

# That Hamilton Woman

*Anyone who braves the world sooner  
or later feels the consequences of it.*

LADY MELBOURNE



**Leslie Carroll starts an enthralling new series about one of England's most notorious heroines, Emma Hamilton**

Emma Hamilton is the real-life heroine of what is arguably the greatest love story in British history; yet her passionate and enduring romance with Lord Horatio Nelson remains the stuff of legend.

She had the accent — and mouth — of a bawdy Welsh maid, but Emma's breathtaking beauty captivated some of the most influential and powerful men in Europe. At the end of the 18th century, she was the most talked about woman in the world: an artful performer, an ambassador without portfolio, and the confidante of a queen. Once she met Nelson, Emma's fascinating life grew even more tumultuous, as she and the sea hero braved the censure of king and peers, and the sneers of society, all in the name of true love.

According to her baptismal entry, Emma Hamilton was born Amy Lyon in 1765. Her blacksmith father died when she was only two months old and her illiterate mother soon went to London, seeking employment. Emy (as her name was pronounced), was raised mostly by her wise and loving grandmother, Mary Kidd, in a cramped cottage in the grey and dreary coal mining town of Hawarden.

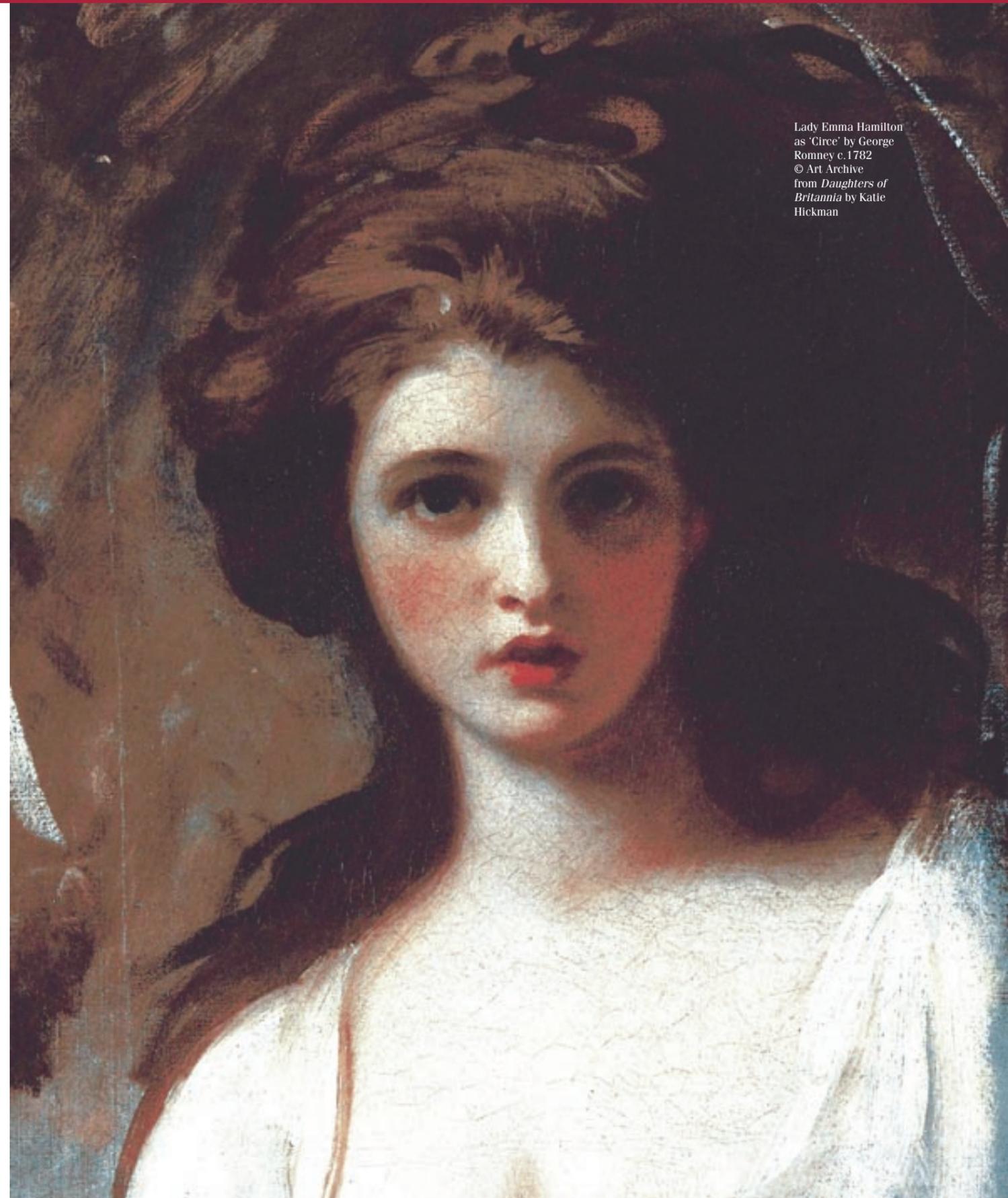
As a little girl, Emy would stand by the roadside not far from the Chester market and peddle lumps of coal from the folds of her apron. But when Mrs Kidd saw that her grubby little granddaughter was something of an early bloomer, she thought it best that Emy give up charming the passing travellers, and secure more proper employment.

After a brief stint as an under-nurserymaid for a local doctor's family, Emy ended up in London, where she and a fellow servant, Jane Powell, would sneak out of their employers' home at night and head over Blackfriars' Bridge for the raucous and colourful Cocksheath Camp. There, the renegade adolescents set themselves up as ballad singers; but when a near-dawn return caused a commotion in the household, the girls were discharged without references.

However, the adventure-loving Emy was soon back on her feet, and working as a housemaid for the Linley family. At that time Thomas Linley was one of the co-managers of Drury Lane Theatre (the other being Richard Brinsley Sheridan) and also served as the company's music director. Emy fell madly in love with the Linleys' second son, Samuel, an eighteen-year-old midshipman who had been sent home to recover from a fever. By all accounts, the infatuation was entirely mutual, but when Samuel died, an utterly distraught Emy quit the Linleys.

Not too many days later, the naïve fourteen-year-old was taken under the wing of a prominent madam. During lively evenings at the pleasure gardens of Ranelagh and Vauxhall, between copious bottles of champagne and claret and much 'gutting' — her phrase for energetic gourmandising — she learned the arts of pleasing men. Technically, she remained *intacto*, but she knew the 'abbess' was collecting secret bids for her virginity.

Lady Emma Hamilton as 'Circe' by George Romney c.1782  
© Art Archive  
from *Daughters of Britannia* by Katie Hickman



Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh by Benjamin West © NTPL/Uppark/John Bethell from *Nelson and Emma* Ed. Roger Hudson. The Folio Society 1994



parties and amateur post-prandial theatricals. She was now tall, with a stunning figure she didn't mind exhibiting, and she loved a rollicking good time.

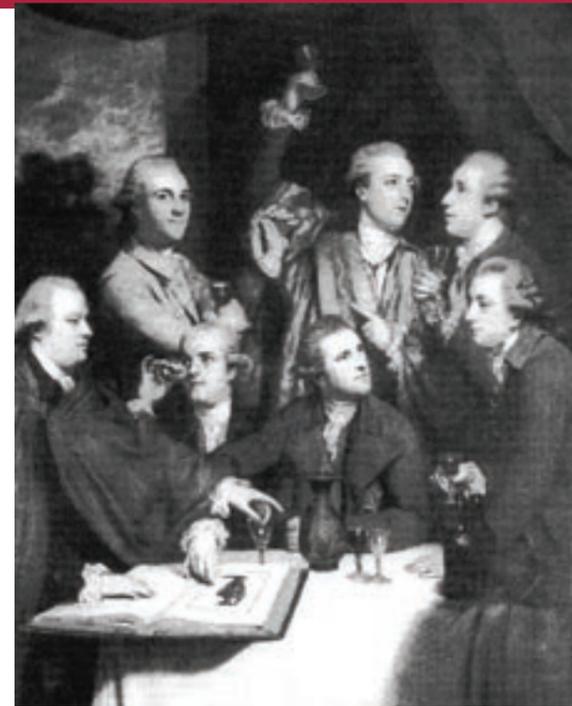
Alas, after not too many months, Sir Harry's ardour began to cool, perhaps coinciding with Emily's fascination for one of his friends — the aloof Charles Greville, whose polite civility and evident respect for her feelings proved a welcome tonic. Their clandestine affair began during the summer of 1781, and not too many months later, Emily realised she was pregnant. The child had to be Sir Harry's, but her frantic attempts to reach him were rebuffed.

Panicked, Emily turned to Greville for advice. Would he be willing to become her protector now? The cautious Greville struck a hard bargain, agreeing to such an arrangement if Emily would cut all former connections, coming to him after her child's birth — but without the child — and that she change her name, yet another indication that she was willing to be re-born as a respectable young woman.

Calling herself Mrs Emma Hart, she came under Greville's protection, after her daughter, known as 'little Emma', was born in the early months of 1782. With her mother as chaperone, they moved into a small house bordering Paddington Green in London's Edgware Road. It was an unlikely match — chilly, disapproving Charles Greville and the often over-exuberant Emma. Greville had her sit for the eminent portraitist George Romney several times and he undertook to educate Emma and instil her with some breeding. Emma was passionately grateful and she fell deeply in love with her Pygmalion.

In February 1783, they were visited by Greville's uncle, Sir William Hamilton, His Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Court of the Two Sicilies. Hamilton had come home to bury his wife's body in her native Wales, and almost as soon as he set foot in the modest cottage in Edgware Road, he became smitten by his nephew's stunningly beautiful protégée.

Emma was most impressed by the way this fifty-two-year-old suavely elegant courtier with the polished manners and the racy wit treated her as though she were an equal. That summer, Emma was shunted off to her family as Greville accompanied Hamilton on a tour of Hamilton's estates in Scotland and Wales. While she leapt at



A composite portrait of the Dilettanti Society on the occasion of the induction of Sir William Hamilton as a member in 1777. Hamilton is pictured centre left, his nephew Charles Greville, is seated centre right. By Sir Joshua Reynolds. © Courtauld Institute of Art from *Nelson and Emma* Ed. Roger Hudson. The Folio Society 1994

the chance of seeing her little daughter again, she despaired of a lengthy separation from Greville. Emma penned him several letters from Hawarden, which all went unanswered, throwing her into a panic. Had she been too raucous in his presence? Had she let her temper get the best of her on too many occasions, and thereby forfeited his affections? Averring that she had never loved any man so deeply (and meaning it), she promised to be quiet and dutiful from then on, if only he would continue their arrangement.

But Greville's passion had diminished as well. Rumour had it he was shopping for a wife, which sent the precariously positioned Emma into a tizzy. In the autumn of 1785, Greville stunned her by suggesting a visit in the spring to his uncle in Naples. He promised Emma that her holiday would last a half year or so and he would come and fetch her the following autumn.

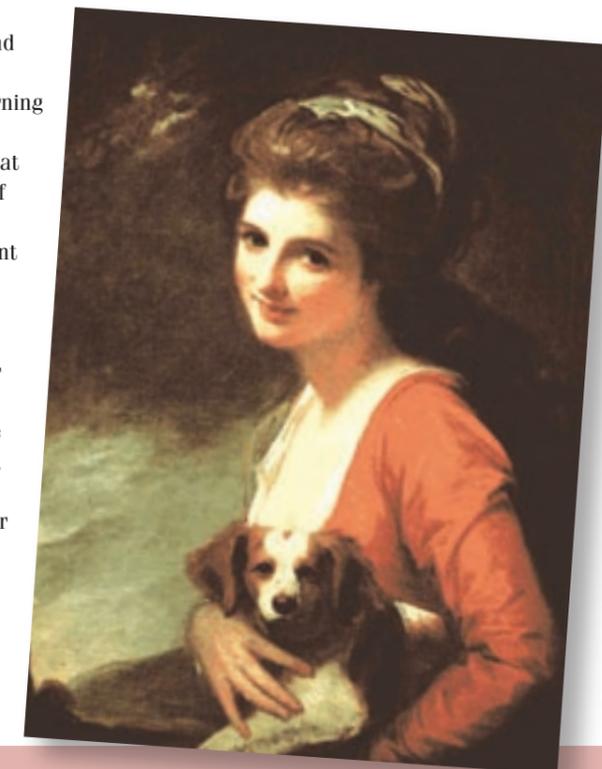
Instead of leaping at the opportunity to better herself in a warm and sunny climate, in the company of a gentleman she esteemed, Emma rightly had a sense of foreboding about the entire arrangement. But she was not in a position to contradict the wishes of her protector if she wished his magnanimity to continue.

Emma arrived in Naples on 26 April 1786, her twenty-first birthday. Though she was immediately swept into the social whirlwind, and although Sir William showered her with gifts and fashionable new clothing, she missed her Greville dreadfully.

When fourteen letters to Greville went unanswered, Emma was panic-stricken, and Sir William deemed it the right time to make a clean breast of the situation. He admitted that Greville had indeed been wife-hunting and had enormous debts, to boot, acquired through collecting items of *virtu* that well exceeded his modest government income. Greville had proposed a bargain: if his uncle would consent to name him as his heir, Sir William would inherit Emma!

Infuriated and betrayed, Emma considered returning to England or Wales — but what would become of her? With her countrified accent and her lowly birth, she could never hope to marry above her natural station. Only one avenue seemed obvious, but Emma did not want another protector; her heart still belonged to Greville.

Below: Nature (Emma Hamilton) Print after G. Romney (1785). This was the first portrait for which Emma sat for Romney. It was commissioned by Charles Greville. © National Maritime Museum Greenwich



However, she most probably became deflowered when she went to the Admiralty to seek the release of a young cousin who had been press-ganged; a sort of quid pro quo was extracted by the rakehell Captain Jack Willet Payne. Terrified that her disgrace would be discovered by the madam, Emy realised that it was time to move on. Her lovely singing voice had enchanted the Scot Dr James Graham.

At his Temple of Health in the Adelphi, the vastly popular nightly lectures featured alluring young ladies, scantily clad as Grecian goddesses, either posing or singing, whilst the doctor expounded on the healthful benefits of his mud baths and radical electrical cures. As Emily Lyon, she began her employment for Graham, earning the attentions of several titled young bucks, the most notable — and interested — being the dashing Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh.

Soon the lively and charming fifteen-year-old — now known as Emily Hart — was Sir Harry's mistress, ensconced at Uppark, his Sussex estate, where she entertained his guests at wild dinner



An exterior view of Uppark, West Sussex, where Emma was installed by Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh. ©NTPL/Matthew Antrobus



Emma sitting for her picture as "The Spinstress", with (left to right) Greville, Romney and the poet William Hayley, 1784 – a sketch by Romney.  
© British Museum from *Nelson and Emma* Ed. Roger Hudson. The Folio Society 1994



"The Spinstress" by Romney.  
© GLC. The Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood

Opting to remain in Naples and make the best of a broken heart, she threw herself into the role of Sir William's protégée, accompanying him everywhere. Despite their vast age difference, Emma and Sir William were temperamentally well suited: they shared a taste for adventure — Sir William being a vulcanologist with a passion for Vesuvius — and a frank and playful sexual nature. And together they developed a form of performance art for which Emma would gain world renown. "The Attitudes" featured Emma clad in a diaphanous chiton, striking and holding for several minutes at a time poses that represented, to their audience, extremely recognisable classical figures. With only a few props, such as a shawl, mirror, goblet, or dagger, her still life poses became the hottest invitation in Naples and the talk of Europe.



Sir William Hamilton.  
Engraving after a painting by C. Grignon, 1794  
© Trustees of the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth

By now, Emma and Sir William were deeply in love and passionately devoted to each other. Emma's greatest wish, however, was to become his wife; but there were several obstacles to a legitimate union, chief among them the permission of King George III for his royal servant to marry. Emma was not well born, as Sir William's first wife had been; and her past had been rather colourful, if not downright sordid. The odds were not good.

Arriving in England in May 1791, Sir William set about petitioning Windsor and introducing Emma to several of his influential English friends. They spent time in Bath that August (renting rooms at No 12 Great Pulteney St), and Emma was entertained by the equally vivacious Duchess of Devonshire and Lady Betty Foster. In Georgiana's salon, she was compelled to give an impromptu performance of her Attitudes for none other than the Prince of Wales, who became an instant admirer.

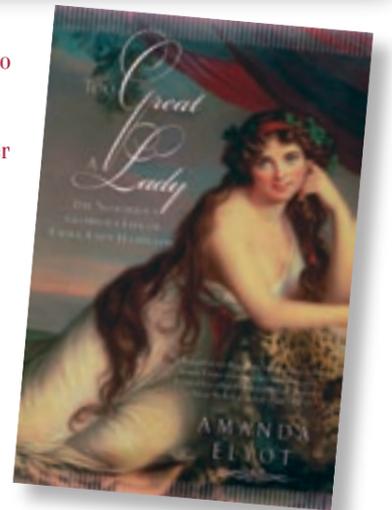
Although he received a bit of a quizzing from his majesty, Sir William did obtain permission to marry Emma, on the proviso that she not be considered the ambassador, and would never be received at the English court. Unpleasant terms, to be sure, but at least true love did triumph. On 6 September 1791, Sir William and Emma were married in London at St Marylebone. Right after the quiet little ceremony, they dashed off to Romney's studio where Sir William commissioned another portrait of his new bride. The painting's title? - *The Ambassador*. 🍷



Emma as "The Ambassador". An engraving of Romney's last portrait of Emma, for which she gave the final sitting on the day of her marriage to Sir William Hamilton on 6th September 1791.  
© National Maritime Museum from *Nelson and Emma* Ed. Roger Hudson. The Folio Society 1994

(In the next issue, Emma returns to Naples as the wife of Sir William, and the stage is set for the most compelling and enduring encounter of her life.)

Leslie Carroll is a professional actress and multi-published novelist, who writes historical fiction under the pen name Amanda Elyot. Her novel *TOO GREAT A LADY: The Notorious Glorious Life of Emma, Lady Hamilton*, Emma's life story told from its heroine's point of view, was published by NAL in February 2007.



Cover for *Too Great A Lady* by Amanda Elyot, featuring Emma as 'Bacchante' after Vigee LeBrun.