

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

THE publication of this book in 1792 marked a low point for the Gunning family and for General Gunning in particular. Within five years, this supposed hero of Bunker Hill who claimed descent from Charlemagne and whose sisters had married into the highest levels of the aristocracy was to die in Naples, disgraced and apparently impoverished.

Major General John Gunning's *Apology* was published with the names of the main characters, Gunning (G——, G—nn—g), Duberley (D—ber—y), etc., obscured by the use of dashes. Since no-one at the time would have been unfamiliar with the two scandals surrounding the name of Gunning, the intention must not have been to protect the innocent or prevent the author from being sued for libel but to advertise the contents as being salacious. The title *Apology* seems to serve a similar purpose, for the author shows little remorse, and delights in recounting his many seductions. Despite the promise of the subtitle, the original edition leaves many questions about the so-called Gunning Mystery unanswered.

### THE GUNNING FAMILY

The Gunnings were reasonably prosperous, if rather profligate, landed gentry with a family home at Castle Coote in Ireland, although it has been said that the family was originally from Cornwall.\* The General's father, also John, was a barrister of the Middle Temple who had married Bridget (Biddy) Bourke, a daughter of Viscount Mayo, in 1731. Portraits show her to have

\* Lady Constance Russell, *Three Generations of Fascinating Women*, 2nd edn, 1905, p. 95.

been very pretty and she was described as ‘a young Lady of uncommon Accomplishment’.\* The Honourable Bridget Bourke was not to be the Gunning family’s last association with the aristocracy.

The newlyweds went to live at the old Manor House in Hemmingford Grey, Huntingdonshire, where their daughter Mary (usually called Maria) was born in 1732, Elizabeth in 1733, Catherine (Kitty) in 1735 and Sophia in 1735. Their daughter Lissy was born in 1744. The date of John’s birth is not recorded, but, as we shall see, the date 1742 given by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*† seems to be at least a year out.

In 1740, presumably due to financial pressures, the family moved to Ireland, first to Roscommon and then to Dublin. Mrs Bellamy, the Irish actress, tells how, returning from the Dublin Theatre to Britain Street, she heard sounds of distress and came across ‘a woman of most elegant figure, surrounded by four beautiful girls, and a sweet boy of about three years of age’. The distressed woman turned out to be Mrs Bridget Gunning whose possessions were being seized by the bailiffs.‡ The ‘sweet boy’, of course, was the future General. Since Mrs Bellamy makes it clear that this took place after Thomas Sheridan<sup>2</sup> took over the management of the theatre, it can have been no earlier than 1745, and John must have been about four (see below).

#### JOHN, ELIZABETH AND MARIA GUNNING

When they returned to England in the late 1740s, news of the beauty of the young John’s sisters, Elizabeth and Maria, had preceded them. Despite their lack of dowries and their naïve

\* *London Evening Post*, 28 October 1731.

† Given in the life of the General’s daughter, Elizabeth.

‡ *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy*, 4th edn, vol. 1, 1786, p. 196–8.

ways, they soon attracted the attention of some of Britain's most eligible young men. Elizabeth met James Hamilton, sixth Duke of Hamilton on 16 January 1752 and they were married the following month, on St Valentine's day. In the March of that year, Maria married George Coventry, sixth Earl of Coventry whom she had first met in July 1750.

John was entered into Westminster School in 1751 and Maria and Elizabeth, visiting soon after, requested a holiday for the scholars, which was granted.\* The school's records show that he was ten at the time of entering,† so must have been born in 1740 or 1741.

The Duke of Hamilton died in 1758 and in the following year Elizabeth married a handsome soldier called Jack Campbell. In 1770, her husband inherited the Dukedom of Argyll and Elizabeth's position in society was further enhanced. Such a rapid rise in the Gunning family's fortunes grabbed the public imagination; it was the stuff of fairy tales, or at least of the sentimental novels of the period and, many years later, it would have a bearing on the first scandal to engulf John Gunning and his family.

Despite the celebrity of his sisters, John Gunning seems to have lived in relative obscurity. He joined the army and, while a captain in the 49th Regiment of Foot, married Susannah Minifie, daughter of James Minifie DD, a Somerset clergyman, in August 1768.‡ Miss Minifie, like her sister Margaret, was a successful novelist, something which she was later to vehemently

\* *Dublin Journal*, 29 June, 1751, quoted in *Three Generations*, p. 140.

† I am grateful to Rita Boswell, the School's Consultant Archivist, for this information.

‡ *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 6 August 1768 give 5 August. The DNB says 8 August but this was the date of the marriage allegation (a prerequisite of marriage by licence). It was presumably rather later in the month. Frank Frankfort Moore, 'The Plot of a Lady Novelist' in *A Georgian Pageant*, London: Hutchinson, 1908, has 1769 and, strangely, Lady Constance Russell says 1763.



Elizabeth Hamilton (*née* Gunning), Duchess of Hamilton, later Duchess of Argyll. The Duke of Hamilton commissioned the painting from his cousin, Gavin Hamilton, to celebrate his marriage to Elizabeth in 1752.



The young John Gunning.

deny, presumably to avoid the taint of commerce; since the shelves of every circulating library in England were groaning under the weight of prolix and gushing romantic novels bearing her maiden name upon their title pages, this achieved nothing but to undermine her credibility at a time when (as we shall see) it was sorely needed.

In early 1775, Gunning, now with the 43rd Foot, was appointed Deputy Adjutant General in North Britain with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.\* Not surprisingly, he was soon on American soil.

\* *London Chronicle*, 14 February 1775.



Maria Coventry (*née* Gunning), Countess of Coventry, painted by Gavin Hamilton, probably in 1753.

Harold Murdock, an American amateur historian, has left us an imaginative reconstruction of Gunning's presence in Boston:\*

And now, as the darkness of an early spring day comes on, let us in imagination look into Earl Percy's dining-room and see what passes there. The newly lighted candles are burning brightly on the broad

\* *Earl Percy's Dinner-Talk*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907, pp. 11–12.

table around which the Earl's eleven guests are sitting at their ease, all but three in the uniform of the royal army. The dinner is cleared away and the port and madeira are going the rounds. The Earl is chatting with a strapping officer on his left whose handsome face is a fair legacy from the race of which he comes. This is Lieutenant-Colonel John Gunning of the 43d Foot, who has the honor to be the brother of the famous Gunning sisters, and through them a brother-in-law to the Duke of Argyll and to the Earl of Coventry. 'My sister the Duchess,' and 'My sister the late Countess of Coventry,' are well-worn phrases with Colonel Gunning, and within a year his pride has been stirred again by the marriage of his niece with Lord Stanley, the heir to the affluent Earl of Derby. The handsome Colonel speaks with something of a brogue, betraying his Irish origin, and if his memory is good he can recall dark days of childhood when the family fortunes were low, dishonor imminent, and when the situation was saved by warm-hearted George Anne Bellamy, of the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin. But those days are long past, and Colonel Gunning glories not only in his connection with great families in England, and in his rapid rise in the army, but also in an honest and complacent conviction that he is thirty-second in descent from Charlemagne.

In General Orders, 19 June 1775 we find:

The Commander-in-chief returns his most grateful thanks to Major-general Howe for the extraordinary exertion of his military abilities on the 17th instant. He returns his thanks also to Major-general Clinton and Brigadier Pigot for the share they took in the success of the day, as well as to Lieutenant-colonels Nesbitt, Abercromby, Gunning, and Clarke, Majors Butler, Williams, Bruce, Tupper, Spenlove, Small, and Mitchel, and the rest of the officers and soldiers, who by remarkable efforts of courage and gallantry overcame every disadvantage, and drove the rebels from the redoubt and strongholds on the heights of Charlestown, and gained a complete victory.\*

By this time he was serving with the 82nd Foot. In truth, Gunning's military career has left few traces and was probably

\* Paul Harris Nicolas, *Historical Record of the Royal Marine Forces*, London: Thomas and William Boone, 1845, vol. 1, p. 87

very undistinguished. In November 1779 we find him presiding over the court martial of one Garret Bush in New York:\*

[Extract of the General Court Martial whereof Lieut. Colonel John GUNNING was President, held at New York between 16 November 1779 and 24 November 1779.]

Friday the 19th November 1779.

The Court met pursuant to Adjournment.

Garret BUSH Inhabitant of Staten Island, was brought Prisoner before the Court, and accused of Aiding and acting as a Guide to the Rebels on Staten Island in taking a part of His Majesty's Light Dragoons.

Captain COGLE of the 1st Battalion of New Jersey Volunteers being duly Sworn deposed that one James BARTLEY came to him at his Post at Decker's Ferry on Staten Island, and informed him that the person who guided the Rebels on a certain Night wore a Snuff coloured pair of Velvet Breeches, a sort of Callicoe cross barr'd Jacket with Linnen backs to it, a little round Hat bound with Velvet, and a Ribband buckled round the Crown, that the said James BARTLEY came from the Rebel Shore, and informed him of the above, that he (the Witness) then went and pursued him; that he went into several Houses, but could find nothing like the described Cloaths, that at last he went to the House the prisoner formerly lived at, and there found the prisoner with a Hat on his Head exactly answering BARTLEY'S description; that as soon as BARTLEY saw the Prisoner he cried out 'that is the man.'

Q: (by the Court) – How long a time was there between the Light Dragoons having been attempted to be carried off to the time the man gave you the information of the Prisoner?

A. About Six Weeks.

Q: Did you say that the people in whose House the Cloaths were found, said they belonged to the Prisoner?

A: Yes.

\* UK National Archives, WO 71, vol. 91, pp. 19–22.



James BARTLEY Soldier in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion New Jersey Volunteers, being duly Sworn deposed that about three months ago or something more, he was with the Rebels when they crossed over at the burnt Island, that he believes the intention of the Rebels was to take some Light Horse, but finding that the Party at Decker's Ferry was too Strong for them, they only lay in wait upon the road to take a patrol as it should pass; that two Light Horsemen were passing by the Place where they lay, and the rebels fired upon them: that while they were firing, a Guide who belonged to the Rebels, ran to a House hard by and brought the Prisoner to the Gate, and asked him if he were willing to go with them to guide them back to their Boat, and he said he was, but that they must make haste, for that if he should be found out, he would be hung – that the Prisoner then did guide them to the Marsh, when they let him go as they then knew the road very well.

Q: (by the Court) – Do you know of your own knowledge, that the Prisoner went with his own accord or was he forced?

A: He went of his own accord.

The Court Adjourned for further Evidence.

Monday 22nd November 1779.

The Court met pursuant to Adjournment not having further Evidence the Prisoner was put upon his Defence.

The Prisoner Garret BUSH being put upon his Defence, declared to the Court, that on a Sunday Evening he was going home, when the rebels took him just as he came out of the door and forced him to guide them to their Boat; that as soon as he got to the Marsh, they let him go.

The Prisoner called upon Mr. Benjamin PARKER Inhabitant of the City of New York who being duly sworn deposed that he has known the Prisoner five Years that he enlisted as a Waggoner under Colonel SHERRIFFE: that he never knew him at all to be suspected as an Enemy to British Government, and has always understood that he has done his Duty very well upon Staten Island.

He further called upon Mr. Isaac DECKER Inhabitant of Staten Island who being duly Sworn deposed that he has known the Prisoner from a Child that he always looked upon him as a friend to British Government, and he never heard that his Character was the least Suspected by any one.

The Court having duly considered the Evidence for and against BUSH, together with what he had to offer in his Defence, is of Opinion That he acted as a Guide to the Rebels in breach of the nineteenth Article of the fourteenth Section of the Articles of War; but that it was by Compulsion and it doth therefore Acquit him.

John BLUCKE  
Assistant Deputy Judge Advocate

J: GUNNING  
Lt. Col. President

Confirmed  
H. CLINTON

If Gunning's own account is to be believed, he was probably too busy practising the arts of seduction to play any very important part in the hostilities (p. 17 ff.). The British army, which Gunning credits with teaching him the 'more refined mysteries of the debauchee' (p. 4) seems to have been so preoccupied with such activities that it is remarkable that the Revolutionary War dragged on until 1783.

#### DOMESTIC BLISS

What attracted John Gunning to Susannah Minifie is something of a mystery. Perhaps she was pretty in her youth, although the pictures of her in later life do nothing to support this idea. She certainly did not represent an advantageous match on the scale of Maria's and Elizabeth's marriages. As the daughter of a country parson, she would not have brought John any social advantage and is unlikely to have brought much of a dowry either. Susannah seems to have been quite well educated but, like her husband, no great intellectual. As her *Letter*\* amply

\* *A letter from Mrs. Gunning addressed to His Grace the Duke of Argyll*, London : Printed for the author, 1791. I have relied on the Dublin reprint of the same year for quotations.