

himself drank the glass of negus which he had obtained for her and then offered her his arm to escort her back upstairs to the drawing-room without noticing his mistake until she laughingly pointed it out to him. “This”, as Lady Errol herself would remark, “convinced me that my new acquaintance was, at any rate, very different from most of the young men around us!”⁶⁴ True or not, this anecdote is quite typical of Frere's “distract” character, and it is quite possible that he himself had no recollection of their earlier meeting.

Lady Errol was born Elizabeth Jemima Blake, daughter of Joseph and Honoria Blake of Ardfry, County Galway – the place said to have been the model for Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent. Her precise date of birth is unknown, but as she is said to have been older than Frere it must have been 1768 or earlier. *Burke's Irish Family Records* does not include her among the children of Joseph and Honoria Blake. Three sons are mentioned, born 1765, 1773 and 1774, but no daughters. A more detailed genealogy is printed in a collection of portraits of “distinguished females”, which names her as the second daughter and seventh child of Joseph and Honoria Blake, but no date of birth is provided either for her or for her three sisters.⁶⁵ She was one of the beauties of her time, and a portrait of her by Shee shows a young lady with dark eyes and masses of dark hair, dressed in a scarlet riding habit and broad-brimmed hat, and smiling out at the world with great self-possession.⁶⁶ On 25th January 1790 she married George Hay,

⁶⁴ *Memoir*, 162

⁶⁵ *Burke's Irish Family Records* (1976), 119; John Burke, *The Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Females*, 87-88

⁶⁶ Festing, 109

sixteenth Earl of Errol and hereditary Lord High Constable of Scotland.⁶⁷ But great beauty and a “good” marriage are no guarantees of lifelong happiness. In May 1798 a small force of British troops, including 600 Foot Guards, made an unsuccessful raid on Ostend. The raid was to be kept secret, and the commanding officers had given their word of honour not to reveal the details. Lord Errol, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the 1st Foot Guards, apparently talked loudly of the plan to his men, making some inappropriate comments on it, and as a result was put under arrest on board ship for the duration of the raid.⁶⁸ According to one newspaper report he was “slightly wounded in the face and neck...by a splinter” on board the vessel on which he was confined,⁶⁹ and was seriously ill by the time the expeditionary force returned to Margate, where he was met by his wife. At some point after 26th May he was taken back to London, and died on 14th June at Grenier’s Hotel, Jermyn Street. The stories that circulated claimed that he was drunk when he divulged the secret, and made a botched attempt to kill himself. His family eventually issued a rather implausible statement claiming that he had “for many months previous to his decease laboured under a very severe indisposition; and was delirious when he embarked on the late expedition to Ostend.”⁷⁰ Whatever the truth of the matter, the shock of this event shattered his widow’s health, and she never fully recovered.

Thomas de Quincey recalled meeting her and her sister some months after the tragedy on a canal-boat travelling from Tullamore to Dublin:

⁶⁷ *The Scots Peerage*, III.582-583. Festing, 108-109, is wrong in identifying Lady Errol’s husband as the 15th earl, and also has the wrong date for the wedding. The *ODNB* entry for John Hookham Frere, which relies heavily on Festing, is also incorrect

⁶⁸ *Times*, 26th May 1798; *Evening Mail*, 25th May 1798

⁶⁹ *New Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 25th May 1798

Two ladies appeared slowly ascending from the cabin, both in deepest mourning, but else as different in aspect as summer and winter. The eldest was the Countess of Errol, then mourning an affliction which had laid her life desolate, and admitted of no human consolation. Heavier grief – grief more self-occupied and deaf to all voice of sympathy – I have not happened to witness. She seemed scarcely aware of our presence, except it were by placing herself as far as was possible from the annoyance of our odious conversation.... Months had passed since that calamity [i.e. Errol's death], when we met his widow; but time appeared to have done nothing in mitigating her sorrow.⁷¹

From this time on she seems rarely to have enjoyed good health for long. The exact nature of her illness is not clear, but seems at first and principally to have affected her ability to walk. Sometimes she was in great pain and confined to bed; at other times she was well enough to walk, although often with the aid of a stick. In August 1799 she was reported at Bath as continuing “in a very disagreeable state of health”, but bearing it very patiently,⁷² and in the following year she decided to see if the warmer climate and hot springs of Portugal would be of any benefit. Two other invalids also travelled to Lisbon at about this time for the sake of their health, and they, too, were to meet Frere. They were the poet Robert Southey and Prince Augustus, Duke of Sussex.

⁷⁰ The statement was printed in various newspapers, including *Morning Herald*, 23rd June 1798

⁷¹ De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, I.321

⁷² *Later Corr of George III*, III.246