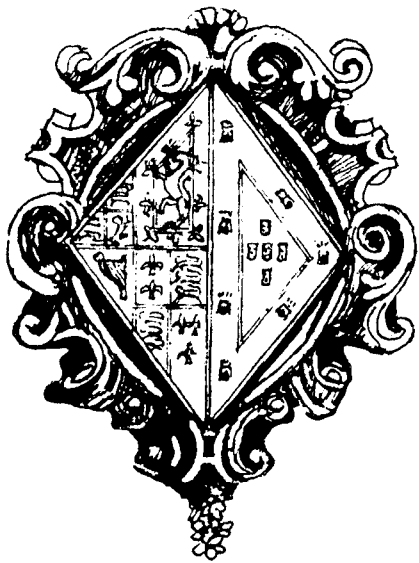


**THE BRITISH
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF PORTUGAL**

TWENTY FIFTH ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 1998

Quinta Nova
Carcavelos
2777 PAREDE



BOOK REVIEWS

WILLIAM BECKFORD

Composing for Mozart by Timothy Mowl. John Murray (Publishers) Ltd. London 1998. 324 p.

Beckford has, of course, an endless fascination for those interested in AngloPortuguese studies. This quite stupendously vain person wrote classical accounts of his stays in Portugal and his account of his trip to Alcobaça and Batalha is indispensable to anyone not only curious about Beckford but also on how these great monasteries functioned at the end of the XVIII century. Indeed I recall my Mother, Susan Lowndes Marques, and Ida Kingsbury taking off on a happy week and tracing Beckford's steps on this trip. But what this book tells us is that Beckford's famous journey did not occur as related in his book. His account is, rather, an amalgam of impressions "cooked" after more than one visit and written several decades later! And here is an important aspect of all Beckford's accounts relating to personal experiences, he very much "edited" his writings afterwards to make him "look good" or those he disliked (and there were many) "look bad". In other words, one can't trust Beckford's accounts of what he saw, in Portugal, or elsewhere. The title of this book suggests his enormous vanity for he claimed to have composed an aria for Mozart, no less!

The subject of his homosexuality is well dealt with here. The fact that he had to leave England due to his dalliance with the Earl of Devon's heir is well known. In Portugal he tried his luck, and largely succeeded, with the Marquis of Marialva's son, Dom Pedro. Indeed it is extraordinary how a very conservative Portuguese noble family should have allowed this foreigner who, after all, was not even a Catholic (although they very much hoped to convert him and Beckford loved the ceremony and incense of Catholic liturgy) into their domestic intimacy. Of course, Beckford was enormously rich

which then, as today, helped to overcome many barriers. The Marialvas hoped Beckford would marry their daughter, Dona Henriqueta. She went on to marry the already aged Duque of Lafões and had children. Dom Pedro died in Paris, perhaps unsurprisingly unmarried, and the title of Marquis of Marialva passed to the Lafões family where it remains to this day.

It is generally believed that Beckford's "sexual orientation" (as one now says) precluded the British envoy in Lisbon, Walpole (the Prime Minister's nephew) from presenting this rich English traveller to Queen Dona Maria I. But this book suggests that Beckford allowed himself to get involved in court intrigue through the Marialvas. The British Merchants had important privileges in Portugal in those days which many thought excessive. Beckford's actions suggest that he sided with the factions which were against such privileges in Court and hence the British envoy's displeasure.

Beckford visited Portugal three times. The last time in 1798 (former visits: 1787 and 1793) was rather typical and discreditable. The Prince Regent D. João had offered him an honour. Beckford declined it for himself but insisted his lover and long time companion Franchi (an Italian he had picked up in the Choir of Lisbon's Patriarchal Church) be given the Order of Christ which would give him the title of Chevalier. The Prince Regent eventually gave way but insisted that Beckford come out to Lisbon, receive the decoration and then hand it over to Franchi. It was a short visit.

The book, of course, also covers Beckford's life outside Portugal, his writings and other travels and the building of his great folly Fonthill Abbey (where he entertained Nelson), which collapsed in 1825. Well worth acquiring.

Paul Lowndes Marques

--ooOoo--