

### **Biography of Elizabeth Hervey**

Elizabeth Hervey (née Marsh) was the author of six novels, all published anonymously between 1788 and 1815. She is better known as the sister of William Beckford, author of at least ten novels, his most famous being *Vathek: An Arabian Tale*.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately biographical evidence of Hervey is restricted and one cannot be sure of the exact dates of her life. However, one can assume that she would have been born in the 1750s as she was married in 1774, and may have died in 1816 as no further novels were published after 1815. She was the daughter of Francis and Maria Marsh<sup>2</sup> and had links through her maternal grandfather to the household of Frederick, Prince of Wales.

Hervey's step-father was the wealthy MP William Beckford (?1709-1770) and her mother was Maria (née Hamilton) the widow of Francis Marsh, a Jamaican planter. William Beckford Senior's roots lay in sugar plantations in the West Indies. He owned twenty estates with his father Peter.<sup>3</sup> On his return to England in 1744 he bought a 4000–5000 acre estate in Wiltshire which he replaced with a Palladian mansion, Fonthill from 1757, so lavishly furnished that it was named by Colt Hoare, and afterwards generally known as 'Splendens'.<sup>4</sup> This gives an insight into William Beckford's social status, as he held many positions of power, including being an MP for Shaftesbury between 1747-1754 and then London from 1754 until his death in 1770 respectively. He even held the office as lord mayor of London between 1762-3

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<sup>1</sup> <http://beckford.c18.net/wbeditions.html> [accessed 28 02 06].

<sup>2</sup> This is the first example of how inaccurate and incomplete biographical information on Hervey is, as Cara Rosencrantz believes their surname to be 'March.' Janet Todd, *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* (Methuen & Co., London, 1987) p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1905?docPos=3> [accessed 28 01 06].

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1905?docPos=3> [accessed 28 01 06].

02101106. ENGL 3041. Assignment 1.3 Author Biography. Tutor: E.J. Clery

and again between 1769-1770.<sup>5</sup> This social status is confirmed in the education of his only son, William who was sent in 1777 to complete his education in Geneva and to reside with his uncle, Colonel Hamilton, a former soldier of the East India Company.

One can infer from the letters he wrote to his step-sister Elizabeth that they had a close relationship. The lively letters he wrote from Switzerland often contained his inner feelings disguised in his writing of the dramatic landscape and he frequently wrote passages moving towards story form. These letters may have allowed Hervey to write about Switzerland without having visited it.<sup>6</sup>

One can deduce that Elizabeth was brought up in the magnificent house 'Splendens' after her mother remarried after her father's death, and there she would have received a fine education befitting a lady in the late 1760s and early 1770s. It is evident from her work that she was well-read, indeed William Beckford's tutor 'thought her in her teens a 'prodigy' who wrote more than undergraduates read.'<sup>7</sup> Records shows that she wrote five novels, although one cannot be assured of the accuracy of records as she is so frequently omitted in many popular biographies of the time. Her works included:

**1788** *Melissa and Marcia; or the Sisters*. Two volumes. Published anonymously by W. Lane of Leadenhall Street. The number of editions is unknown.

**1790** *Louisa: or, the Reward of an Affectionate Daughter* 3 vols. 'By the author of *Melissa and Marcia*.' T. Hookham, New Bond Street, London.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://beckford.c18.net/wbbeckfordbio1.html> [accessed 02 03 06].

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1905?docPos=6> [accessed 28 01 06].

<sup>7</sup> Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Batsford, London, 1990) p. 517.

02101106. ENGL 3041. Assignment 1.3 Author Biography. Tutor: E.J. Clery

**1796** *The History of Ned Evans* 2 vols. for John Rice, 111 Grafton Street, Dublin.

Title page ‘interspersed with moral and critical remarks; anecdotes and characters of many persons well known in the polite world; and incidental strictures on the present state of Ireland.’ Epigraph: ‘O’erstep not the modesty of nature!’ from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, III.iii. 16-23. This has a much busier title page than others, perhaps at the publisher’s request. Possibly influenced by Ann Radcliffe regarding the necessity for extra information with her novel.

**1797** *The Church of Saint Siffrid*. 2 vols. ‘By the author of *Ned Evans*.’ William Porter, Grafton street, Dublin.

**1800** *The Mourtray Family* 4 vols. Faulder, London. No mention of previous works  
One can only speculate that perhaps it was not so well received, or simply that Faulder preferred a simpler title page.

**1814** *Amabel or, memoirs of a woman of fashion*. 4 vol. Henry Colbourn, London.  
Cardiff Corvey website lists a dedication to the Queen, signed 'Eliz. Hervey' and that the title page read: “By Mrs Hervey, author of *The Mourtray Family*.”<sup>8</sup>

The *Bloomsbury Guide*<sup>9</sup> lists another work *Julia* written in 1803 which is possible as there was a large gap between *The Mourtray Family* and *Amabel*, but no concrete evidence of such a novel has been found in ECCO or in other searches.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.british-fiction.cf.ac.uk/TitleDetails.asp?title=1814A034&browse=y> [accessed 25 02 06]

<sup>9</sup> Claire Buck ed., *The Bloomsbury Guide to women’s literature* (Bloomsbury, London, 1992) p. 632

Like many women of the time, Elizabeth Hervey's reasons for writing were based on financial necessity.<sup>10</sup> After leaving the security of her affluent home environment, her marriage to Colonel Thomas Hervey in 1774 led to financial ruin as he gambled away their fortune, forcing them to flee abroad. The country they fled to is unknown but one may speculate that it was probably France for two reasons: firstly, because Hervey writes with an insider's knowledge of France in her novel *Melissa and Marcia* and secondly because her husband died in Liège suggesting they had been living in France. Hervey returned to England after his death in 1781<sup>11</sup> and supported herself (and her two young sons) through her writing.<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that *The History of Ned Evans* and *The Church of Saint Siffrid* were published in Dublin before her return to publishing in London. She was well travelled as she also wrote with an intimacy only gained by one who has lived in the country about Wales and North America.<sup>13</sup>

Her first work *Melissa and Marcia; or the Sisters* was published anonymously by William Lane and his Minerva Press in 1788. This publishing house was well-known for printing the works of previously unpublished authors. The Minerva Press was seen as a low-status publishing house and was often used as a stepping-stone to more respected publishers.<sup>14</sup> The critical reception of her novels varied, but she was

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<sup>10</sup> 'Elizabeth Hervey wrote to re-establish family fortunes.' Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schowering, gen. eds. *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey* (OUP, 2000) p. 50

<sup>11</sup> Todd states Colonel Hervey's death as being in 1778 although further records have shown they were married for seven years before his death. Some of her biography has since been found to be inaccurate, for example she states *Louisa* as being Hervey's first work, although we now know it to be *Melissa and Marcia*. p. 517

<sup>12</sup> Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen* (Routledge, London and New York, 1992) p. 64

<sup>13</sup> 'MR [Monthly Review] noted that local descriptions of Wales, Ireland and North America indicated the author's having resided there; "the details of military scenes might infer a personal acquaintance with them."' Todd p. 516

<sup>14</sup> This is implied by later texts on the Minerva Press, including Blakey and Adburgh who (on p. 170) notes that 'Lane did not pay his authors very much, and he himself waxed exceedingly rich on the proceeds of their labours.' One can imagine Hervey consulting other publishers who might pay her more as it has already been made clear she was writing to support herself and her two sons financially.

generally well received in her time. The *Monthly Review* writes that *The History of Ned Evans* left ‘the mind under a pleasing impression’ and that the work ‘is distinguished by the religious air pervading it.’<sup>15</sup> The *Feminist Companion* has *Melissa and Marcia* listed as written anonymously and says it is ‘a sprightly predictable story of one vain and one wiser twin [containing a] good sketch of their early life with [their] miserly, misogynist father.’<sup>16</sup> However, it is noticeable that she is not listed in the ‘Forgotten Favourites’ of Dorothy Blakey’s book *The Minerva Press*.

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<sup>15</sup> Todd, p. 163

<sup>16</sup> Blain, p. 517

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Followed through a Google link to 'Elizabeth Hervey,' leading me to this website on Isabelle de Montolieu which lists *Amabel* in the bibliography. Repeats much of the information of Summers and Turner.

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