

Coloured by Nostalgia: the Juvenilia of Mary Eliza Haweis (1848-1898)

In the Mary Eliza Haweis archive at the Women's Library in London are papers dating from the 1860s which contain as many of her youthful sketches and writings as are known to have survived. Since this material was first deposited, at a time when scholarly interest in juvenilia was itself in its infancy, it has always eluded the close attention that both its author's subsequent career (as a well-known advice writer on fashion, domestic decoration, and colour schemes) and its own inherent interest would seem to warrant.

Among the drawings and designs produced by Haweis in her childhood years are poems and prose pieces foreshadowing the 'Thought Book' which she later kept. These reveal an eidetic personality, perceiving words as powerful visual impressions, and an equally powerful attraction towards what Felicia Hemans had called "all the lofty feelings which have their root in the soil of home affections." Haweis's methods, as she makes her poetry a palette for the same vividly seen images and colours with which she describes her dreams as perpetually shot through, may mark her as the daughter of a painter (Thomas Musgrave Joy), while in her themes there is certainly some tincture of Tennyson; but, out of both her poetic style and her choices of subject, a remarkable originality still emerges. What these juvenilia demonstrate is firstly that Haweis's personal 'Chromatic Sedition' predates by fully fifteen years the 1873 incident in which she applied green paint to the outside of the home she shared with her husband in London's Welbeck Street, and secondly that the distinctive Victorian "transformation of nostalgia from malady to aesthetic" – as Linda M. Austin has termed it – started to shape her writing long before any of it found its way into print.