

# William Thomas Beckford

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**William Thomas Beckford** (1 October 1760 – 2 May 1844) was an English novelist, art critic, travel writer and politician.

He was born in the London home of the family at 22 Soho Square [1]. At the age of ten, William Beckford the younger inherited from his father former Lord Mayor of London William Beckford a large fortune consisting of £1 million in cash, land at Fonthill in Wiltshire, and several sugar plantations in Jamaica, which allowed him to indulge his



William Beckford

interest in art and architecture, as well as writing.

At the age of nineteen he met the Hon William Courtenay, later 3rd Viscount and 9th Earl of Devon, then ten years old, a boy reputed to have been singularly beautiful, and fell in love with him, a relationship thought to have been largely romantic and sentimental. However, Beckford was bisexual, and six years later he was hounded out of polite English society when (probably unfounded) gossip accused him of seducing the youth, driving him into self-imposed exile on the continent. Having previously, at the age of twenty three, married the fourth Earl of Aboyne's daughter, Lady Margaret Gordon on May 5, 1783, Beckford chose exile, in the company of his young wife, whom he grew to love deeply, but who died in childbirth at the age of 24.

Having studied under Sir William Chambers and Alexander Cozens, he travelled in Italy in 1782



William  
Courtenay, as a  
boy.

and promptly wrote a book on the subject: *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents* (1783). Shortly afterwards came his best-known work, the Gothic novel *Vathek* (1786), written originally in French and, as he was accustomed to boast, at a single sitting of three days and two nights. There is reason, however, to believe that this was a flight of imagination. It is an impressive work, full of fantastic and magnificent conceptions, rising occasionally to sublimity. His other principal writings are *Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1780), a satirical work, and *Letters from Italy with Sketches of Spain and Portugal* (1835), full of brilliant descriptions of scenes and manners. In 1793 he visited Portugal, where he lived for a while. Beckford's fame, however, rests nearly as much upon his eccentric extravagances as a builder and collector as upon his literary efforts. In carrying out these he managed to dissipate his fortune (estimated by his contemporaries to give him an income £100,000 a year, but which probably never exceeded half that, making him a very rich man rather the Croesus of legend). The loss of his Jamaican sugar plantation to the Wildmans was particularly costly. Only £80,000 of his capital remained at his death.

The opportunity of purchasing the complete

library of Edward Gibbon gave Beckford the basis of his own library, and James Wyatt built Fonthill Abbey, in which this and the owner's art collection would be housed, and which Nelson

visited with the Hamiltons in 1800. It was completed in 1807. He entered parliament as member for Wells and later for Hindon quitting by accepting the Chiltern Hundreds, but mostly lived in seclusion, spending most of his father's wealth without adding to it, so that the great house he had built became a ruin. In 1822 he sold it to John Farquhar, and moved to Lansdown Hill, Bath where he commissioned architect Henry Goodridge to design a spectacular folly, Lansdown Tower, which is now open to the public.



Fonthill Abbey designed for William Beckford by the architect James Wyatt. Print from John Rutter's *Deliniations of Fonthill and its Abbey* (1823).

He was Member of Parliament for Wells from 1784 to 1790<sup>[1]</sup>, for Hindon from 1790 to [1795]] and again from 1806 to 1820.<sup>[2]</sup>

He left two daughters. The elder was married to Alexander Hamilton, 10th Duke of Hamilton.

He spent his elderly years living in Bath on Lansdown Terrace and built a final masterpiece, Lansdown Tower (now known as Beckford's Tower), where he kept many of his treasures. He had wished to be buried in the grounds of this tower, but was buried at Lyncombe Vale cemetery; this wish was not granted until after his elder daughter managed to get this piece of land consecrated by the church in 1848 and then his body and sarcophagus was moved to the new cemetery<sup>[3]</sup>. After his death at the grand age of 84, on May 2, 1844, at his residence Lansdown Crescent his body was laid in a sarcophagus placed on an artificial mound, as was the custom of Saxon kings, of whom he claimed to be a descendent.

## Other works

- *Biographical Memoirs of Extraordinary Painters* (1824)

- *Recollections of the Monasteries of Alcobaca and Batalha* (1835)

## External links

- Beckfordiana: The William Beckford Website
- His Obituary from the *Bath and Cheltenham Gazette*, p. 3
- Online edition of *Vathek* at eBooks@Adelaide
- Works by William Beckford at Project Gutenberg
- Recollections of the late William Beckford, by Henry Venn Lansdown, edited by Charlotte Lansdown, 1893, from Project Gutenberg
- Images of Lansdown Tower (Beckford's Tower) in Bath

## See also

- List of horror fiction authors

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*Biographical Dictionary of English Literature.*  
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Dutton.

## References

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<http://www.angeltowns.com/town/peerage/hcomm>
3. ^ page 275 William Beckford 1760-1844:An eye  
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