

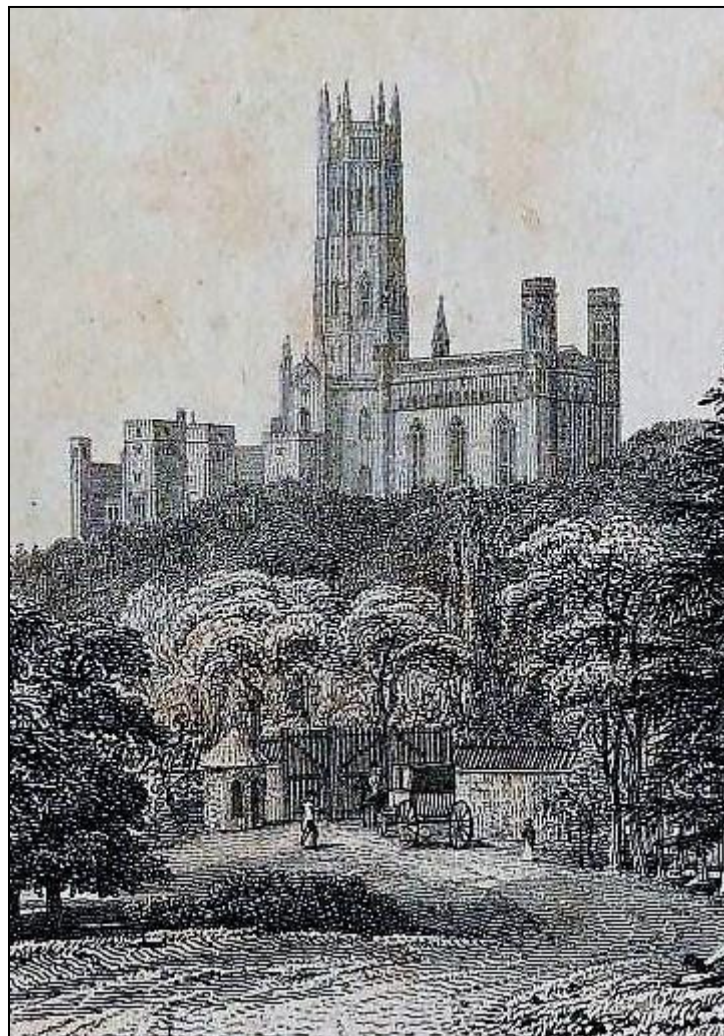


# THE BECKFORD NEWSLETTER

NO. 62 APRIL 2025



## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING SATURDAY 21 JUNE



AT OLD FONTHILL ABBEY  
BOOKING FORM ENCLOSED

## BECKFORD LECTURE 2024

Forty-two members and guests attended the annual Beckford Lecture at the Travellers Club on 26 November when our Vice-President Dr Daniele Niedda lectured on 'William Beckford's use of the Ancients in *Dreams Waking Thoughts and Incidents*'.

The lecture will be printed in this year's *Beckford Journal*.



Stephen Clarke  
and Prof Ronald de Leeuw

Before dinner, Professor Ronald de Leeuw presented, to the Beckford Tower Trust, Beckford's annotated copy, of Walter Harte, *The History of the Life of Gustavus Adolphus*, London, 1759. This was a *pars prototo* of Dr Gerlof Jansen's bequest of his Beckford collection. Stephen Clarke, the Beckford Society's Chairman, received the book on behalf of the Trust, expressing its gratitude for such a generous donation.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2025

This year's AGM will be held at Old Fonthill Abbey, by kind invitation of Mrs and Mrs Stephen Morant.

The Society last visited Fonthill in 2017, so this year's meeting will give members an opportunity to see the recent changes and improvements to the landscape.

After lunch there will be the opportunity to explore the Abbey's grounds.

An agenda for the AGM and booking form are enclosed.

## FONTHILL OPEN DAYS 2025

### OLD FONTHILL ABBEY

The grounds of Old Fonthill Abbey will be open to the public on Sundays 4 and 18 May from 10.30 - 4.30, giving visitors the opportunity to enjoy bluebell woods and rhododendrons, lakeside walks and views of the Abbey. There will be a barbecue and homemade refreshments.

The openings are in aid of Cure Parkinson's and local charities. Entry donation, suggest £10 per adult. Polite dogs welcome. Unfortunately, in the event of high winds the grounds will close.

Old Fonthill Abbey, Fonthill  
Gifford, SP3 6SP, on the Hindon-  
Newtown lane.

## FONTHILL HOUSE

The gardens of Fonthill House will be open on Sunday 27 April (in aid of Salisbury Hospice) and 8 June (in aid of Lady Garden Foundation).

There are woodland walks and formal gardens, which have been redeveloped under the direction of Tania Compton and Marie-Louise Agius. There is a William Pye fountain and other sculptures.

See the Fonthill Estate website  
<https://fonthill.co.uk> for more information.

Fonthill House, Tisbury SP3 5SA.

## BECKFORD PICTURES IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY

London's National Gallery bought directly from William Beckford, notably in 1839, with the purchase of Raphael, *St Catherine of Alexandria* (NG168) and in 1844, with the acquisition of Bellini, *The Dodge Leonardo Loredan* (189)

In 1882, Velàzquez, *Philip IV of Spain in Brown and Silver* (NG 1129) was bought by the Gallery at the Hamilton Sale.

Twenty-nine paintings once owned by Beckford are shown on the

Gallery's Beckford website pages.  
[nationalgallery.org.uk/people/william-thomas-beckford](http://nationalgallery.org.uk/people/william-thomas-beckford).

## NO 1 GREEK STREET

The future of No 1 Greek Street seems uncertain following the collapse of the charity which owns the building.

William Beckford's uncle Richard purchased the house at the corner of London's Greek Street and Soho Square in 1754, on his retirement from the West Indies.

From 1862 the building was used as a hostel for homeless women run by the the House of St Barnabas-in-Soho charity. In 2013, a not-for-profit members club opened in the building, which also hosted an employment academy training over 300 homeless people with skills in hospitality to help rebuild their lives.

The house contains fine carving and plaster work – some of the finest Rococo- style work of the 1750s surviving in London – which was probably created for Richard Beckford.

Following initial marketing by estate agents Allsop, the charity now wishes to explore further the continued use of the building for charitable purposes.

Some members will remember the Beckford Lecture and AGM being held in the house in 1997 and 1998.

## IN THE AUCTION ROOM

Books once in William Beckford's collection were included as part of Bibliotheca Brooker, the T. Kimbell Booker library of Renaissance books and bindings, being sold by Sotheby's in a series of sales from 2023 to 2025.

In London on 9 July 2024, in a sale devoted to art, architecture and illustrated books, four Beckford volumes were offered for sale.

Vico, *Augustarum imagines*, Paris, c. 1620, in an Eighteenth-century German red morocco binding, had once belonged to Baron von Hohendorf, much of whose collection is now in Vienna. Sold at the Beckford sale in 1883, it was later in the Clements collection. It sold for (lot 637) £3,810.

An emblem book, Nicolaus Taurellus, *Emblemata physico-ethica*, Nuremberg, 1595, used as an album amicorum, sold for (lot 625) £6,350. A second emblem book, Claude Paradin, *Les devises heroiques*, Antwerp, 1561, made (lot 578) £5,334,

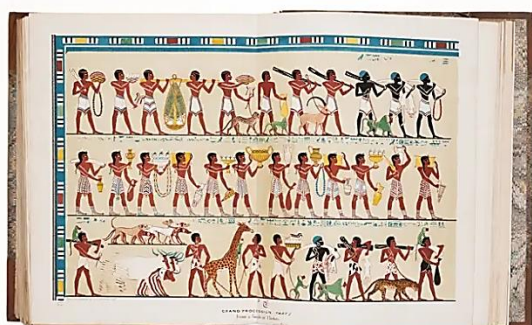
The final work was Beckford's copy of Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo's book, often referred to as the 'Bible of Mannerism, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura*, Milan, 1585. Sold at

the 1882 Beckford sale, it had later belonged to the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield. With an estimate of £1,500 – 2,000 (lot 558); it was unsold.

In New York on 18 October 2024, in a sale of Aldine editions, appeared Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, Venice, 1515. Bound in contemporary Roman green morocco by the Cardinals' Shop which produced bindings for Cardinals Salviati, Ridolfi and also Clement VIII, it was the final production of the printer Aldo. It sold (lot 874) for \$19,050.

In London, on 10 December, in the fifth part of the Brookeriana sale, Sotheby's offered a fine Bible in Latin, Basel, 1526, with illuminated capital letters. In a Parisian dark brown morocco binding, with lettering in lapidary capitals, possibly by the binder Étienne Roffet, it had sold for £18. 10s at the 1882 Beckford sale, and now made (lot 1025) £27,940.

The sale at Forum Auctions, London, on 11 December, included 11 lots of Beckfordiana, including six of books from Beckford's library. Waldron and Harding, *The Biographical Mirrour*, 1795 - 98 (vols.1 & 2 [of 3]) extra illustrated with 22 proof states (lot 20) made £300.



Hoskins, *Travels in Ethiopia*, 1835

Other books demonstrated Beckford's penchant for travel literature. *Antigüedades Arabes de España* [Granada and Cordoba], [? Madrid], [1780] (lot 21) sold for £800. James Grey, Jackson, *An Account of the Empire of Marocco*, 1811 (lot 22) made £2,000. Beckford's large paper copy of Marco Polo, *The Travels*, 1818, made (lot 23) £3,200. G. A. Hoskins, *Travels in Ethiopia*, 1835, with chromolithograph plates printed by Hullmandel, possibly the earliest examples to be published, made (lot 25) £5,500. The book is recorded as being at Beckford's Tower in the 1844 inventory.

Finally, a large paper copy of Thomas Stothard's illustrations for Cadell and Davies' 1820 edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, in a binding possibly by Charles Lewis (lot 24) made £800.

Another Beckford item appeared at Forum Auctions' sale on 27 Feb 2025, when *The Trial of Renwick Williams* (Commonly called *The*

*Monster*) together with a collection of trials was sold (lot 199) £460. This was part of the enormous collection of Ricky Jay (1946 - 2018) the American magician, actor and writer.

## BARRY HUMPHRIES' LIBRARY

Barry Humphries the comedian, actor and Beckford Society member was a passionate book collector, recognised by his membership of that most exclusive group of bibliophiles the Roxburghe Club. Two recent London sales revealed the range and quality of his collection.

Christie's sale 'Barry Humphries: The Personal Collection', in London on 7 February, was mainly of pictures, costumes and his famous sunglasses, but there were also books and manuscripts including works by Aubrey Beardsley and Ronald Firbank. There was also a significant part of his Oscar Wilde collection.

The second sale was held in London by Forum Auctions, on 26 March. In the introduction to the catalogue his son Rupert writes: 'He loved having his library and all the books in it, but he also loved collecting: the active pursuit of missing editions and better



association copies ... Every jacket he had tailored had a “poacher’s” pocket sewn into the lining so he could make off quickly with a new acquisition’.



Barry Humphries in his library  
Cover of Forum Auctions Catalogue

The sale reveals his interest in writers of the Decadent movement and by masters of the supernatural and weird, including Aleister Crowley, M. P. Shiel and Sheridan Le Fanu. He also collected association copies, having Horatia Nelson’s copy of Monk Lewis’ *Romantic Tales*, and Siegfried Sassoon’s Lord Alfred Douglas’ *Poems*.

A group of works by Peter Thicknesse, friend of Gainsborough and some-time Bath resident, started the sale. Then followed 18 lots of Beckfordiana: works by Beckford,

copies of books from his library, and catalogues of the Hamilton/Beckford sales.

Appropriately these started with Beckford’s first book, *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters*, 1780 (lot 2) which made £900. Then two copies of the first edition of *Vathek*, 1786. The first (lot 3) had belonged to Lady Caroline Lamb, with her signature and notes. This sold for £8,000. The second (lot 4) in a fine binding in the style of Roger Payne, made £2,200. Next, an early French (1787) edition of the novel (lot 5), sold for £600, followed by Beckford’s own copy of the 4th edition, 1823 (lot 6) with five pencil notes in his hand, realised £6,500.

Copies of Beckford’s rare satirical novels *Modern Novel Writing*, 1796 (lot 7), sold for £4,200, and *Azemias*, 1797 (lot 8), made £7,000. Then, *The Story of Al Raoui*, 1793, (lot 9) a work sometimes attributed to Samuel Henley rather than Beckford, together with a copy of Henry Lansdown, *Recollections of the Late William Beckford*, 1893; sold for £800.

Bound in to a copy of *Italy; with Sketches of Spain and Portugal*, 1835, (lot 10) was an autograph letter from Beckford to Messrs Molteni and Graves, 30 July 1834, regarding an art purchase. Also in

the lot was *Recollections of an Excursion to the Monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha*, 1835. This sold for £1,300.

Then five books from Beckford's library, all with Beckford's pencil notes. The first, David Irving, *Memory of the Life and Writings of George Buchanan*, 1807, with 30 notes by Beckford (lot 11), sold for £8,000. Sir David Dalrymple (Lord Hailes), *An Inquiry into the Secondary Causes which Gibbon has Assigned to the Rapid Growth of Christianity*, 1808, (lot 12) with ten notes on the front endpaper, including: 'Rare doings at Corinth – public prayers for the increase of the number of harlots' Why really Sir David you are not a whit behindhand with Gibbon himself in dissemination of impurities – see page 256'. This made £2,000.

Twenty-two notes in Sir Archibald Alison and others, *Travels in France during the Years 1814-15*, 1815, including: 'triumphal entry by Chariguy the great worm Doctor with all his bottles into Aix' (lot 13); made £2,000. Another travel book, William Sheppard, *Letters descriptive of a Tour through some parts of France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany, in 1816*, 1817, with four pages of extensive notes by Beckford (lot 14), sold for £5,500,

The final item from Beckford's library, was Samuel Rogers, *Human Life*, (lot 15) extra illustrated with a watercolour portrait of Rogers and two pages of pencil notes by Beckford, sold for £8,000.

Next, copies of John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823; Phillips' Fonthill sale catalogue, 1823, and catalogues of the Hamilton Palace Sale and Beckford Library, 1882-4. Finally, another copy of Henry Lansdown, *Recollections of the late William Beckford*, 1893 (lot 19) which sold for £750.

## A GIBBON/BECKFORD BOOK

Bookseller Bernard Quaritch, in a recent catalogue, 'The Classical Tradition in the British Isles' (Pars altera, M to Z), offered Edward Gibbon's copy of Pindar, *Olimpia, Nemera, Pythia, Isthmia*, Oxford, 1698, with the historian's marginal annotations and a leaf of notes laid in loose. The book later belonged to Beckford who presented it, as part of Gibbon's library, to his physician Dr Frederick Schöll.

## ROBERT BECKFORD BOUNCES INTO BATH

Nearly 100 people packed into the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution (BRLSI) on 12th March to be stimulated by a lively discussion between the ebullient Robert Beckford, Professor of Climate and Social Justice at the University of Winchester, and Shawn Sobers, Professor of Cultural Interdisciplinary Practice at the University of the West of England, a Bathonian working in various media exploring narratives of belonging. Professor Beckford also has associate roles as a Professor of Black Theology at The Queen's Foundation, and is a Professor of Theology at VU University, Amsterdam.

Professor Beckford is a descendent of slaves who worked on Alderman Beckford's sugar plantations in Jamaica, and like many, was given the name of the plantation owner on arrival after gruelling and degrading voyages from West Africa. Although he said that he has always felt positive about his name, and it is a 'strong' name in Jamaica, he has reportedly been known to strike though his name in a gesture of the rejection.

The wake-up call to explore his heritage came when he watched Alex Haley's *Roots*, an American television series which tells the story of an African man who was sold into slavery in Africa, then transported to North America. As part of his own roots research he has visited several places in Jamaica connected with the Beckford name, with varying degrees of discomfort: the cemetery of Spanish Town Cathedral, where there are row upon row of Beckford graves made him less comfortable about the family: should he change his name?

He went on to say that there is very little to see of the old plantations, just ruins and rubble. The local people did not think it necessary to maintain any cultural memory. As for Britain, there was a lot of violence propping up genteel British society and in the stately homes the slave trade is not obviously presented.

Later he visited the Guildhall in London where he recorded a piece for the 2005 Channel 4 documentary *Empire Pays Back* in front of the statue of Alderman Beckford. He felt very uncomfortable being so close to an image of the brutal plantation owner who killed hundreds of his slaves including a man that he had burned alive. He said that the statue should be removed like the statue of slave owner Edward Colston was removed from its prominent public site in Bristol.

Going to Beckford's Tower in Bath was a less 'powerful' experience because the William who had it built was a more complex figure. When he arrived there, he was welcomed by a volunteer who asked about his purpose for visiting. 'I



own it' he replied half-jokingly. He felt he had a stake in it, if not financially but emotionally. And he felt that the Tower has presented atonement for the past and projecting into the future well. In contrast, in Bristol Cathedral he felt shaky and oppressed because there are 200 monuments to people who had connections to the 'triangular trade'.

Professor Beckford wants to give voice to the narratives and open up the archives so that his children and grandchildren to have access to them. Reparatory justice is needed, and Christian reparation is about finding the truth. Reparation should be done through dialogue with Beckford communities around the world, and he believes that the Tower can have an impact on Caribbean and West African communities through digital platforms. As for schools, they should integrate black history into the curriculum so that children can talk about it in a complex way.

'The UK is in catch-up mode compared to the USA and should democratise and 'complexise' the conversation, so that the slave trade is 'lamented' nationally. Racial capitalism and brutality lives on in the silence of this history. The history is not 'untold' but 'unheard' in the sense that not everyone reacts to it.'

Communities in Bristol have been talking about the slave trade for 30 years, but in Bath it has only been for the last 10, and it is the institutions like BRLSI and the Bath Preservation Trust have taken the initiative. He says: 'There are huge opportunities for research and for Bath to promote its connection to the slave trade.'

JONATHAN HOLT

STEPHEN TENNANT (1906 – 1987)

'William Beckford was a role model for Stephen, and had been since the early thirties, and he would quote from biographies of Beckford in his ever-more extensive marginalia. Beckford had lived nearby, at Fonthill, where he built his great Gothic folly. Beckford was Stephen's eighteen-century equivalent; James Lees-Milne describes his prose as antedating modern writers like Firbank and Waugh, and like Stephen, had spent much of his time travelling and recording his experiences in detailed journals ... Fonthill too seems to have predated Wilsford [Tennant's Wiltshire Manor] , with its owner, "a mystery man, in a décor of echoing corridors, Gothic halls and galleries, opulent hangings, contrived lighting effects, dizzy heights, pictures, music, wonderful books." '

From Philip Hoare, *Serious Pleasures. The Life of Stephen Tennant*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990, p. 364

CARLO KNIGHT (1926 – 2024)

Carlo Knight essayist, writer and scholar of Neapolitan and Caprese history died aged 95 in June last year. *Il Mattino* described him as a ‘Renaissance man with a thousand interests and a multifaceted genius impossible to pigeon-hole’.

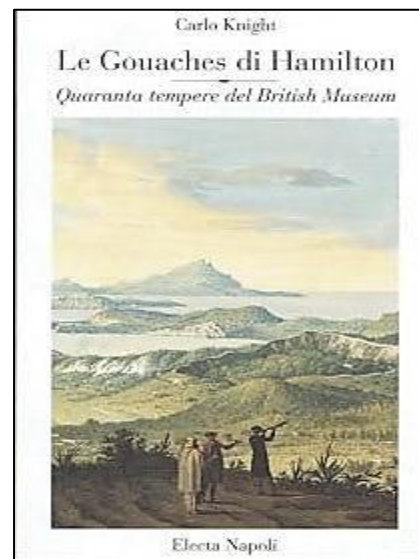
He was born in Naples and after three years at medical school changed course to join the Italian Navy. Later he was a director of various industrial companies. Throughout his life he was fascinated by history and a keen art collector. On retirement in 1976, he devoted himself to his studies.

He was to write twelve books, fifty essays, and published some thousand articles in the cultural pages of Italian newspapers. In 1980, with Andrea Jorio he identified the site of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum,

He was particularly interested in Sir William Hamilton about whom he wrote essays and published *Hamilton a Napoli*. Naples: Electra 1990, the first Italian biography of the British Envoy to the Court of the Two Sicilies. He also contributed an essay ‘William Hamilton and the “art of going through life”’ to the British Museum’s catalogue of the

*Vases and Volcanoes* exhibition of Hamilton and his collections (1996).

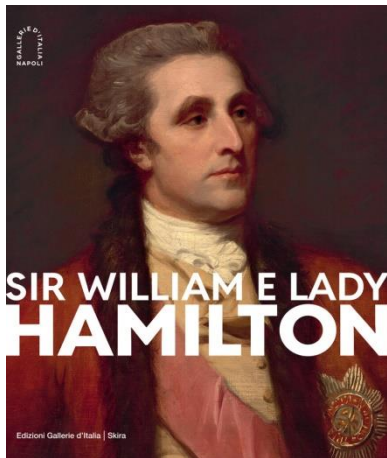
Earlier he had published a book on the English Garden at Caserta (1986), the garden created as a result of Hamilton’s suggestion to Queen Maria Carolina. In 1994, he wrote *Le Gouaches di Hamilton*, describing the illustrations by Pietro Fabris for Hamilton’s *Campi Phlegraei*.



Among his latter works were editions of the correspondence between Charles III and the Prince of San Nicandro, tutor to the young Ferdinand IV, and of Charles III’s letters to his son.

Knight divided his time between Posillipo and Capri. The death of his wife in November 2023 was a severe blow.

## SIR WILLIAM RETURNS TO NAPLES



Sir William Hamilton recently returned to Naples when the Intesa Sanpaolo bank

presented, at Gallerie d'Italia, an exhibition *Sir William and Lady Hamilton*, which opened last October and ran until 2 March.

The exhibition, curated by Francesco Leone and Fernando Mezzocca, illustrated Hamilton's great interest in volcanography, antiquities, landscape painting, and music, as well as the role he, and Emma, played in Neapolitan society.

Among the exhibits were Reynolds's portrait of Hamilton (National Portrait Gallery), and Romney's portraits of Hamilton (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and *Emma as Circe* (Waddesdon). Landscape paintings included two views by Cozens painted for Beckford and Hackert's *View of the English Garden at Caserta* (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid).

Francesco Leone and Ferdinando Mazzocca (eds), *Sir William e Lady Hamilton*. Edizioni Gallerie d'Italia/Skira, 2024. ISBN 978-88-572-5315-2. €39.

### ON THE GRAND TOUR

'The road across the Apennines from Bologna to Florence, which Beckford and Gibbon found so dreary and melancholy, was generally considered one of Italy's better ones, although it was certainly advisable not to make the journey in severe weather when carriages had to be abandoned for mules, or to spend the night *en route* in such a grim village as the one from which two hags stalked forth with lanterns and fearful grins to invite Beckford to a dish of mustard and crows' gizzards, a dish that he was half afraid to tasting, lest it should transform him into 'some bird of darkness, condemned to mope eternally on the black rafters of the cottage.'

Christopher Hibbert, *The Grand Tour*, London: Methuen, 1987, p.47.

[Hibbert's Beckford quotation comes from Letter XIII of *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, 1783].

JONATHAN HOLT

WILLIAM BECKFORD TO SIR WILLIAM HAMILTON

*Dated (in Sir W. Hamilton's writing) Geneva, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1782.*

... 'I long for summer impatiently, not because it is green-bough time, and that I may run wild about my shrubberies, but because it will bring you to England.

In the course of my peregrinations I pick'd up a rare old Japan porringer, which came out of the Medici lumber-room, but hunted about for some bronze Deilves in vain. Alas! I must return to England without penates. 'Tis your fault; but I know what you expect in paradise, where you will certainly go, being a pure soul, to speak in the side-hole, diversate style. As you sweep along the milky way to the melodious jingling of St. Peter's keys, lo & behold a grand perspective of the British Museum, all glory & transparence, like the last scene of a pantomime. Doors wide open, *Pulveria via* set in the entry, vases behind, and a whole world of bonetty gentlewomen & their spouses sauntering about & observing what a wonderful *learned* gemman was Sir Wm H., who knew what was underground just as well as you, Mr. Alderman Portsoken, knows turtle, tho' it lie under a silver river. I, humble being, who mean to lead a harmless, innocent life, & hope to be transported to any place of bliss (save Ab-----m's bosom), shall sneak off to a little pavilion full of antiques on the verge of a hill; there under shelter of a copse, let a stream be just perceived, & on its banks huge piles of books and maccaroni. That divine food has been absolutely forbidden to enter my lean chops since I landed at Leghorn, alack-a-day! I have fared like a hermit of Mount Libanus, or like poor Father Anthony Piganei [*possibly Antonio Piaggio, a priest employed by Hamilton to record the activities of Vesuvius*] very often, I dare engage; my affectionate compliments to him. As for Angelica [*Kauffman*] she is my idol; so say everything that can be said in my name, & tell her how I long to see Telemachus's papa, and all the noble family.

I should scribble to you for ever if old [*Jean*] Huber [*whom Beckford first met in 1777*] was not telling stories, the best imaginable, and young Huber making sketches of Vathek's adventures, the boldest you ever beheld. Adieu, then; thank your friends, the genii of the arts, for your deliverance; &, to conclude with grandeur, those genii excepted who shadow you with their wings, assure yourself there is no being so much attached to you as your,' &c'.

*The Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents formed by Alfred Morrison. (Second Series). Vol 1. Printed for private circulation, 1893, 186 -187.*



George Saintsbury  
Photograph by Elliot and Fry  
National Portrait Gallery

## GEORGE SAINTSBURY AND *VATHEK*

George Saintsbury (1845–1933) was well known as a teacher and writer, and it is not surprising to learn that he admired *Vathek*, to the extent of praising it at length in at least four of his studies of English literature. After obtaining a degree at Oxford in 1868 he married Emily Fenn King who died in 1924. They had two sons, Louis and Christopher.

After graduating he taught at several schools before contributing essays and literary criticism for the *Saturday Review*. In 1895 he was appointed regius professor of rhetoric and English literature at Edinburgh University and remained in that position until 1915 when he retired to live in Bath

in the former servants' annex to 1 Royal Crescent. Here he continued to write until his death in 1933, aged 87. In 2014 Bath Preservation Trust, having restored the annex and united it with the main house, celebrated his work with an exhibition on his life.

In 1901 Saintsbury edited and introduced an English translation of Balzac's novel series *La Comédie humaine*, published in 1895–1898 by J. M. Dent, and reissued by a little-known book club, the Society of English Bibliophiles. They flourished between 1890 and 1910, and Saintsbury also provided introductions to some of their other issues. His prolific literary output included a much admired late work on wine, *Notes on a Cellar-Book* which appeared from Macmillan in 1920. He was buried in Southampton, the town of his birth.

His extensive papers are in Edinburgh University Library Heritage Collections, reference GB 237 Coll-79.

*A History of Nineteenth Century Literature (1780–1895)*. London: Macmillan, 1896, pp. 39–41

The Novel school of the period (to which Holcroft introduces us) is full and decidedly interesting, though it contains at the best one masterpiece, *Vathek*, and a large number of more or less meritorious attempts in false styles...

William Beckford is one of the problems of English literature. He was one of the richest men in England, and his long life—1760 to 1844—was occupied for the most part not merely with the collection, but with the reading of books. That he could write as well as read he showed as a mere boy by his satirical *Memoirs*



of *Painters*, and by the great-in-little novel of *Vathek* (1783), respecting the composition of which in French or English divers fables are told. Then he published nothing for forty years, till in 1834 and 1835 he issued his *Travels in Italy, Spain, and Portugal*, recollections of his earliest youth. These travels have extraordinary merits of their kind; but *Vathek* is a kind almost to itself. The history of the Caliph, in so far as it is a satire on unlimited power, is an eighteenth century commonplace; while many traits in it are obviously imitated from Voltaire. But the figure of Nouronihar, which Byron perhaps would have equalled if he could, stands alone in literature as a fantastic projection of the potentiality of evil magnificence in feminine character; and the closing scenes in the domain of Eblis have the grandeur of Blake combined with that finish which Blake's temperament, joined to his ignorance of literature and his lack of scholarship, made it impossible for him to give. The book is quite unique. It could hardly, in some of its weaker parts especially, have been written at any other time; and yet its greater characteristics have nothing to do with that time. In the florid kind of supernatural story it has no equal. Only Dante, Beckford, and Scott in *Wandering Willie's Tale* have given us Hells that are worthy of the idea of Hell.

Except that both were very much of their time, it would be impossible to imagine a more complete contrast than that which exists between Beckford and [Robert] Bage [1730 – 1801, businessman and novelist]. The former was, as has been said, one of the richest men in England, the creator of two “Paradises” at Fonthill and Cintra, the absolute arbiter of his time and his pleasures, a Member of Parliament while he chose to be so, a student, fierce and recluse, the husband of a daughter of the Gordons, and the father of a mother of the Hamiltons, the collector, disperser, bequeather of libraries almost unequalled in magnificence and choice. The “tale of terror” had been started by Horace Walpole in the *Castle of Otranto*, and had, as we have seen, received a new and brilliant illustration in the hands of Beckford. But the genius of the author of *Vathek* could not be followed; the talent of the author of the *Castle of Otranto* was more easily imitated.

*The English Novel*, London: Dent, 1913, pp. 158–159

*Vathek* (1786) stands alone—almost independent even of its sponsors—it would be awkward to say godfathers—Hamilton and Voltaire; apart likewise from such work as it, no doubt, in turn partly suggested to Peacock and to Disraeli. There is, perhaps, no one towards whom it is so tempting to play the idle game of retrospective Providence as towards the describer of Batalha and Alcobaça, the creator of Nouronihar and the Hall of Eblis. Fonthill has had too many vicissitudes since Beckford, and Cintra is a far cry; but though his associations with Bath are later, it is still possible, in that oddly enchanted city, to get something of the mixed atmosphere—eighteenth century, nineteenth, and of

centuries older and younger than either—which, *tamisée* in a mysterious fashion, surrounds this extraordinary little masterpiece. Take Beckford's millions away; make him coin his wits to supply the want of them; and what would have been the result? Perhaps more *Vatheks*; perhaps things even better than *Vathek*;<sup>1</sup> perhaps nothing at all. On the whole, it is always wiser not to play Providence, in fact or fancy. All that need be said is that Anthony Hamilton and Voltaire are certainly not by themselves—good as they are, and admirable as the first is—enough to account for *Vathek*. Romance has passed there as well as persiflage and something like *coïonnerie*; it is Romance that has given us the baleful beauty of that Queen of Evil, Nouronihar, and the vision of the burning hearts that make their own wandering but eternal Hell. The tendency of the novel had been on the whole, even in its best examples, to prose in feeling as well as in form. It was Beckford who availed himself of the poetry which is almost inseparable from Romance. But it was Horace Walpole who had opened the door to Romance herself. Still, *Vatheks* are not to be had to order: and as Romance was wanted, to order and in bulk, during the late years of the eighteenth century, some other kind had to be supplied. The chief accredited purveyors of it have been already named and must now be dealt with, to be followed by the list of secondary, never quite accomplished, exponents now of novel, now of romance, now of the two mixed, who filled the closing years of the eighteenth century.

[Footnote <sup>1</sup> Since the text was written—indeed very recently—the long-missing “Episodes” of *Vathek* itself have been at length supplied by the welcome diligence of Mr. Lewis Melville. They are not “better than *Vathek*,” but they are good.]

Saintsbury also discusses *Vathek* in *A Short History Of English Literature*, London: Macmillan, 1898, p.610 and *The Peace of the Augustans*, London: Bell, 1916, pp. 171-172.

JON MILLINGTON

#### A BORROWED VATHEK

‘Although she could write no longer Eleanor’s voice sounded strongly in letters to Mrs Parker ... There was the perennial concern about the return of their borrowed books which she could now no longer read. What has become of their *Vathek* that they had leant Mrs Parker? ‘Lady Eleanor Vows par Diana that the second Volume of *Sagan Histoire de Napoleon* – left here as a Substitute for the Caliph Shall not be restored till you come to replace the Potentate on his too long Usurped throne’.

From Elizabeth Mavor, *The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romanic Friendship*. London: Michael Joseph, 1971, 184 – 185. Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler lived together in their cottage at Llangollen from 1780 for nearly half a century. Their many visitors and admirers included Royalty, soldiers, inventors, philanthropists and men of letters.

## A SÈVRES PLATE



A Sèvres porcelain 'Parasol Chinois' plate, 1792, was sold for (lot 37) £5,510 at Roseberys, London on 11 March. It was probably part of the service of 72 plates acquired by William Beckford in March 1792.

John Whitehead discusses this service in his article 'Some French Purchases by William Beckford, *The Beckford Journal*, Vol. 2 (1996), 39 – 44.

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