**Williams, William** (June? 1727-27 Apr. 1791), novelist and painter, was baptized on 14 June 1727 in Bristol, England, the son of William Williams, probably a mariner, and Elizabeth (Belshire?). As a boy Williams attended the Bristol Grammar School, but his preferred classroom seems to have been a local artist's studio, where he began to develop his interest in painting as a profession. Williams's parents had more practical plans for their son, however, and when Williams was perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, he was bound as an apprentice to a captain in the Virginia trade. This arrangement proved to be short lived. Dissatisfied with his appointed career, Williams abandoned his position at the earliest convenience and fled to the West Indies. Many years later the renowned artist Benjamin West, who knew Williams intimately, quoted him as saying, "After going the second voyage . . . when in Norfolk, in Virginia--to tell you the truth . . . I left the ship & sailed for the West Indies, where I hoped to be unknown, that I might work my way to some places--& accomplish my wishes as a Painter." West was of the impression that his friend "was shipwrecked, & thrown into great difficulties, but Providence . . . preserved him through a variety of dangers." Although no documentary evidence has surfaced to corroborate this version of Williams's sojourn in the West Indies, the fact that his novel *Mr. Penrose: The Journal of Penrose, Seaman* recounts vividly and with apparent fidelity to environmental details the adventures of a castaway on the Mosquito Coast suggests that Williams may indeed have based the novel on firsthand experience.

In 1747, after two to three years in the Caribbean (of which possibly one to two years were spent among the Rama Indians of Nicaragua), Williams journeyed to Philadelphia, where he earned his living as a painter of portraits, landscapes, and conversation pieces. There he met West, at that time a precocious nine-year-old boy. Williams, the first professional artist West had ever met, encouraged the boy's interest in painting; lent him some books about the Old Masters, including his own manuscript "Lives of the Painters"; and instructed him over the next decade in the art of painting. So significant an influence was Williams as teacher and mentor to his young protégé that West later remarked that he would not have become a painter had Williams not come to live in Philadelphia.

In addition to painting, Williams taught drawing and music in an evening school he established for the instruction of "polite youth." Somewhat later, in 1759, he painted scenes in the Southwark Theatre for the Hallam Company, managed by David Douglass, thereby becoming the first known professional scene painter in American theater. The versatile artist took up the pen as well as the brush during these years, composing poetry in addition to his biographical sketches of Old World painters. It was also most likely at this time that he began to write *Mr. Penrose*.

Shortly after settling in Philadelphia, Williams married "a respectable townswoman" (name unknown), with whom he had two children, but she died within a decade of marriage. In 1757 Williams reportedly wed Mary Mare, who added a third child to the family in 1759 (William Williams, Jr., also a painter), but she passed away four years...
later. In 1760 Williams journeyed to Jamaica and possibly Antigua, where he hoped to commission portraits from wealthy planters. The trip was apparently a success: during fourteen months in the West Indies he is thought to have executed some fifty-four paintings. After returning to Philadelphia Williams resumed his business of "painting in general" and again supplemented his income by teaching. Several of Williams's surviving canvases date from this period, including portraits of William, David, and Deborah Hall, children of David Hall, Sr., the printing partner of Benjamin Franklin. One of Williams's most profitable undertakings, however, was the painting and ornamentation of ships for Philadelphia shipbuilders Thomas Penrose and James Penrose, quite likely the namesakes of Williams's protagonist Lewellin Penrose.

By 1769 Williams had moved from Philadelphia to New York, where he continued to paint and teach as well as clean and restore paintings. Several portraits from this period survive, including those of Jacob Fox, John Wiley and his sisters, and Master Stephen Crossfield, as well as his striking *Imaginary Landscape*. With the economic recession of the prewar years Williams's business declined, however. The revolutionary war brought additional hardships, including the deaths in battle of Williams's two sons from his first marriage. (Although Williams was a Loyalist, his sons fought for American independence.) Bereft and financially insecure, Williams returned to England in 1776, accepting an offer of patronage from a gentleman in Bedfordshire (identity unknown). When his patron died after eighteen months of sponsorship, Williams found himself alone and lacking means of financial support. With only one friend in England, he paid a visit to his former pupil Benjamin West, by this time a prominent artist living in London. Williams declined monetary assistance from West but consented to work for him as a model. (A likeness of Williams appears in West's celebrated painting *Battle of La Hogue*.)

Williams moved to Bristol, England, about 1781 and once again set up business as a painter. Among his works from this period are a local river scene titled *Hotwells and Rownham Ferry* and a triptych representing the birth, death, and burial of Christ. Williams married a third time, but his new wife, a widow named Esther, died shortly thereafter. Impoverished and by this time quite elderly, the painter, desiring a "place to die in," sought assistance from Thomas Eagles, a wealthy Bristolian merchant and patron of the arts. Eagles befriended Williams, provided him with discreet but regular financial support, and eventually secured shelter for him at the Merchants' and Sailors' Almshouse of Bristol. Williams was a pensioner of this charitable establishment for five years, during which he continued to paint until his death in Bristol. His fascinating self-portrait dates from this period (intriguingly, X rays reveal that the palette and brush the subject holds are painted over an earlier depiction of book and pen), and he evidently worked on a painting, now lost, with a theme from *Mr. Penrose*.

Although Williams's work is not widely known, his contributions to the literature and art of the colonial period are substantial. Williams was one of the first portraitists in the American colonies, and his novel *Mr. Penrose: The Journal of Penrose, Seaman* is probably the first novel to be written in what would become the United States of America. Although only a small fraction of the more than 240 canvases Williams reportedly completed in the American colonies and West Indies have been identified, those that have been positively attributed to him bear witness to a significant artistic talent, characterized by a distinctive sense of theatricality and a penchant for fantastic,
dreamlike landscapes. Williams's influence on American literature was minimal due to the fact that his novel was not published until 1815 and then only in England and in a completely restyled form. In fact, Williams was almost wholly unknown to literary scholars until the much belated publication of the original text of Mr. Penrose in 1969. As a result, literary critics and historians have only recently begun to appreciate the importance of this early American tale of a Welsh sailor, "accustom'd," as he says, "to all Vice except Murder and Theft," who learns compassion and tolerance among the natives of Central America.

Bibliography


Sarah Wadsworth

Back to the top