

## **Author Biography: Elizabeth Helme**

Even though Elizabeth Helme's work proved very popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is little biographical information and evidence to be found about her life. It is not yet known exactly where or when Helme was born. It is known that she was born near Durham, but soon moved to London after the death of her father when she was still a child. It was in London that she received her education and also met her future husband, William Helme, with whom she went on to have five children.

Researchers have yet to confirm the maiden name of Elizabeth. I found reference of a marriage between an Elizabeth Horrobin (who came from Durham) and a William Helme in St. Martin in the Fields, London on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1772.<sup>1</sup> This marriage does fit in with previous biographical research on Elizabeth, and so it could well be that the Elizabeth mentioned in this parish record is the same as the author Elizabeth. The family experienced their first financial problems when William lost his money, for reasons which remain unclear. To provide the family with an income, William took up the position of schoolmaster in Brentford, where he became well known for his teaching. He was also a published writer. He published largely educational works, his two most successful texts being *Henry Stuckely; or, The Effects of Dissipation* and *Evenings Rationally Employed*.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth too began working at the Brentford school and later became headmistress. Elizabeth's father had also been a schoolmaster, and education clearly played an important role in her life.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mormon Church, *International Genealogical Index* <<http://www.familysearch.org>> [accessed March 2006]

<sup>2</sup> William Helme, *Henry Stuckely; or, The Effects of Dissipation* (Brentford: Norbury, 1794), *Evenings Rationally Employed* (Brentford: Norbury, 1803).

Elizabeth made her entry into the world of literature through translating a large variety of French and German works. As Montague Summers notes, Helme was ‘an ardent educationalist and very prolific with her pen’.<sup>3</sup> She quickly produced an extensive amount of translation work. At the time Helme was writing, translation was a fairly popular way for women to begin their literary careers. During the renaissance period, translation was one of the very few modes female writers were able to participate in. Although Helme worked at a time when the female author was becoming more prominent, women still faced far more prejudice than their male counterparts when it came to producing and publishing work. Helme translated many texts including *Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico* and *Travels from the Cape of Good Hope into the interior parts of Africa*.<sup>4</sup> When translating texts, Helme worked mainly on travel literature and the biographies of famous explorers. After working on translations for some time, Elizabeth Helme then began to write novels. She had ten published in all, some of which were very successful, both commercially and with the critics. Her novels included the following:

- *Louisa; or, The Cottage on the Moor* (London: G. Kearsley, 1787)
- *Clara and Emmeline; or, The Maternal Benediction* (London: G. Kearsley, 1788)
- *Duncan and Peggy: A Scottish Tale* (London: J. Bell, 1794)
- *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (London: William Lane, 1796)
- *Albert; or, The Wilds of Strathnavern* (London: Sampson Low, 1799)

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<sup>3</sup> Montague Summers, *A Gothic Bibliography* (London: The Fortune Press, 1940) p.63.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Heinrich Campe, *Cortez; or, The Conquest of Mexico*, translated by Elizabeth Helme (London: Sampson Low, 1799), Francois Le Vaillant, *Travels from the Cape of Good Hope into the interior parts of Africa*, translated by Elizabeth Helme (London: William Lane, 1790).

- *St. Margaret's Cave; or, The Nun's Story. An Ancient Legend* (London: Earle and Hemet, 1801)
- *St. Clair of the Isles; or, The Outlaws of Barra. A Scottish Tradition.* (London: Longman and Rees, 1803)
- *Pilgrims of the Cross; or, The Chronicles of Christabelle De Mowbray. An Ancient Legend* (Brentford: Norbury, 1805)
- *Magdalen; Or, The Penitent of Godstow. An Historical Novel* (Brentford: Norbury, 1812)
- *Modern Times; or The Age We Live In: A Posthumous Novel* (Brentford: Norbury, 1814)

It has been remarked that most of Helme's novels focus on 'personal morality and its relationship with class and wealth'.<sup>5</sup> In the preface to one of her texts, Helme writes that 'the design of [...] my work' was to 'inculcate morality and a love of study' and 'to improve minds'.<sup>6</sup> Helme also experimented with the gothic genre in *St. Margret's Cave*. As well as her novels and translations she also wrote moral and educational works, such as *Instructive Rambles Extended in London and Adjacent Villages*.<sup>7</sup> Some of Helme's texts, like *Louisa* and *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest*, proved incredibly popular. *Louisa*, for example, went through five editions in the first year of its publication and continued to be reprinted until the mid nineteenth-century.

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<sup>5</sup> Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: women writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford, 1990), p.509.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Helme, *Instructive Rambles Extended in London and Adjacent Villages* (London: Sampson Low, 1800), p.6.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

One of her daughters, also Elizabeth Helme (later Somerville), followed in her mother's footsteps by both working as the headmistress of the school her mother had taught and by publishing several texts. Her most popular work was *Little John, and Their Dog Bluff*, which Summers describes as 'a delightful' novel which was 'many times reprinted'.<sup>8</sup> However, the fact that mother and daughter share the same name has led to confusion as to which of them wrote which texts. *Little John, and Their Dog Bluff*, for example, is often attributed to Elizabeth senior.

As well as the confusion which surrounds mother and daughter, there is also some uncertainty concerning the death of Elizabeth Helme Senior. Some research has suggested that she died in 1810 and 'not 1813 as usually said'.<sup>9</sup> Other researchers, such as Summers, cite her death as being in 1813. There is therefore somewhat confusion around the publication of Helme's novel *Magdalen*. Where *Modern Times* is listed as a 'posthumous novel', *Magdalen* (published in 1812, which, according to some researchers would be after her death) has no mention of it being a posthumous work. What is known however, is that Helme died in debt. She had written on several occasions to the Royal Literary Fund asking for assistance. In one letter she wrote:

For seventeen years I have written for the press, and by that means supported myself respectably, and materially assisted a large family, but a very close application for the last three years, rendered necessary by the failure of all other means, has entirely destroyed my health and [...] plunged me into a complicated, and hopeless, dropsical and liver complaint from which I can flatter myself with no relief but Death.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Helme (Junior), *Little John, and Their Dog Bluff*, (London: Darton and Harvey, 1799), Summers, p.64.

<sup>9</sup> Blain, p.509.

<sup>10</sup> Royal Literary Fund, case number 97, 20 Oct. 1803.

Although neither Elizabeth nor William Helme relied solely on authorship as a source of income, it is clear from this letter that it did play an important role in the family's livelihood. Other files from the Royal Literary Fund archive show that both Elizabeth's husband and her children also made requests to the fund for assistance.

(842 words)

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