

The Duchess and the Artist

A love story

Georgina, Duchess of Bedford	1781 - 1853
Edwin Landseer	1802 - 1873

Georgina was born in 1781 to Alexander, the 4th Duke of Gordon and his first wife Jane and was the 6th of seven legitimate children (five girls and two boys). Alexander fathered a further nine children by at least four different women, and Jane was no saint either.

Alexander and Jane were completely different in their outlook on life ; Alexander loved the Highlands, home life and country pursuits, on the other hand Jane was an independent and ambitious woman but because of her more modest upbringing also had a social conscience. Although Georgina lived a privileged, cultured and outwardly happy childhood and grew up with a love for nature and the arts, she witnessed both her parents having extra-marital affairs which perhaps influenced her attitude to infidelity in her own marriage, and showed that as long as discretion was observed affairs could be conducted fairly openly. In her teenage years, with her parents estranged she spent much time with her mother in a farmhouse near Aviemore which was often filled to overflowing by visiting politicians, writers and local gentry and through her mother, Georgina acquired social skills, but her formal education was more limited; French, drawing and dancing. The aim of an 18C aristocratic woman was to become a feminine creature, pleasing to men, not a blue-stocking who might intimidate a potential husband. One of Jane's main missions in life was to secure maximum status for her five daughters, but also to protect her sons from similarly predatory women.

The Georgian marriage market was very competitive, and presentation at court and coming-out balls were handled with great precision and Georgina was 'launched' in February 1799. A successful season was measured by weddings, not balls and the duchess would not rest until Georgina had walked down the aisle with a duke. Georgina's main rival was Georgiana Cavendish, known as Little G, the daughter of her mother's arch enemy, the Duchess of Devonshire. Little G was slightly younger than Georgina so she was not presented at court until May 1800, but the girls soon found themselves competing for the same man, and the most eligible bachelor on the scene was the Duke of Bedford.

Political allegiances favoured Little G as the Bedford's, like the Cavendish's were Whigs whereas the Gordon's were staunch Tories and it seemed inevitable that the Duke would marry Little G.

Francis, 5th Duke of Bedford was one of the wealthiest men in Britain owning estates all over England and his responsibilities began when he was just three years old when his father, also Francis, Marquess of Tavistock was killed by a fall from his horse in 1767, and then on the death of his grandfather when he was only six years old Francis became the 5th Duke. Handsome, in a slightly overweight and debauched way, Francis had reached his mid-30's without marrying. He enjoyed women's company (a bit of an understatement), but realised that he was prey for predatory mothers. His eligibility attracted the mothers, while his good looks appealed to the daughters, and at the age of 35 he realised it was time he selected a wife to be the mistress of Woburn, and the mother of legitimate heirs. The aforementioned duchesses were ready to meet the challenge each believing her daughter to be the preferred candidate. At first the Duchess of Devonshire seemed to be ahead and he was invited to Chatsworth to meet the family in more relaxed circumstances than coming-out balls, but he gave contradictory signals. Meanwhile the Duchess of Gordon was on manoeuvres, persuading her son-in-law the Duke of Manchester to invite the Duke of Bedford to their estate to meet the young Georgina. Within a short time Georgina's youthful beauty and *joie de vivre* worked and the duke abandoned the Devonshire's.

Despite the uproar it caused in society, Georgina's relationship with Francis was flourishing when tragedy struck. In February 1802 Francis was playing a strenuous game of tennis when

he suffered a strangulated hernia. His doctor was called and advised Francis that an operation was required, and the surgeons wanted to operate immediately, however Francis asked for two hours respite in order to arrange his affairs. He was very close to his two brothers and spent the time going into the details of running the family estates, just in case he died. After the operation, which seemingly he bore with great fortitude, he asked how long he was likely to survive, and was told, about half an hour; but he held on for a couple of days and one of his last requests was for a lock of his hair to be taken to Georgina. He was buried at the village of Chenies, which the family owned. (On 12 June 1954 the entire village was sold at auction in order to pay the death duties of Hastings Russell, 12th Duke of Bedford. It covered 1,676 acres including 7 dairy farms, 44 houses, a hotel, 255 acres of woodland, watercress beds and fishing rights for....£152,000).

After Francis's death the Duchess of Gordon claimed Georgina was privately engaged to him. However, it was not just private, Francis had told the Duke of Manchester of his intentions explaining that the obstacle which had prevented his marriage had been removed (his relationship with a Mrs Palmer) and he was just waiting for Georgina's return from Scotland to make the engagement public. John, the new Duke of Bedford refused to accept this and launched a counter-offensive to contradict the story as a fabrication.

The Duchess of Gordon realised that the dispute was damaging Georgina's reputation so she took direct action and contacted John's sister-in-law, Lady Bath, to arrange a meeting between John and Georgina. The eventual outcome was that the proof of the engagement was circumstantial rather than fact but it seemed that the late duke was intending to propose. However, cunning as ever, Jane asked John why Francis had asked for a lock of his hair had to be given to Georgina. John replied that whatever Francis said in his last moments was in strict and sacred confidence except that Georgina was named in terms of unbounded respect.

Georgina and her mother left England for France in the summer and Jane was apparently rude to nearly everybody, including Napoleon; perhaps out of frustration over the uncertainty of Georgina's marriage prospects. Then almost overnight her attitude changed, because she suddenly had the idea of a match between Georgina and Napoleon's stepson, Eugene Beauharnais. Eugene's status was irresistible to Jane and it is likely his physical charms attracted Georgina. However, the duchess had met her match in ruthless dynastic match-making; Napoleon wanted his family linked to European royalty not a Scottish dukes daughter.

However, things were about to change, John arrived in Paris to deliver the lock of Francis's hair, and a rapport between Georgina and John built up on the basis of mutual suffering; they had both loved and lost the same man and they were still grieving for him. John had also recently lost his first wife, Georgiana Byng, who had died of consumption. His first marriage had started as an impetuous romance when he was 19 and the couple went on to have three sons and he pursued a career in politics as MP for Tavistock and as the years went by he became bored with her, but after her death he experienced tremendous guilt about the way he had treated her, and found living without both wife and brother a torment.

During their time in Paris Georgina attuned herself to his melancholy moods and by sympathising with him, won him over. John was different from Georgina's other suitors, he was a plain, shy man and his easy-going nature and love of the country reminded her of her father. The fact that he was fifteen years older seemed to add rather than subtract, giving him an attractive air of maturity. In May 1803 they were engaged, much to the delight of her father and predictably the duchess was ecstatic that her daughter had caught a duke.

They married on 23 June 1803 with great celebrations and she took to her new role with extravagant enthusiasm and set about putting her mark on Woburn, spending lavishly which then extended to the grounds. To achieve this they used the renowned Humphrey Repton, after he had finished their London home in Russell Square. Being the youngest duchess for more than three decades she was a marked contrast to the depression of John's first wife, and she was the one person who could dispel her husband's black moods. But she was not only a wife but a stepmother to Francis, William and John, but as she was only a few years older than them she had to be more of a friend than a mother.

Georgina gave birth to twelve children, nine boys and three girls (two of the boys dying shortly after birth) and contrary to the normal practice of the age nursed most of her babies herself. The duke never doubted he had married the right woman, but at times he must have wondered about linking himself to her family, because of a scandal involving her sister Susan. She had married the Duke of Manchester in 1793, but the couple were estranged by 1808 when the duke became the Governor of Jamaica and his wife remained in Britain. The duke was notoriously unfaithful but it was the duchess who became the subject of a scandal in 1813 when she left him for a servant (accounts differ as to whether it was a footman or a gamekeeper) and she was exiled from polite society.

In June 1822, while John and Georgina were at Endsleigh (a hunting and fishing lodge near Tavistock) John suffered a stroke which traumatised Georgina, her husband having been like a rock in her life. Instead of supporting her, two of her stepsons, Francis and William (the latter having moved abroad in 1821) were critical of her, believing she was exaggerating his condition. In August the duke and duchess returned to Woburn where Georgina dedicated herself to nursing her husband, progress was slow and Georgina's depression deepened.

The scene has been set of Georgina's life thus far but a lot more happened in the life of the Bedford's before the arrival of Edwin Landseer (probably best known for *The Monarch of the Glen* and the lions at the base of Nelson's Column).

Landseer was just eighteen when he first entered the Bedford's circle in 1820 when the duke became Landseer's first major patron and it was through his connection with the Bedford's that he got an insight into the world of the aristocracy. The glamour and extravagance of the duke and duchess's lifestyle must have been quite intoxicating for the young man.

Unlike Georgina's usual circle of ageing aristocrats offering courtly love and smooth manners, Landseer with his good looks, dark hair and brooding romantic features and beneath his urbane social veneer there were hints of danger (Heathcliff?) and when they first met a relationship between the duchess and the artist must have seemed improbable. Landseer was twenty one years younger than the duchess and only slightly older than her eldest son (Emmanuel & Brigitte Macron 1977 & 1953 - 24 years younger and Catherine Zeta Jones & Michael Douglas 1969 & 1944 - 25 years younger) and his first recorded visit to Woburn was in 1823 when he was commissioned by the duke to paint a portrait of his wife. Inevitably, this meant Georgina and Landseer spending much time together when the duchess was feeling at her most vulnerable and isolated. This portrait was very special to Landseer because he kept a sketch he did of it for the rest of his life, and it seems he did not really want to take money from the duke for the commission. However, he eventually asked for a modest amount but the duke insisted he take £50.

Their courtship was through art rather than letters and wherever they went his sketchbook went too. Art gave the lovers an excuse to spend many hours alone together and he helped her to develop her potential as an artist as she had a natural aptitude, but her talent had not been developed. He also came to realise that he loved the Highland landscape as much as she did and it was to provide the inspiration and the perfect background for his art.

While the duke's professional relationship with the artist was developing, the duchess's friendship was increasing in intensity. When their romance developed into a sexual relationship cannot be precisely pin-pointed but it seems likely to have been between 1823 and 1825, for in the autumn of 1825 there was a shock for Georgina's family and friends, four years after her last child was born, her longest ever period without having a child, she was pregnant again. A biographer of Landseer believed that Rachel, born 19th June 1826 to be Edwin's child because Georgina was in Scotland from July to October 1825 without the duke and Edwin was also in the Highlands during this time. It seems Rachel was conceived at the end of September 1825. The idea that the duke was not the father is also supported by the fact that letters from him around this time show that he certainly did not expect the duchess to become pregnant.

At the end of October, just as Georgina probably became aware that she was expecting, she had to travel to France with the duke. They arrived in Paris on 5th November and she was very unwell and confined to her room, but Georgina could not wait to leave France and in April she

returned to England without the duke. Her journey was not advisable and although she was feeling unwell she was determined to go, and despite the discomfort she seems to have been very happy. Whatever Rachel's true parentage the duke always accepted her as his own; however, as she grew up Landseer seems to have taken a special interest in her, and he painted her more frequently than any of the duchess's other children.

Although it suited the duchess that Rachel was treated as her husband's child, because it gave her daughter the social status she never would have had as the illegitimate child of an artist, there is a cryptic poem among Landseer's papers that hint that the artist was not happy with the situation and suggests that he felt cheated out of both his daughter and his lover. Whatever Landseer may have wished, neither the duke nor duchess considered divorce. Affairs were commonplace in Regency society but divorce was rare. Aristocrats were willing to accept adultery as long as it was done discreetly.

Outwardly nothing changed in the relationship between the duke, the duchess and the artist. The duke continued as the artist's patron and wrote friendly letters to him, it was not in the duke's nature to take an aggressive stance and it is also clear that he didn't want to lose Georgina because whatever she did, or had done, he loved her very much. Georgina liked her position as the Duchess of Bedford and the wealth and lifestyle it gave her, and even if she had found a passion to match her own nature with Landseer, that did not mean she wanted to be his wife. No doubt she realised that if she followed her instinct too far she would become a social outcast, like her sister Susan. However, it is unlikely that her motives for staying with the duke were purely mercenary, as her attitude during his illness had shown that she genuinely loved her husband, and while remaining within her marriage she was able to have the best of both worlds. She had the upper hand with both men and enjoyed two very different relationships on her own terms.

To appease Edwin, who had a far more jealous, possessive temperament than her husband, Georgina made sure that she had time alone with him. In 1827 she spent four months away from the duke in the Highlands, her father had died that summer, so a holiday in the Highlands with her lover and not far away from her brother and sister-in-law at Gordon Castle was just what Georgina needed to raise her spirits. Despite her husband's eagerness to see her she kept prolonging her stay. The duke expected her to join him in Brighton in the first week of November, but she changed her plans and stayed in Scotland for another month. She justified her long absence to herself and others by claiming the duke was happy on his own. When Georgina did eventually return to the duke it seems that their marriage went through a difficult period and she unwisely complained to her stepson about his father. Although Lord William did not attack the duchess directly for having an affair, he attacked her indirectly by complaining that all she talked about was Rachel, Rachel and that she was spending too little time with her other children and implied that because of her lack of attention they were becoming unruly.

In April 1828 the duke suffered another slight stroke, but this did not deter Georgina from again spending several months away from him in Scotland. Intoxicated with her love affair it seems she felt no guilt about her husband's needs. In Scotland Edwin was seeing his mistress in her natural habitat; she could play to perfection the sophisticated society hostess, but the real Georgina was a far more earthy character who relished getting back to nature in her home country. Landseer had a similar dual character; although he could appear a dandy in the drawing room, the essence of him, his creative spirit was freed by the raw Highland landscape.

When the duchess left her husband in England she did not leave her children, and Edwin had to share Georgina with her family. It seems he was quite happy to find himself surrounded by children, particularly as the baby of the family was his own daughter. As he was the youngest of seven perhaps he was used to being pampered by his mother and siblings, if so there was a comforting familiarity in the environment of Georgina and her children. The duke was not altogether happy about being left alone for many months for the second year running and he wrote to friends hoping that Georgina would come back earlier that year. But she didn't.

Although the three main characters had, to varying degrees come to terms with the dynamics of this *menage a trois* not everyone accepted it and gossip about the duke and duchess living separate lives was spreading. Comment was not restricted to high society, soon newspapers were publishing stories. The duke was willing to accept the duchess's infidelity in private, but once it became public knowledge it was more humiliating. As usual, the duke's first priority was to protect Georgina and in the autumn of 1828, although he was not feeling well, he considered going to join his wife in Scotland, in an attempt to repair the damage done to her reputation, but on his doctor's advice he did not go.

Despite the widespread gossip Georgina and Edwin had no intention of giving up their relationship and the duchess was taking steps to make their Highland trysts easier. In 1830 she leased a property (the Doune) from her childhood friends, the Grants. This simple but substantial house surrounded by natural beauty was the perfect romantic setting for them to share both art and love.

Georgina cared more about her young lover than her reputation and as long as the duke was willing to accept the situation other people could say what they liked. Her marriage to the duke had been more to satisfy her mother's dynastic demands than her own romantic requirements, so perhaps now she wanted a partnership that satisfied her needs. More than twenty years of her life had been devoted to being a wife and mother, pleasing others. Perhaps she felt it was time to have a relationship that was purely to please herself. As a mature woman in her forties, she knew just what she was looking for and having found that person she was not willing to sacrifice him just to conform to society's image of how a middle-aged duchess should behave.

When Edwin was elected a Royal Academician in 1831 his list of patrons became longer and grander and his first contact with royalty was in 1836 when Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent commissioned him to paint her daughter's dog, Dash, for a birthday present and subsequently he became friendly with Victoria and Albert.

As time went on, Landseer's role in the Bedford household developed and he and the duke established a genuine friendship. The age gap was more than thirty years so perhaps it became more a father and son relationship. Sometimes the men would spend time together at Woburn without Georgina. In December 1830, when she was almost fifty Georgina discovered she was pregnant again, it was an inconvenience and a threat to her health that she had not expected, and to the duke's relief she miscarried. This was to be Georgina's final pregnancy and at last after thirty years her child-bearing days were over.

In October 1832 Louisa was married at Gordon Castle and the following month Georgina travelled with her three daughters and new son-in-law to Ireland and she was enchanted by Louisa's new house, but her visit was ruined by an accident. In January 1833 she fell from a carriage on to her back and early reports were quite encouraging, but then she started spitting blood so the duke travelled to Ireland to be with her. A magazine 'The Satirist' alluded to her relationship with Landseer suggesting that due to her accident she would want him near, in fact it was her husband she wanted when she thought she was dying. Her reaction reveals that deep down it was the duke from whom she drew strength and that her marriage, not her affair was the bedrock in her life. The duke was slightly surprised and very moved when he realised how much his wife needed him, but he was equally shocked at the change in her. In early February the duke and duchess returned to England, although Georgina was still not fully recovered. However, by August she was well enough to entertain Edwin and his friends who were planning a trip to the Highlands and Georgina told them to treat her house as their own. In the end she went to Scotland as well, while the duke stayed in England. In Scotland there were more children from her children's generation than her own, and Edwin was able to relax and paint in his favourite environment.

After such an enjoyable stay in the Highlands, the duchess returned to the duke more than usually cheerful. However, her good mood changed when she developed jaundice. As well as being physically unwell, she was in a bad mood with her husband. Although she had had a happy time in Scotland with Landseer and friends, it seems she was annoyed by the amount of time the duke had been spending with Lady Sandwich. There was also tension from time to

time when the duke's older children believed that more attention was paid to Georgina's children although when Lord William had an affair while a diplomat in Germany, and Georgina was sympathetic it made Lady William furious and she tried to smear Georgina's name, but the duchess had more on her mind as her brother died in 1836 ending the Gordon line.

Although the duchess was now a matronly figure, her relationship with Landseer was as strong as ever. He stayed with her in Devon and built a hut of his own next to her house on Speyside so that every autumn he could paint and be near her. His friendship with the duke had also developed over the years and by the mid 1830's it was often the duke and not the duchess who invited him to stay at Woburn and Scotland.

By 1837 the Bedford's had become like a second family to Landseer, so when he suffered a bad head injury after falling from his carriage, he turned to the duke and duchess for help. He came to stay with them in London and was nursed by Georgina. Although he seemed to recover well, it was later thought that this injury contributed to the mental illness that was to last for the rest of his life.

The duke died of a stroke on 20th October 1839 at the age of 73, and although the duchess had not been faithful to the duke she had always loved him. He was her security and she had known that while he was alive he would always support her. The world seemed a very hostile place without him and with his death she lost not only her husband but also her status; no longer the Duchess of Bedford, she became a dowager duchess with limited influence. Her position was worse than many widows because her stepson, Francis, inherited the title and he had never had a strong relationship with Georgina, and when his father died the situation deteriorated, partly due to financial arrangements but also because of deep-seated resentments.

The duke's death also changed the dynamics of Edwin's relationship with Georgina, who was now available, and in the spring of 1840 he proposed, but she turned him down. Why Georgina refused is debatable. As a handsome man of 38, Edwin was an eligible bachelor and a considerable catch for a corpulent 58 year old. Although he was not an aristocrat, his genius placed him outside class divisions and he had become a fêted member of Victorian high society. The aristocracy courted him both as an artist and as a guest, and he was firmly established as Queen Victoria's favourite painter. The timing of his proposal was insensitive because Georgina was still genuinely mourning her husband. Perhaps she felt that Edwin was suitable as a lover but not a husband because of his temperament. Erratic and unreliable, he was hypersensitive to criticism and often fell out even with old friends. There was a very dark side to his character, he was deeply interested in the occult and had a morbid obsession with murder cases. The duke had been her rock; Edwin would have been shifting sands.

Whatever the reasons for Georgina's refusal, its effect was drastic. In the early summer of 1840 Landseer had a nervous breakdown. It was decided that his mental health might be improved by a trip abroad, and before he went Georgina was so concerned she sent her doctor to see him and the report was not good. Georgina did not think it was just a temporary problem; she knew her lover well enough to be very aware of his fragile mental health and after six weeks he returned better, but not cured.

Without her husband or her lover to support her, and without the finances and homes she was used to, Georgina had to build a new life for herself. She divided her time between London and Speyside and although she and Edwin never formalised their relationship it continued for the rest of Georgina's life. He would visit her in London and stay with her in Scotland. It seems that although Edwin was a difficult man for most people to deal with, he was dominated by Georgina and did whatever she wanted, she even expected him to cancel any other engagements if she needed him. In return for his loyalty Georgina gave Edwin the stability and structure that was so essential to his finely balanced state of mind. In 1844 he had a bad fall from his horse and suffered a severe blow to his forehead and dealing with his physical illness was much easier than trying to keep his mind on an even keel. Although it was not an easy relationship and despite his mental troughs there were still times when one partner would stimulate the other's creativity.

As she grew older, Georgina's own health deteriorated and she frequently suffered from chest infections, and began to winter abroad, taking a villa in Nice. Georgina loved the colourful environment and the Mediterranean climate, however, she found the social life boring. Approaching the age of seventy Georgina seems to have become aware that her own life was drawing to a close and Edwin put aside attractive offers to spend more time with her. Although she was now an old woman, her hold over him was still greater than any other woman could exert no matter how young or beautiful. Georgina's instincts were right and the autumn of 1852 was to be her last visit to her beloved Highlands. The following February, while she was staying in Nice, she developed influenza. Edwin was in England, but a friend kept him informed. She died on 23 February 1853 and was buried in Nice not at Chénies. In death, as in life, she was her own woman, not just another Duchess of Bedford.

Georgina left a posthumous bombshell for her children that clarified the speculation about whether Rachel was Landseer's daughter. Rachel was shocked when she found out, but no change was made to her position in the family.

In death, Georgina acknowledged Landseer's importance in her life; he was one of the few people outside her immediate family to be left a bequest, it was a white marble clock with a weeping figure carved on it, from her London home. There seems to be little doubt that Georgina was the love of Landseer's life. He never married and in the years after her death he gradually went mad, suffering depression and a whole range of phobias and complexes. He turned to drink to block out his mental torment and died on 1st October 1873; and as one of the most famous artists of the era he was buried at St. Paul's Cathedral. After his death many pictures of Georgina and her children particularly Rachel, were found in his private collection.