

## Mary Martha Sherwood (1775–1851)

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by Gillian Dow

The *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature* entry for Sherwood concludes with the following sentence: 'Her works, which are too fiercely religious and moralistic to be popular today, include *The History of Susan Grey* (1802) and *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818, 1842, 1847)'. This somewhat dismissive account of an educationalist and writer for children who was well-loved throughout the nineteenth century, is nonetheless accurate – her evangelical tone has not aged well. In its day, however, Sherwood's fiction was among the most popular for both British and American children, and her most famous stories were translated into other European languages. Sherwood's manuscript story 'The School Feast and how admission was attained' on display as part of this exhibition, is typical of the mid-nineteenth century taste for religious allegory in works for children, most familiar to twenty-first-century readers in stories such as the Reverend Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1862-63). This undated manuscript was probably written between 1830 and 1840, and, like Sherwood's earlier *The History of the Fairchild Family*, is informed by her evangelical background. Children must, this didactic literature tells them, recognise their innate human flaws, and early preparation for eternal salvation is essential.

Born Mary Martha Butt in 1775, she married Captain Henry Sherwood, a cousin, in 1803. Between 1805 and 1816, the couple (who had left their eldest daughter in England with Mary Martha's mother and sister) lived in India. There, they had six more children, two of whom were to die in India in infancy. Sherwood claimed in her autobiography that the Indian climate did not agree with the family, and that she suffered from near-constant illness in her time abroad. This did not, however, affect her industry and sense of duty to education: she founded schools for the offspring of army officers, as well as for local Indian children, many of whom she taught in her own home. Her *History of Little Henry and his Bearer* (1814) was Sherwood's most popular work, and tells a touching tale of death-bed conversion. Based on earlier Evangelical tales, Sherwood's little Henry is a young English boy who, through his own devotion and goodness, and his stoicism and staunch faith in the face of death, converts the Indian who had looked after him in his childhood to Christianity.

Colonial themes remained current in Sherwood's fiction even after she left India. Nonetheless, it seems to have been with some relief to them all that the Sherwood family returned to England in 1816, despite the pecuniary want that led both husband and wife to open schools. Sherwood's boarding school for girls in Wick remained in business for eight years, teaching a broad curriculum which included French and Astronomy as well as the more basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Her experience at a boarding school for girls in Reading in the 1790s, as well as teaching at a Sunday school, must have stood her in good stead here. It was, however, as an author, rather than a schoolmistress, that she was best known in her later years. Sherwood's fame spread throughout the 1820s and 30s, when, like Hannah More, she wrote a series of tracts for the poor, urging them to respect their status, and emphasising a personal relationship with God, strengthened by a reading of the Bible. Typically, the urgency of a return to a close reading of the Bible is stressed at the end of 'The School Feast and how admission was attained': quotations linking the action in the story to the word of God are given.