

George Canning Is My Son

For twenty-five years I have been bending my friends' ears about Mary Ann Hunn, George Canning's actress mother. At last I have finished my book, or at least have made up my mind to stop tinkering with it, and so Mary Ann's story will see the light of day. We hope. The book has been accepted by the crowd-funded publisher Unbound, and it will be published provided enough people buy it in advance. This is a return to the eighteenth century custom of publishing by subscription, so is appropriate for my book. Mary Ann's first husband, George Canning senior, raised money in this way, and is said to have wept tears of gratitude and relief when a friend produced his five guineas on the spot. Canning senior used the money to buy food for his starving wife and baby rather than for its ostensible purpose of funding a book. My proposition to you is less dramatic, but if you do feel like buying *George Canning Is My Son* you will help me bring my long project to a conclusion.

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<https://unbound.com/books/george-canning-is-my-son>



Anonymous portrait of Mary Ann Hunn, from the Gale Collection, West Yorkshire Archive Service

Perhaps I should remind you why the book is important. The first reason is simply that Mary Ann was a remarkable woman – intelligent, strong-willed, resourceful and resilient. She had an extraordinary life, an extraordinarily difficult life, but she fought back and found her own way of negotiating the obstacles that society, and the men in her life, put in her way. And all the time she valued independence and love above a comfortable existence. She wrote her own account of her life in the form of a long (65,000 words) letter to George protesting against his decision that she was unfit to meet his wife and children. Mary Ann's courageous and sometimes chaotic life illustrates many of the ideas explored in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which she read enthusiastically when it came out in 1792.

The book also makes a modest contribution to theatre history. Mary Ann was on the stage for fifteen years, the first three at Drury Lane, and then at theatres in the West Country, Ireland and the North of England. Her own account of her career throws light on the workings of the provincial theatre in the 1770s and 1780s, and also gives her side of several notorious incidents in London. For six years she was the lover of the leading actor Samuel Reddish, who was widely vilified by contemporaries; on Mary Ann's authority I attempt a partial rehabilitation of his reputation.

Finally, the book helps us to understand something of the complex character of George Canning, one of the most important and controversial politicians of the early nineteenth century.

For me, researching and writing this life of Mary Ann has been its own reward, but it would be good to finish it off by publishing it. With Unbound I shall have the assistance of a professional editor and experienced sales team, giving me a good chance of getting Mary Ann's story widely known. But it all depends on people buying their copy in advance.

Julian Crowe
30 July 2019