

**Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript**

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

**Persistent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/158016>

**How to cite:**

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information.

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk).

## Eliza Fenwick: Early Modern Feminist

**Paul, Lissa. Newark: University of Virginia Press, 295 pp. ix-295 pp., \$39.50, ISBN 9781644530108. Publication Date: 2019.**

The important contribution made by women to the intellectual and political life of the eighteenth century is not only being recognised by scholars, but also widely reinterpreted. Lissa Paul's wide-ranging examination of the life, writings, and character of Eliza Fenwick (1767-1840) is thus a welcome addition to this expanding scholarly corpus. Paul, who is Professor of Education at Brock University, explains that her interests in Eliza arose from her research into children's literature, especially Eliza's 1805 work *Visits to the Juvenile Library*. This biography of Fenwick, as Paul explains, stemmed from her curiosity to know more about the author, who had been at the centre of the radical politics and literary life of London in the 1790s and formed part of Mary Wollstonecraft's circle, but for whom very little about her life is known. Eliza was 'a colonial immigration success story' (3), writes Paul, yet following the publication of Annie Wedd's *The Fate of the Fenwicks* (1927), she gained a reputation as something of a tragic heroine. Wedd, as Paul demonstrates, heavily edited Eliza's letters, which had the effect of presenting Eliza as an incompetent woman who was unable to manage her own affairs. By restoring excerpts from Eliza's writings that had been omitted by Wedd alongside new archival discoveries, Paul is able to provide a strong counter-narrative that foregrounds Eliza's agency over her fate and future. She emerges in this book as both an influential thinker and independent woman.

Paul's title is *Early Modern Feminist*, and the *leitmotiv* throughout is the ability of Fenwick to reinvent herself after family tragedy and a number of personal, literary, and financial setbacks. Paul is emphatic in Fenwick's abilities as an author and regards her as an intellectual figure even though she was unable to pursue a literary career. Paul makes a conscious effort to interpret Fenwick's extant correspondence as representative of her skill and abilities as an author, and thus a means to exercise her literary talents when she could not be paid for her work. Fenwick's struggles are very human and Paul does an excellent job of negotiating Fenwick's various identities as she moves from being a daughter, wife, mother, author, governess, teacher, and grandmother and traversed the British Atlantic. The book is a cultural and intellectual history and is not just about Eliza Fenwick but her family members and the circle of friends and acquaintances with whom she interacts at different phases of her life. Indeed, Eliza's skills at making use of her acquaintances to acquire financial and practical support for her and her family is another central theme.

Unlike a conventional biography, Paul adopts a thematic structure that develops in a broadly chronological way. This approach enables the different stages in Fenwick's writing and teaching careers to be combined with her lifecycle. The biography opens with a perplexing letter recounting the mysterious death of her two grandsons William and Tom in the waters of Lake Ontario in April 1834. The intention of recounting this scenario, as Paul notes, is not to solve the mystery of their deaths, but instead 'to foreground their grandmother as an author worth reading' (9). This is then used as a point from which to map out the life and career of Fenwick and to draw attention to the wider social and cultural life of the places she worked and the people that made up her 'everyday community' (10). The aim of the book is to enable Eliza to have a place 'among the canonical the late Enlightenment literary, philosophical women', whilst also observing the struggles she faced as a single woman during a moment of rapid social and political change (19).

'Daughter of Methodism', which forms the focus of the first chapter illuminates Eliza's family history. She was the daughter of the Methodist preacher, Peter Jaco and his wife Elizabeth, and this chapter provides an overview of life as a Methodist itinerant preacher and the experiences of children brought up in Methodist households. Through an examination of the strict and rigorous upbringing expected of Methodist children, Paul offers a possible explanation as to why Eliza, her husband John Fenwick, and her son-in-law William Rutherford all reject

Methodism in their adult lives. In 1788, Eliza married John Fenwick and with him moved into the radical 1790s intellectual and social circle of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Chapter 2, 'Mother and Author', thus explores Eliza's marriage to John and their involvement in the radical politics of 1790s London. The marriage to Fenwick was an unhappy one: he was a drunkard and debtor and unable to support Eliza and her children. His reckless behaviour pushed her to separate from him in the early 1800s, thus marking a new phase in her life as a struggling writer and single mother.

Eliza's literary career provides the focus of Chapter 3, which explores Eliza's writings for children whilst also navigating a very complicated period in her life, as she tried to make a living as an impoverished single woman. This chapter offers a detailed history of Eliza's associates and acquaintances, especially William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Mary Robinson. Her ability to develop influential personal connections also underpins Chapter 4, 'Governess and Networker'. In this, Paul outlines Eliza's experiences as governess in London and Ireland, identifying this as a pivotal time in her career and representative of a time in her life when she was happy despite tensions she experienced with her employers and her family.

Eliza's experiences as a governess of a preparatory school for elite girls in Barbados provides the context for Chapter 5 'Colonist and slaveholder'. This is the strongest chapter in the volume because it explores the wider context of West Indian slavery and the tensions of life for a radical abolitionist living in a slave-dependent society. It therefore embraces the more problematic aspects of Eliza's character and how she tried to negotiate making a new life for herself in a society where slavery was widespread. Her experiences of renting slaves and slave holding seemed to counter her earlier involvement in the abolitionist movement in London in the 1790s, as well as her publication *The Juvenile Library* (1805), which saw a black slave woman called Nora liberated through literacy. Paul deals with this paradox in a nuanced and persuasive manner, arguing that it was easier for women writers like Eliza Fenwick and Mary Wollstonecraft to oppose slavery when they were physically and intellectually distant from its realities (146).

Chapter 6 takes Eliza's narrative to New Haven, where she opened a Seminary for Young Ladies in 1822. Emphasis is placed on the series of personal tragedies Eliza experiences at this time, which include the death of her beloved son Orlando and the unhappy marriage between her daughter, Eliza Ann and William Rutherford, who abandoned her and her four children in Barbados in 1818. The chapter concludes by recounting the death of Eliza Ann, which left Eliza as the primary carer of her four grandchildren. Similar themes are pursued in the closing chapter 'North American Grandmother', which addresses Eliza's decision to emigrate to Canada and the teaching and pedagogy that lay at the heart of her new Seminary for Young Ladies in Niagara. Much of the chapter explores the challenges Eliza faced from her grandsons Tom and Will, who were prone to fits and excessive drinking and died the boating accident that forms the opening vignette to this book.

There are a number of strengths to this well-researched and coherently argued biography, which provides non-specialist readers with an accessible and comprehensive overview of Fenwick's life alongside the wider cultural, intellectual, and political contexts informing her experiences, ideas, and writings. Eliza's story has been pieced together through careful archival research, and there is a strong awareness that this is not just a story about a single individual, but one of complex interpersonal connections and hierarchies of dependency.

The major criticism that can be levelled at this book is Paul's own authorial bias. Indeed, she writes from a position of considerable admiration and sympathy for Eliza Fenwick. Places in the narrative sometimes obscure as much as enlighten the reader about Fenwick's experiences. Her relationships with William Godwin and Mary Robinson in Chapter 3, for instance, are presented as positive and mutually reinforcing, when it is likely that these connections were fraught and contested. Indeed, there is a tendency to overplay Eliza's agency within her networks, when it seems that some of her relationships were exploitative rather than supportive. For example, when Eliza was working as a shopkeeper for William Godwin (97). A similar scenario is

present in Eliza's friendship with Mary Hays, where Paul suggests that the reason for the tension in their relation was because Eliza was a mother and Hays was not, thus rendering their relationship awkward (90). This conjecture feels more speculative than evidential, and it would have been useful for the author to have probed the nature of their friendship further.

A similar point might be made in relation to the ambiguous treatment of 'friendship' and 'networking' throughout the book, but especially in chapters 3 and 4. Whilst Paul makes a convincing case for viewing Eliza as a woman able to establish a successful life for herself and her family through her ability to cultivate and consolidate a useful network of friends, there is little engagement with the concept of networking. It would have been beneficial for the author to have explored what being a 'networker' meant in an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sense, and how Eliza's own ability to network differed from that of other women from this period. For example, in Chapter 4 it is unclear who made up Eliza's networks and exactly what they did to support her and her daughter, Eliza Ann.

This volume is intended to be for 'the general interested reader' rather than specialists. Paul thus acknowledges in her opening notes that the narrative makes use of anachronism 'to capture a feeling or an idea from the past' (xvii). A sense of this is provided in the title 'Early Modern Feminist', which is certainly not a world outlook to which Eliza or her female acquaintances would have ascribed. Whilst Paul defends her rationale for taking this approach, there are places where examples of 'presentism' sit uneasily and disrupt rather than enhance the narrative being told. For example, Paul compares Methodist itinerants to rock stars performing at Glastonbury and Woodstock (29). Paul also interprets a number of moments in Eliza's life reading in a cinematic format, with frames, stills and montages, which are discordant with the evidence being presented (5, 133-4, 175).

Despite these problems, this is generally a successful book. It is particularly adept at interweaving history, literature, and political thought into a singular narrative, and makes a persuasive case for viewing women as important intellectual and literary figures, even if they were not politically active or established authors. Most importantly, it is entirely successful in showing why Eliza's story is a story worth telling, and why scholars of the future should take more of an interest in her life, writings, and experiences. As an accessible and engaging introduction to this topic, it opens up a range of ways for understanding the possibilities open for independent women seeking to make a life for themselves in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century British Atlantic world.

*Dr Naomi Pullin*

*University of Warwick*