Helen Maria Williams's Background and Development as a Writer in Relation to *A Tour in Switzerland*

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Helen Maria Williams (1759-1827) is best known to modern readers for her eyewitness accounts of the French Revolution, *Letters from France* (8 vols. 1790-96) (Hereafter referred to as *Letters*), which secured her an important place in early Romanticism. She was an enthusiastic advocate of the French Revolution, the central event of the period, not only politically but also culturally and aesthetically (Fraistat and Lanser 41). Her other significant travel account, *A Tour in Switzerland; or, A View of the Present State of the Governments and Manners of those Cantons, with Comparative Sketches of the Present State of Paris* (1798) (Hereafter referred to as *Tour*), however, has far less attention from critics in spite of the favourable reception at the first publication and high evaluation by some modern critics (Vincent 12).

*Tour* is based on Williams's journal kept during her exile in Switzerland in 1794, but was not published until early in 1798, just a few weeks before the French invasion of Switzerland. She had published all of her *Letters* before *Tour*: the first four volumes before she fled to Switzerland, and the last four before the publication of *Tour*. This means that she re-examines in *Tour* what she developed in her previous works as she did in writing the series of *Letters*. Therefore, it is significant to take into consideration what she acquired concerning both ideas and narrative techniques in order to fully evaluate *Tour*. The present essay aims to investigate her religious and cultural background, social position, and development as a writer up until she wrote *Tour*.

I

Helen Maria Williams was born in London as the daughter of Charles Williams (d. 1762), secretary to the island of Minorca, and his second wife, Helen, née Hay (1730-1812), who were respectively Welsh and Scottish. Her father died when she was a child, and her family moved to Berwick-upon-Tweed near the Scottish border. Helen Maria had two sisters: One was a half-sister Persis, from her father's first marriage, and the other was a younger sister Cecilia. The three sisters were raised to have a sense of pride in their family heritage, and educated by their mother, who was a Dissenter and "influenced the whole family with her 'Scottish Presbyterian piety – fervent, grave, deep.'"²

Williams was marginalized triply from the outset as Gary Kelly points out: She was from a middle-class family living in the geographical and cultural borders of Britain, acquired intellectual culture from religious dissent (Presbyterian), and she was a woman (30). Even in the last half of the eighteenth century, the civil and political rights of Dissenters were still limited long after the Toleration Act of 1689 granted them freedom of worship (Fraistat and Lanser 17n4). She, however, ventured to join the literary and political circle of London, and began her career as a writer, firstly
with her poems, and then with her only novel, albeit through the help of male mentors.

After returning to London in 1781, she met her male mentors who would encourage her literary ambitions and help her in her career. The first mentor was Andrew Kippis (1725-95), who was a minister of Presbyterian congregation in Westminster and a literary man. He was an advocate of social and political reform, and leader of the English Dissenting Enlightenment who belonged to several different Whig organizations and coteries, holding advanced views for many of the dissenters of his day as a result of his wide reading. He encouraged and helped Williams to publish her first work, *Edwin and Eltruda: A Legendary Tale* (1782), which is an anti-war poem. Kippis also introduced her to an international literary and political circle, including the Burneys, the Wartons, Benjamin Franklin (1706-90), the Corsican leader General Paoli (1725-1807), the painter George Romney (1734-1802), the famous bluestocking Elizabeth Montague (1718-1800), and the English provincial Enlightenment poet, Anna Seward (1742-1809). Kippis also introduced Williams to Samuel Johnson (1709-81), who praised her *Ode on the Peace* (1783) celebrating the end of the war with America.

Her second mentor was John Moore (1729-1802), physician and writer. By the time Williams met him around 1784, he was already a popular writer by virtue of his several novels and two travel books. *A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany* (1779) was based on his experiences as a tutor accompanying the Scottish nobleman the young Douglas, 8th Duke of Hamilton for the Grand Tour. In 1781, he published a sequel, *A View of Society and Manners in Italy*, which was also very popular. Like Williams, he was to publish two eyewitness accounts on the French Revolution, *A Journal during a Residence in France* (1793) and *A View of the Causes and Progress of the French Revolution* (1795).

As Kennedy points out (*Helen* 32), Moore had a very significant influence on Williams through their affectionate and lasting friendship, nourished by their shared Scottish background. I would argue that his influence is especially important concerning her writing *Tour*. His first travel book not only aroused in her a yearning for Switzerland but also taught her how a writer should be. She placed at the beginning of the second volume of her *Poems of 1786* a poem in Moore’s honour, entitled, "Epistle to Dr. Moore, Author of A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany." In this poem, Williams, asserting, "My heart instructs me how to write" (*Poems 2: 4*), admires Moore’s "skill” which soothed and encouraged her to write:

That softer glide my hours along,
That still my griefs are sooth’d by song,
That still my careless numbers flow
To your successful skill I owe.... (*Poems 2: 4*)

This "successful skill” enabled Williams to trace his trip imaginatively and shape her idea of Switzerland, and led her to exclaim:

O SWITZERLAND! How oft these eyes
Desire to view thy mountains rise;
How fancy loves thy steeps to climb,
So wild, so solemn, so sublime;
And o’er thy happy vales to roam,
Where freedom rears her humble home. (Poems 2: 11)

Her expectation for Switzerland as a free and democratic country led to her being disappointed as we can see in Tour. However, she demonstrates in her own travel account the qualities which she admired of Moore’s “soothing” book, especially the author’s broadmindedness, positive attitude towards different cultures and good humour:

That soothing page, which care beguiles,
And dresses truth in fancy’s smiles:
For not with hostile step you prest
Each foreign soil, a thankless guest!...
Thro’ varying modes of life, you trace
The finer trait, the latent grace,
And where thro’ every vain disguise
You view the human follies rise,
The stroke of irony you dart
With force to mend, not wound the heart.
While intellectual objects share
Your mind’s extensive view, you bear,
Quite free from spleen’s incumb’ring load,
The little evils on the road —
So, while the path of life I tread,
A path to me with briers spread;
Let me its tangled mazes spy
Like you, with gay, good-humour’d eye.... (Poems 2: 19-20) (Emphasis added)

A “soothing” effect is the most significant for Williams both in judging and writing, and continually sought and referred to in Tour. Readers also find in Tour her imaginative way of presentation of “truth,” broad-mindedness, keen observation, and penetration into both “the finer trait, the latent grace” of others and “human follies.” It is difficult to keep “gay, good-humour’d eye” in her path “with briers spread,” but she struggles to advocate the great cause of freedom, never losing her optimism and idealism.

In addition, it is worth noting that this poem is written in a way which reminds us of Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Traveller.” As the poet in “The Traveller” presents the distinct characters of people in the countries such as Switzerland, Italy and Britain, so does Williams describe the characteristics of towns in different countries Moore describes, by presenting both his and her viewpoints and sometimes merging them.

Through Moore, Williams corresponded with Robert Burns (1759-96) and promoted his work in
England. Her friendship with Moore continued as is shown in the inclusion of her poem under the title of "To Dr. Moore, in answer to a Poetical Epistle written by him, in Wales, to Helen Maria Williams” in her second instalment of Letters, titled Letters of France, Containing Many New Anecdotes Relative to the French Revolution and the Present State of French Manners (1792).

The assessment and recognition of Williams’s poetical works in those days can be traced through their publication style. The first Edwin and Eltruda was published anonymously, with a preface by Kippis, and the second work, An Ode on the Peace was published also without her name but with mention of her previous publication. Then her third work Peru (1784) was published with her name. It was a six-canto poem on the European-New World relationship and dedicated to Elizabeth Montagu. The following Poems (2 vols.) were published with her name in full and a list of names of its subscribers, which are about 1570 including Prince of Wales, poets like Joanna Baillie, Elizabeth Carter, and Anna Seward, bluestocking Elizabeth Montagu and Frances Boscawen, painter Joshua Reynolds, and noblemen and intellectuals, Anglicans and Dissenters such as the Duchess of Devonshire and her husband, the Archbishop of Canterbury and York, and Richard Price. Her future intimate friend John Hurford Stone was also a subscriber. Poems is a collection of poems, including the reprinting of her first two works, and many of them are on history and on the sufferings caused by poverty and war. It was dedicated to Queen Charlotte. With this volume, Williams established herself as a poet of "sensibility,” which is well represented in the poem “To Sensibility.” She pledges her allegiance to "SENSIBILITY,” acknowledging it involves the negative feelings such as pain, woe, and fear, but showing how it generates power vital for the human "heart”:

No cold exemption from her [Sensibility’s] pain
    I ever wish’d to know;
Cheer’d with her transport, I sustain
    Without complaint her woe.

Above whate’er content can give,
    Above the charm of ease,
The restless hopes and fears, that live
    With her, have power to please.

Where but for her, were Friendship’s power
    To heal the wounded heart,
To shorten sorrow’s ling’ring hour,
    And bid its gloom depart? ... 

She prompts the tender marks of love
    Which words can scarce express;
The heart alone their force can prove,
    And feel how much they bless.
Of every finer bliss the source!
'Tis she on love bestows
The softer grace, the boundless force,
Confiding passion knows...(Poems 1: 21-23)

Here sensibility is defined as sympathy and compassion for the sufferers, which deepen and strengthen one's love for others in its affective dynamics.

After publishing one more poetical work, A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade (1788), she produced Julia, a Novel; Interspersed with Some Poetical Pieces (1790). The former underscores her continuing interests in the political issues and sympathy for the suffering of the oppressed. The latter indicates Williams's challenging spirit for and experiment with a literary form aimed at the combined effect of the novel and poetry. Julia has further significance as a re-writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse (1761) in the sentimental style of Frances Sheridan’s Sidney Bidulph (One: 1761, Two: 1767) or Henry Mackenzie’s Julia de Roubigné (1777) as has been pointed out (Orlando, Duquette xiii). Reworking of the preceding works was Williams’s deliberate strategy for negotiating with conventions of both society and literary genre and creating a work in her imaginative way. This strategy was taken again in Tour.

Williams’s first and only novel Julia was highly and favourably evaluated in general when it was published. Even Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), well known for her severe criticism of sentimental novels by women writers, approved of it as a novel to be recommended to young female readers, commending Williams’s feminine sensibility (”feminine sweetness in her style and observations”), “modesty and indulgence in her satire,” “genuine unaffected piety,” and “refinement of sentiments, without a very great alloy of romantic notions” (98).

Despite her success both as a poet and novelist, Williams again ventured to cross the geographical, cultural and social border to take an active part in a wider world. She went to France and thereafter continued to be an eyewitness and advocate of the French Revolution until the end of her life. She tried to be a bridge between France and Britain by getting more closely involved in the political sphere than before and sending her messages out to the British audience. She chose an epistolary form addressed to a friend in England for this purpose.

Williams arrived in Paris on the eve of the Festival of Federation, the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, and attended a mass at Notre Dame on the eve and the Festival on 14 July 1790. Letters Written in France (vol. 1) describes her experience as a spectator of the memorable events in the history of human kind, and articulates not only her enthusiastic support of the Revolution, but also her sensibility, cosmopolitanism and idea on the strategy for writing, which are crucial to her later works.

These are condensed in her highly emotional response to the dramatic scene of the concession of royal power to the National Assembly by the oath of King Louis XVI, followed by “[a] respectful silence,” and “the cries, the shouts, the acclamations of the multitude” (69) :
You will not suspect that I was an indifferent witness of such a scene. Oh no! this was not a time in which the distinctions of country were remembered. It was a triumph of human kind; it was man asserting the noblest privileges of his nature; and it required but the common feelings of humanity to become in that moment a citizen of the world. For myself, I acknowledge that my heart caught with enthusiasm the general sympathy; my eyes were filled with tears; and I shall never forget the sensations of that day, "while memory holds her seat in my bosom." 5

Here she asserts the power of sympathy which breaks down national, linguistic and ideological barriers between people. At the same time, she makes clear her stance supporting the cause of freedom and equality as "a citizen of the world," indicating cosmopolitanism demonstrated in Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Traveller” (Bygrave and Bending 371n). Her aim is to make her readers experience the same “sensations” by conveying the sublimity of the scenes she witnesses.

However, she faces the impossibility of describing the sublime scene:

One must have been present, to form any judgment of a scene, the sublimity of which depended much less on its external magnificence than on the effect it produced on the minds of the spectators…. How am I to paint the impetuous feelings of that immense, that exulting multitude? Half a million of people assembled at a spectacle, which furnished every image that can elevate the mind of man; which connected the enthusiasm of moral sentiment with the solemn pomp of religious ceremonies; which addressed itself at once to the imagination, the understanding, and the heart! (64-65)

Therefore, one of her most important strategies is to create images to be completed by her readers’ collaboration using their “imagination, the understanding, and the heart,” thereby cultivating their sensibility.

Another prominent strategy is the inclusion of a kind of sentimental narrative based on fact and poems, all of which have been well recognized by critics. This creates the effects similar to those she achieved by the inclusion of poems in her novel Julia: the accentuation of themes and images, the emphasis on emotions, and the shift of point of view. The most notable example is the history of M. du Fossé in Letters (1790), who was imprisoned for three years by his despotic father Baron du Fossé using a letter de cachet because of his marriage with a daughter of a bourgeois family. His wife and child were left in England, the mother supporting herself and the child as a language teacher. He could secure his freedom by his father’s death in 1787 and the French Revolution. Therefore, his domestic happiness is a symbol of the cause of the Revolution, while his imprisonment a symbol of the injustice and cruel oppression under the old regime. As Williams’s first involvement with the Revolution is friendship with Madame du Fossé, the story emphasizes “the inseparability of personal fortunes from national politics” (Fraistat and Lanser 15), in other words, that of the private and the public. In addition, the point of view shifts from Williams the spectator to the point of view of the insider and sufferer, showing that aristocrats are also victims of the ancient regime, thus encouraging the reader’s emotional involvement, while maintaining the
balance of reason and emotion, reality and imagination as a whole.

In the next Letters (1792), Williams employs a poem addressed to her mentor, John Moore, as I have already mentioned, and emphasizes the glorious achievement of the revolution and her euphoric hope by focusing this time the peasants in an idyllic and harmonious natural landscape:

There, on the Loire’s sweet banks, a joyful band
Cull’d the rich produce of the fruitful land;
The youthful peasant, and the village maid,
And age and childhood lent their feeble aid.
The labours of the morning done, they haste
Where in the field is spread the light repast;
The vintage-baskets serve, revers’d, for chairs,
And the gay meal is crown’d with tuneless airs.

Delightful land! Ah, now with gen’ral voice,
Thy village sons and daughters may rejoice;
Thy happy peasant, now no more a slave,
Forbad to taste one good that nature gave.
No longer views with unavailing pain
The lavish harvest ripe for him in vain....
For now on Gallia’s plain the peasant knows
Those equal rights impartial heav’n bestows;
He now, by freedom’s ray illumin’d, taught
Some self-respect, some energy of thought,
Discerns the blessings that to all belong,
And lives to guard his humble shed from wrong.

Auspicious Liberty! in vain thy foes
Deride thy ardour, and thy force oppose.... (122-23)

This beautiful landscape with peasants enjoying their lunch break during their harvesting in the centre is a metaphor for an ideal society where those of the lower class can have “self-respect” with their fundamental human rights guaranteed so that they can afford to enjoy their life. It cannot be denied that Williams’s sympathy is more bestowed on aristocratic women than to those of lower class, as some critics have pointed out, but the image presented here is the one which Williams always keeps in mind when she observes and judges various societies. It is worth noting that she increasingly makes uses of natural landscape as a metaphor for condition of society as her expectation for the Revolution is betrayed by atrocious execution, massacre, and the Terror.

Acquiring an international reputation by the first Letters, she settled in Paris in 1791 and established and extended acquaintance with Girondist leaders such as Jacques Brissot (1754-93) and Pierre Vergniaud (1753-93), and with Manon Roland (1754-93), wife of the Interior Minister. Through Manon Roland’s salon, Williams met other important French intellectuals and revolutionary leaders.
Some of them might well have been reading the French translation of the first volume of her *Letters*, which the Constitutional Society at Rouen had enthusiastically welcomed as a harbinger of English support (Fraistat and Lanser 22). By the end of 1792, Williams’s own apartment on the Rue Helvéste had become an important salon for French, American, and British radicals. Among the guests were the political philosopher Thomas Paine, the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, the painter Benjamin West, the Whig politician Charles Fox, and the Irish independence leaders Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone. During this period, she also met John Hurford Stone who was to become her life partner.

Actively engaged in such an extensive network, Williams continued to publish her eyewitness account of the Revolution taking its most dramatic turns: her second volume in 1792 was succeeded by the third and fourth volumes in 1793, which comprised the end of the first series.

The third volume, *Letters from France: Containing a Great Variety of Interesting and Original Information Concerning the Most Important Events that Have Lately Occurred in that Country, and Particularly Respecting the Campaign of 1792* contains seven letters, but it is only the first letter that Williams wrote. The other letters were written by “another hand” as noted by her in the Advertisement of this volume, and subsequently identified by scholars as John Hurford Stone (Fraistat and Lanser 157). In the first letter, dated 25 January 1793, four days after the execution of Louis XVI, Williams deplores the change from “the golden age of the revolution” to the terrible chaos caused by the violation of freedom by using metaphor from nature: “[T]he enchanting spell is broken, and the fair scenes of beauty and of order, through which imagination wandered, are transformed into the desolation of the wilderness, and clouded by the darkness of the tempest.” Then she attacks Maximilien Robespierre (1758-94) rather insultingly as the head of the “band of conspirators”:

> ... gloomy and saturnine in his disposition, with a countenance of such dark aspect as seems the index of no ordinary guilt – fanatical and exaggerated in his avowed principles of liberty, possessing that species of eloquence which gives him power over the passions, and that cool determined temper which regulates the most ferocious designs with the most calm and temperate prudence. His crimes do not appear to be the result of passions, but some deep and extraordinary malignity, and he seems formed to subvert and to destroy. (4-5)

She, however, expresses her hope by asserting that anarchy cannot be lasting though she admits its destructive power with metaphor of torrents: “Anarchy is the impetuous torrent that sweeps over the land with irresistible violence, and involves every object in one wide mass of ruin” (11). Her severe criticism of the character of Robespierre is referred to by Williams in the first chapter of *Tour* as a reason for her banishment along with her relationship with the Girondists (91).

The fourth volume with the same subtitle as the third contains five letters between February and May of 1793, last of which was written by Williams’s friend Thomas Christie. The first letter describes the trial and execution of the French King, and Letters 4 and 5 address the misconceptions about the French Revolution in Britain by offering the detailed analysis of the British press and the pamphlet wars. Most notably, she criticizes Edmund Burke (1729-97) the
author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and his associates in France for using their power of writing for the downfall of the monarchy and the execution of the King: "[T]heir writings contributed at once to render the court discontented with the revolution, and the nation suspicious of the court. Of consequence, they had a great share in producing the calamities of the monarch and his unfortunate family." Despite this example of harmful influence of writing, it is by the very power of writing disseminated by the new printing culture that Williams believes the principles of the Revolution to be kept eternal. She declares this absolute faith with her favourite metaphor of natural land:

... since the invention of printing has diffused science over Europe and accumulated the means of extending and preserving truth,PRINCIPLES can no more be lost. Like vigorous seeds committed to the bosom of the fertile earth, accidental circumstances may prevent their vegetation for a time, but they will remain alive, and ready to spring up at the first favourable moment. (270).

Because of her English citizenship and her pro-Girondin, anti-Jacobin stance in the French Revolution, Williams, her mother and sister Cecilia were imprisoned from 9 October to late November in 1793, first at the Luxembourg prison and later at the English convent on rue de Charenton. They were released by the intervention of Stone and Marie-Martin-Athnase Coquerel, who was to marry Cecilia in 1794. Williams was obliged to leave Paris in April 1794 because of Robespierre’s banishment decree for all foreigners. She fled to Switzerland with Stone, later joined by Stone’s friend Benjamin Vaughan.

As we have seen, Williams started from a marginalized position as a woman from a middle-class family of Dissenters. She, however, constantly struggled to cross the cultural and social borders through an active engagement in her literary intellectual and political network, experimenting with different kinds of writing techniques.

**Notes**

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1 The biographical information in this essay is heavily indebted to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Hereafter referred to *Oxford DNB*), *Dictionary of National Biography* (Hereafter referred to *DNB*), Orlando, Kelly, Kennedy (Helen) and Vincent. The year of Williams’s birth differs according to the sources, for example, 1762 (*DNB*), 1761 (Kelly) 317). Here I take the latest data of *Oxford DNB* written by Kennedy, who provided Vincent with the birthdate of Williams (17 June 1759) found by Andrew Ashfield (Vincent 14).

France Since the Restoration in 1815 (London: Baldwin, 1819) 194. Qtd. in Kennedy, Helen 23.

For Kippis, see Ruston, Kelly, and Kennedy, Helen.

For Moore, see Fulton, Kelly, and Kennedy, Helen.

Line 68 of William Hayward Roberts, "To G. A. S. Esq. On his Leaving Eton School": "Even in thy heart while memory holds her seat” in Poems (1774) (Fraistat and Lanser 69n1).


Williams, Letters. Women’s Travel Writing: 1750-1850, vol. 2, ed. Franklin 4. The text of vol. 3 of Letters contained in Franklin (vol. 2, letters 1-6) was used for this research, and the page number of this text is hereafter shown in the parenthesis after the quotation. There are many versions of Letters, sometimes with different titles.

Williams, Letters. Women’s Travel Writing: 1750-1850, vol. 2, ed. Franklin 236. The text of vol. 4 of Letters contained in Franklin (vol. 2, letters 8-12) was used for this research, and the page number of this text is hereafter shown in the parenthesis after the quotation.

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Abstract

Helen Maria Williams’s Background and Development as a Writer in Relation to A Tour in Switzerland

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This essay examines Helen Maria Williams’s religious and cultural background, social position, and development as a writer up until she wrote her travel account, A Tour in Switzerland; or, A View of the Present State of the Governments and Manners of those Cantons, with Comparative Sketches of the Present State of Paris (1798). The examination is significant in order to fully evaluate this work because of its time of publication.

Williams was marginalized from the outset as a woman from a middle-class family of Dissenters living in the geographical and cultural borders of Britain. She, however, established herself as a writer in London, firstly with her poems, and then with her only novel, albeit through the help of her mentors, Andrew Kippis and John Moore. The influence of the latter is especially important concerning her writing Tour. In France as well as Britain, she constantly struggled to cross the cultural and social borders, expanding her perspectives through an active engagement in her literary intellectual and political network, and experimenting with different kinds of writing techniques.