at his expense; they do not possess a servant; even Lord C.'s Valet de Chambre is not properly their servant. They all have situations in the King's household, from which they receive their pay, while they continue in the service of the Conynghams." The Duke of Clarence (William IV) told a friend that George IV had given Lady Conyngham £95,000 to buy Bifrons. But apart from money, their life seems to have been unexciting; in June 1827, Greville noted; "..... the dullness must be excessive, and the people who compose his habitual society are the most insipid and uninteresting that can be found. As for Lady Conyngham, she looks bored to death, and she never speaks, never appears to have one word to say to the King, who, however, talks himself without ceasing." Lady Conyngham may have been bored with the King, but she certainly had reason to be grateful for his generosity.

Towards the end of his life, the King seems to have feared that Lady Conyngham was interested only in his generosity, and he complained frequently both to and about her. But one of the royal doctors thought that this was only his usual pattern with women, and Wellington agreed that it was merely to "try and vex her."

George IV died on 26th June 1830, and Lord Conyngham in 1832. I have no knowledge of Lady Conyngham's life during her widowhood.

If you would like illustrations, the Museum of Brighton, which is the same Department as the Royal Pavilion, has a number of amusing and informative caricatures. You should get in touch

with Andrew Barlow, Keeper of Fine Art, who I am sure would be very helpful. The telephone number is: 0273 603005.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if I can be of any further help.

Yours Sincerely,

Gillian Campbell

Cynthia Campbell