

HARRIET (CROSLEY) VENTUM, (1760s - ??), AUTHOR

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<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/corvey/corinne/essay%20vesey.html>

Harriet Ventum (fl. 1800–1814): Biographical Notes

Born Harriet Crossley sometime in the 1760s, Harriet Ventum would seem to have spent most of her life within a two-mile radius in London. Nothing is known of her early years, but we can glean some information from the work she later produced: she was educated—she worked for part of her life as a teacher in a school—she may perhaps have travelled to Italy, Wales, and Portugal among other places, and she may have been a part of or known about members of the gentry.

On 12 October 1786, Harriet married a Thomas Ventum at St Benet Gracechurch, London. [27] According to *The Times* for 10 December 1790, the couple took up residence in a house at 20 Greville Street, Holborn. There is a record of a Thomas Ventum given as a ‘court officer’ and ‘gentleman pensioner’, a post he held between 1788 and 1789. [28] (*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘gentleman-pensioners’ as ‘royal bodyguards, one of 40 gentlemen who act as guards or attendants to the sovereign on state occasions’.)

On 11 November 1790, Harriet and Thomas christened their daughter, Elizabeth Frances, at St Andrew’s Church Holborn. However, Thomas’s duties to the King seem to have ended abruptly—the record simply states, ‘vac by 1790’. [29] Then, in December 1790 and January 1791, Thomas’s name appears twice in the archives of *The Times*—under ‘Sales by Auction’—first on Friday, 10 December 1790:

Lot I. A Spacious FREEHOLD HOUSE, situate No. 20, on the South-side of Greville-street, recently repaired, and let, to Mr. Ventum, one year of whose term was unexpired at Lady-day last [25th March 1790], at a very low Annual Rent, clear of Land Tax and all Outgoings, of FIFTY POUNDS per Annum. [30] —and then for Tuesday 18th January 1791:

By HENRY WATKINS,

On the Premises, No. 20 Greville street, Hatton Garden, THIS DAY and TO-MORROW, at Twelve o’Clock

THE Neat and Genuine HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, Plate, Linen, China, Prints, and Books, of Mr. THOMAS VENTUM,

amongst which are neat four-post and sield [sic] bedsteads, with printed cotton and morine furnitures, a number of good beds and bedding, a general assortment of cabinet work, a fine toned harpsichord by Griffin, an eight day clock in mahogany case, good kitchen requisites and other effects.

To be viewed to the Sale, and Catalogues had on the Premises, and of Henry Watkins, no. 63 Holborn Hill. [31] Perhaps these were felicitous rather than ominous events; perhaps the Ventums simply needed a bigger residence for themselves and their new daughter; but it is just as likely that their financial circumstances may have been taking a distinct turn for the worse.

Almost two years later, on 13 December 1792, a second daughter, Mary Harrison, was christened when she was two days old in the Lying-in Hospital at Endell Street. The hasty christening tells us that, in all likelihood, the child did not survive; the place of Harriet’s confinement almost certainly indicates that at this point her circumstances were very much straitened indeed.

For the next eight years the trail goes cold; however, turning to Ventum's work we find a description of extremely straitened circumstances in her first novel, *Selina* (tantalisingly subtitled 'A Novel, Founded on Facts'), published in 1800. Certain passages in this novel speak of first-hand experience of real penury. *Selina* was printed for C. Law, Avemaria-Lane, by Bye and Law, St John's-Square, Clerkenwell. A second novel, *Justina; or, The History of a Young Lady* followed in 1801. For the next thirteen years, however, Ventum turned her attentions and talents almost exclusively from novels for adults to didactic prose intended to improve and inspire children and young people, writing seven books for children, four of which were published by J. Harris, successor to Elizabeth and Francis Newbery, the famous children's publishers who had a press-cum-bookshop in St Paul's Churchyard. (The renowned Newbery Medal, awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children, was named in tribute to the Newbery family of publishers.)

In the Preface written for her fifth book (and her third for children), published in 1802 and entitled *Surveys of Nature: A Sequel to Mrs Trimmer's Introduction*, Ventum writes, Engaged in the business of a school, and constantly in the habit of teaching, I found that although Mrs Trimmer's Introduction was a very serviceable work for the perusal, something on the same plan, but on a rather more enlarged scale, with more particular descriptions, would be highly necessary to assist my purpose of instruction with the elder ones. [32]

Thus we know that she worked as a teacher alongside her work as a writer. Perhaps Ventum was influenced in part by a desire to contribute to the growing canon of work by women, such as Maria Edgeworth and Sarah Trimmer, which sought to meet the social mood of concern for the 'rising generation' during turbulent times at home and abroad.

I could find no extant record of Thomas Ventum's death, nor of a divorce, but on 9 July 1803, Harriet married a William Brown at St Mary's Whitechapel. At this point Harriet would have been somewhere between 35 and 43 years old. There is no easily recoverable record of any children from this marriage, and Harriet continued writing under the name Ventum.

Most of her works seem to have had only one edition, though the Newberys seem to have had enough faith in her abilities to accept—perhaps even commission—roughly one a year. Her work was often favourably reviewed, for the most part, though sometimes she was accused of being derivative. [33]

The publication of *The Holiday Reward, or, Tales to Instruct and Amuse Good Children* during the Christmas and Midsummer Vacations in 1814 is the last public record I have been able to unearth concerning Harriet Crossley Ventum Brown. Her story was not that of a player in the social carnival of bluestockings, theatre parties, and nobility, such as that enjoyed by more lustrous contemporaries, but of a keen observer and self-appointed guardian of morality, who grew from her early Gothic-influenced work to the more serious business of guiding the young. Her life was spent in the workaday world of London as a woman whose relative lack of status would seem, ironically enough, to have granted her more, not fewer, opportunities and freedoms, though perhaps at a price which, at times, may have included real hardship.

We also do not know Harriet's birth or death dates. We do know she was the daughter of Samuel & Elizabeth (Whitelock) Crosley who were married Nov.29,1761 St.Leonard's Shoreditch. Harriet was therefore likely born in the 1760's. Her grandparents were Peter Whitelock & Hannah Harrison who were also married at St.Leonard's Shoreditch Apr.28,1728. Harriet is mentioned in her mother's will of

1789. There was also an additional child, the first born, Harriot Harcourt Ventum bp.Oct.17,1787 Great Stanmore, London. It is not clear if any of Harriet's three daughters survived. This family is detailed on our WHITLOCK21 chart. Harriet Ventum's books were published from 1800 to 1814 and several are still studied today as examples of early books for children.

This find is a direct result of the great research done by Jennifer Hart who is researching the Tate family of Jamaica and has uncovered so much information on this collateral line.

SOURCE: X7161