15

‘To Rally Round the Throne’

Saving the Nation in Charlotte West’s *Residence*

Charlotte West’s *A Ten Years’ Residence in France* (1821) presents itself as an eye-witness account of the French Revolution by a Protestant Englishwoman living in France from 1787–1797. The status of the text as history or fiction is uncertain, although its various categorisations under biography, history, and travel by contemporary reviewers suggest that while its generic indeterminacy was recognised it was nonetheless regarded as non-fiction by its early readers. The authority of personal memory is repeatedly evoked, however, the text is written at a historical and geographical distance from the events it describes and the representation of the past is strongly influenced by the British political context of 1821 at a time of radical protest and popular unrest. The *Residence* demonstrates the potential of autobiography and travel narratives within loyalist campaigns as West puts personal experience into public service. She provides anecdotes illustrating the violence of the Revolution, challenges the radical interpretation of liberty and equality, and portrays herself as an exemplary subject in her ability to defend the social order as she calls on a community of readers ‘to rally round the throne and the king’.

Her counter-revolutionary identity and rhetorical strategies suggest the influence of Hannah More, as she draws on a feminised model of moral and religious authority. The *Residence* is not a self-vindication of past revolutionary conduct like Grace Dalrymple Elliott’s *Journal*, as West claims the identity of the female patriot to address a nation under threat. In so doing, she reveals the ways in which women’s life writing contributed to counter-revolutionary discourses into the nineteenth century and suggests the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the position of the female patriot.

West’s *Residence* has rarely been addressed by literary scholars, but its recent appearance within the Chawton House Library series of *Women’s Travel Writings in Revolutionary France* (2007) will encourage a new audience...
for this work and situate the text within a broader history of women’s writing. West remains a shadowy figure, as the *Residence* is her only foray into print and there is no information regarding her life outside the memoir. Jonathan David Gross comments in his *ODNB* entry that ‘it is not known whether West is using a pseudonym, or how far her exploits are fictionalized’. Her status as an author is therefore open to question: are we reading a memoir written by a woman, or the exploitation of the travelogue form by an author for whom ‘writing as a woman’ was regarded as an effective political strategy? West’s publisher William Sams was a royal bookseller of St James’ Street who had a history of publishing personal narratives, including *Military Memoirs of Four Brothers* (1829) written by a former soldier of the Napoleonic campaigns. Nonetheless, doubts over West’s veracity in the *Residence* are raised by her uncanny ability to appear at crucial moments in key revolutionary locations. She assists the royal family in their return from Varennes, arrives fortuitously in Paris at the moment of Louis XVI’s execution, accidentally witnesses Charlotte Corday on her way to the guillotine, meets the future Josephine Bonaparte, and survives imprisonment in four different locations prior to her release in November 1794. West suggests that this revolutionary ubiquity establishes her as a providential historical witness, remarking that ‘it seemed ordained by fate, that if any thing unpleasant was going on, I was sure to come in for my share of it’ (92).

West makes little claim to authorial status, noting in the ‘Advertisement’ to the *Residence* that it is ‘my first, (And in all probability my last) Essay’ occasioned by ‘the occurrences of the times’ (i–iii). Zoë Kinsley’s analysis shows how women travel writers used prefatory materials to perform ‘gestures of anxiety and inadequacy’ and ‘carefully negotiate contemporary assumptions about the potentially disruptive nature of travelling’. In her opening comments, West asserts her patriotic motivations and the unprecedented nature of the times:

> When my native land is threatened (as has been lately the case) with all the horrors of a Revolution, shall I sit supinely without adding my mite for its protection, by setting forth the dreadful events I have been an eye-witness of, and a bodily sufferer under the rigorous measures of a Revolutionary Government. No! forbid it all the powers of memory, and love to my country, in whose cause every nerve feels doubly strung in her defence. (ii)

The emphasis on her role as ‘eye-witness’ and ‘bodily sufferer’ is a common thread in the *Residence* as her body acts as an index of feeling and