AN AFFAIR IN SEVEN PARTS

OCTOBER 03, 2025

As an art historian who often focuses on Georgian Miniatures, I rarely need to turn to *Okay* or *Hello* magazine to get my fill of Gossip. The majority of the time, the sitters in the portraits from the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have brilliant and scandalous stories to be told about them. Sometimes, it feels necessary to have a Homeland-style conspiracy board to untangle the complex web of relationships and affairs that these Georgians were involved in. That was certainly the case when it came to researching two miniatures that recently came to The Limner Company, of George Carpenter, 2nd Earl of Tyrconnel (1750-1805) (fig. 1) and John Bowes, 10th Earl of Strathmore (1769-1820) (fig.2). The former was painted by John Downman (1750-1824), and the latter by Richard Cosway (1742-1821).

Fig. 1: JOHN DOWNMAN (1750-1824), Portrait miniature of George Carpenter, 2nd Earl of Tyrconnel (1750-1805), wearing a blue jacket with a white waistcoat and cravat, his hair powdered; circa 1790, oval, 8.2 cm (3 1/5 in) high

Fig. 2: RICHARD COSWAY (1742-1821), Portrait miniature of John Bowes, 10th Earl of Strathmore (1769-1820), wearing a light blue coat, yellow waistcoat, and white frilled cravat, his hair powdered white; 1791, oval, 8.6cm (3 2/5in) high

Apart from the fact that they had come from the same collection, there was little to suggest a connection between the two gentlemen. Through research, it soon became clear that there certainly was a connection between them- one that centred around George Carpenter's second wife, Sarah Hussey, Countess of Tyrconnell (née Delaval)(1763-1800). Delving into contemporary sources, including newspapers and msgazines, revealed a series of events, illustrated and recounted in detail, that take us all the way from Tyrconnel's first marriage to Strathmore's death.

1. The First Lady Tyrconnell

We begin our account of the affairs with a line from a letter:

'You must have heard that Lady Tyrconnel has very simply made an unnecessary elopement with a Mr Lorrain Smith; a Frenchwoman would have been satisfied with the liberties this town and age allow.'

-Francis Seymour Conway, 1st Earl Hertford, to Horace Walpole, 20 July 1776. [1]

In 1776, the 2nd Earl of Tyrconnel lost his wife. She had not died, but had instead run away with the sporting personality and artist Charles Lorraine Smith (1751-1835). He had only married Frances Manners in 1772, but by 1777, they were divorced. We see above that the 1st Earl of Hertford found Frances's actions to be 'unnecessary', though the article from February 1777, in the Town and Country Magazine (fig. 3), lists the jealous behaviours of Tyrconnel that pushed Frances away.

Whether or not Tyrconnel was controlling, he was bound to be disappointed at the collapse of his marriage. Nevertheless, he took what he could from this. The entry on Tyrconnel in The History of Parliament states that he 'owed his seats at Westminster to his wives[2]. Through his marriage with Frances, he had taken the seat for Scarborough- this was an area of the country that her family, being the Rutlands, had an interest in. And though he did not keep his wife, he kept this seat for 19 years after they were divorced.

The news of the divorce had travelled, and was even reaching figures like Walpole, as demonstrated by the extract from the letter to him above. Here would be a good point at which to explain the significance of the coverage in Town and Country, too. This magazine, which was published monthly between 1769 and 1796, focused largely on the affairs of the upper class in the period, outlining situations like these in which divorce and infidelity had come to light. One particular section, The Histories of the Tête-â-Tête, detailed the stories of affairs, with blanked-out names of those involved, whose identity could be guessed easily given their portraits were featured at the beginning of the section.

These features were particularly useful in tracing the relationships of our sitters, which we will return to now.

Fig. 3. From Town & Country Magazine, February 1777, opp. p. 65. (taken from archive.org[3])

2. 'The Noble Retaliator'

In June 1779, a familiar face reappears in Town and Country;

Fig. 4. British Museum Prints & Drawings, Ee,5.10, taken from Town & Country Magazine, June 1779[4], opp. p. 289.

The gentleman depicted on the right-hand side of figure 4 is our Earl of Tyrconnel, here named ‘The Noble Retaliator’. It seems that, two years on, Tyrconnel had decided to take his own form of revenge. In doing so, he managed to lose another woman and to break up a marriage. This was the perfect content for a Tête-â-Tête.

People were clearly aware of Tyrconnel’s love life and the perceived failures he experienced. According to the article, he travelled widely after the collapse of his previous marriage, to Dublin, Paris, Florence, Venice, and The Hague, meeting many women along the way. Upon his return to England, he began to pursue Elizabeth Sewell, who was married, but, ‘a favourable opportunity made him forget that she was boand by all the ties of matrimony to another man.’[5]. Perhaps Tyrconnel felt that he was getting back in some way by doing the very thing to another woman that Smith had done to break him and Frances apart. Or perhaps it was true love.

The latter can be confidently dismissed, given that, after divorcing her husband in 1778, Elizabeth did not run away with Tyrconnel, but instead a ‘military cher ami’. Once again, he was left alone.

3. The Second Lady Tyrconnell and her Royal pursuits

Wedding bells were ringing only a few years later, when Tyrconnel was given another shot at marriage. This time, he was marrying Sarah Delaval, of the ‘Gay Delaval’ family of Seaton Hall. Her grandparents were Francis Blake (1692-1752) and his wife, Rhoda. The family were known for their rowdy nature and love for practical jokes. It was perhaps for this reason that, on their honeymoon, Sarah and Tyrconnel played ‘blind man’s bluff’; today seen to be an innocent children’s game, but at the time known as the ‘game of love’, and an opportunity for the follies of passion to unfold.

This second marriage was more successful than the first when it came to children- the pair had a son, who died in 1790, and a daughter, Susannah (d. 1827). However, as would be assumed inevitable at this point, fidelity was not a strong point in the relationship. In 1787, Sarah embarked on an affair with none other than Frederick, Duke of York and Albany (1763-1827), who had just returned to England from Hanover, where he had lived as Prince-Bishopric of Osnabrück.

Fig. 5. ‘The York Jig’, printed by S. W. Fores, September 1788, copy in the British Museum, 1868,0808.5786.

The affair was public and the subject of satirical prints, including figure 5. Here, a maid dances with the duke, and a woman, presumably Sarah, watches on in horror. The poem inscribed on the print suggests these identities;

'See See the fair one by her Guest betray 'd,

By York deserted - rivall'd by her Maid

T-r-n-l, lovely Bride, no longer mourn

His love, since Spider Brushers serve his Turn,

The Cook maid next will strike this loving Man

With Kissing Crusts, & Meat sops in the Pan.'

Sarah, who spent a large amount of time in Oatlands, a property that the Duke had purchased to meet her in, is being replaced here by a maid, whom the Duke appears to have more interest in. In 1791, the Duke married Princess Frederika of Prussia, who would also spend the majority of her time at Oatlands. This marriage did not last, either. They did not divorce, but lived separately, perhaps leaving the Duke plenty of space to continue having affairs like this one.

You may have forgotten that Sarah was still married to Tyrconnel- despite having spent so much time away from him. Their marriage appears to have survived this hitch, though the worst was yet to come.

4. The Second Lady Tyrconnell as The Fair Penitent

By the time the Duke was married, Sarah had found a different love interest. Back at her family home of Seaton Delaval, she had performed in Nicholas Rowe's The Fair Penitent (1702), presumably as the tragic heroine Claista. This play has come up more than once in my research relating to Georgian miniatures- a portrait of the actress Clarissa Hayward, from 1772, depicts her in the guise of Calista. Her story, which can be read on The Limner Company website[6], was also covered by Town and Country, and involved an affair.

The plot of The Fair Penitent sees Calista torn between her Fiancé and lover. In Sarah's story, her participation in the play tore her in two directions, between her husband and her new lover, John Bowes, 10th Earl of Strathmore.

Finally, a connection between the miniatures has arrived!

Fig. 6. Isaac Cruikshank, 'A Luncheon at Gibside- Lamb Chops and Rump Steaks', 1792, British Museum, 1868,0808.6185.

John Bowes had estates across Scotland and the north of England and was the son of the 9th Earl of Strathmore and his wife, Mary Bowes. Following his father's death, his mother married Andrew-Robinson Stoney, an abusive husband who famously kidnapped Mary to prevent her from divorcing him. Strathmore was no stranger to public exposure when it came to his personal life.

Strathmore was probably no stranger to women's affections, too. His father had been called one of the most attractive men in the country, and Cosway's portrait of the younger Strathmore is a testament to his dashing looks. Despite this, he was not married when he met Sarah. Following the acquaintance, she began to visit him in the North, staying at his various estates. One of these was Gibside, the setting for the satirical print shown in figure 6. Our lovers are depicted seated for lunch- a feast of Lamb Chops and Rump Steaks (possibly a reference to the Irish roots of the Tyrconnels and the Scottish roots of the Strathmores). On the table lies an open pamphlet, entitled 'The Art of Pimping by L.T. [Lord Tryconnel]', and through the window, Tyrconnel himself can be seen on a horse, waiting for his wife. He declares:

'What a while they are filling their belly's'

The print emphasises Tyrconnel's naivety when it comes to relationships. By this point, it was assumed by everyone.

It was also public knowledge that Sarah was living at Gibside in the last years of the eighteenth century. Once again, our 'noble retaliator' has been left alone. As James Duff, 2nd Earl of Fife (1729-1809) commented in 1791:

'This Lord will never keep a wife, he must tie the next to the bed post.[7]'

5. A failed attempt to cover the traces of an affair

The obituary section of the October 1800 issue of The Gentleman's Magazine brings bad news to our tale:

'At Seaton-Delaval, after an illness of many months, the Countess of Tyrconnel[8] [died]'.

Our Calista has died. However, she had not yet had her last laugh. The following month's issue provided an amendment to what seems to be a short obituary for such a well-loved woman:

'Her Ladyship was in her 36th year of her age, and died at the seat of Lord Strathmore, at Gybside, near Newcastle, in the County of Durham, where she had been on a visit to his Lordship, having left her father's house in Portland place only about a fortnight before. The immediate cause of her death is supposed to have been a violent cold caught in her journey.[9]'

Despite every attempt to make it seem like Sarah was not just living with her lover, it became known that she was with him when she died. Her funeral was grand, and she was buried at Westminster Abbey, where she had a family vault. It was recorded by Raconteur and Author Augustus Hare that her ghost haunted Gibside, but as with many of the sources here, he may have been exaggerating ever so slightly.

6. A Brief, and Unwelcome, Interlude

The next chapter of this story is the most shocking, though the briefest, and comes from a description of a portrait of Sarah attributed to Edward Alcock (fl.1745-1788), on the National Trust's website[10]. Following the death of Sarah, Strathmore proceeded to pursue her daughter, Susannah Carpenter. She was the same Susannah Carpenter whose father was Tyrconnell.

Susannah herself was drawn by Downman, the artist responsible for the portrait of her father currently with The Limner Company (fig.1), on multiple occasions. Many of these drawings now survive in the British Museum department of Prints and Drawings.

I believe this information comes from a letter written in 1802 by the brother-in-law of Tyrconnel, Sir Ulvedale Price (1747-1829)[12]. He mentions Lord Tyrconnell coming from the North, where he has been settling the marriage of his daughter and Strathmore. This marriage did not go ahead, but what may be most shocking to the modern mind is the fact that he

considered this and visited Strathmore to settle the matter. In fact, Ulvedale Price states that he hears Strathmore is a good man and wishes the marriage well. At the point at which the letter was written, Tyrconnell was genuinely considering it.

Our ‘Noble Retailiator’ has not retaliated and remains surprisingly noble in this situation. This is where we leave him. He did not marry again and died three years later, in 1805.

7. The (sombre) second act is always a lot shorter than the first.

We are left with Strathmore and the rest of his love life. As expected, the end of his story is not without scandal. In the final years of his life, Strathmore embarked on an affair with Mary Milner. Little else is known about her other than the fact that she worked on the Streatlam estate and that she bore John’s only son, also John, in 1811. The issue with this issue was that he was illegitimate. In fact, it was only on Strathmore’s deathbed that he and Mary were married. Because they were married in England, and not Scotland, he was only eligible to inherit the estates in England.

John Bowes Jr. went on to found the Bowes Museum that exists today. His mother married his tutor, William Hutt. As far as the tales recounted above go, this was a story that had a happy ending.

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It is possible that, because Tyrconnel’s and Strathmore’s lives were so intertwined, these miniatures were always kept together. Susannah Carpenter is the most likely candidate to have owned these miniatures- Tyconnel’s because he was her father, and Strathmore’s either because she was briefly involved with him, or because she had inherited this from her mother. Now may be the point at which they are finally separated, or find a home together once again.

[1] From the Yale Edition of Walpole’s Correspondence, p.279. Seen online, 11/09/2025.

[2] R. Thorne (ed.), The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1790-1820, 1986.

[3] https://archive.org/details/sim_town-and-country-magazine-or-universal-repository_1777-02_9/page/64/mode/2up

[4] For the magazine itself, see https://archive.org/details/sim_town-and-country-magazine-or-universal-repository_1779-06_11/page/288/mode/2up

[5] Town & Country Magazine, June 1779, p.291.

[6] https://www.portraitminiature.com/artwork-details/878114/0/ozias-humphry-1742-1810-portrait-of

[7] A. and H. Tayler, Lord Fife and his Factor, pp.231-2.

[8] The Gentleman's Magazine, October 1800, p.1011, see https://archive.org/details/sim_gentlemans-magazine_1800-10_70_10/page/n101/mode/2up?view=theater

[9] The Gentleman's Magazine, November 1800, p.1104, see https://archive.org/details/sim_gentlemans-magazine_1800-11_70_11/page/1104/mode/2up

[10] https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1276772

[12] In the Morgan Library and Museum, MA 1581.9, https://www.themorgan.org/literary-historical/414080.