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**The Question of Hannah Moore's Membership of the French  
Academy Resolved**

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## THE QUESTION OF HANNAH MORE'S MEMBERSHIP OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY RESOLVED

The most important source of material for a life of Hannah More (1745–1833) is the four volume *Memoirs of The Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More*, edited and published by William Roberts in 1834 within a year of Hannah More's death. The task of editing her correspondence, which spanned sixty years, was immense, and Roberts must have dedicated many hours to it. Roberts's work remains the pre-eminent source material for historians. The originals of few of the letters he edited are known to scholars, but the authors recently heard from Dr. Nicholas Bell of an Edinburgh bookseller who acquired a large number of them from a cabinet maker in the Orkneys. These have now left the country for an unnamed institution, where it is hoped that they will become available for study. There are many defects in the edition of Hannah More's letters by Roberts. These were clearly exposed in *The Quarterly Review* in 1834 (LII, August and November).<sup>1</sup> For our purposes, the most important observation of the reviewer is the statement:

His [Roberts's] method of compiling and arranging is so clumsy, that if anyone can extract from this book a distinct notion even of the principal events and dates in her life, he must have bestowed more attention on the materials of which it is composed than the editor himself has thought fit to do. If year and month be not written at the top of the sheet, Mr. Roberts never seems to think of trying to make out the date from the contents.

The reviewer goes on to point out that the work is 'filled with blunders of this class'.

According to Roberts in a footnote to an undated letter, included with letters dated 1782, Hannah More was elected a member of the Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Belles Lettres at Rouen.<sup>2</sup> The *Memoirs* include a letter to Hannah More from Mrs. Boscawen dated 1784, in which she is congratulated 'on your being elected member of the French Academy . . . I was much pleased with this distinguished honour conferred on merit and my dear friend . . . I have kept the secret inviolable because you bid me . . .'<sup>3</sup> A letter from Hannah More to Mrs. Boscawen, dated Bristol 1784, talks about receiving 'mes pancartes academiciennes', and subsequently mentions, without

going into detail, ‘prints, pamphlets, and other little things sent me from Rouen’.<sup>4</sup> The letter from Mrs. Boscawen quoted above has led some of Hannah More’s biographers to state that she was elected to the French Academy, an assertion solely based on the ambiguities caused by Roberts’s hasty and inadequate editing of the More letters. This has caused readers to think that there were two separate events, namely her election to the Academy of Arts in Rouen in 1782 and to the French Academy in 1784.

This error is rehearsed in A.M.B. Meakin’s *Hannah More: a Biographical Study* (1911),<sup>5</sup> and it has led to suggestion that she may have been a ‘membre correspondant’ of the French Academy. The question of Hannah More’s membership of the French Academy was again considered by the authors of this note during the preparation of ‘The Curtain Parted: or Four Conversations with Hannah More 1817–1818’, by M.J. Crossley Evans.<sup>6</sup> Our discussions encouraged us to solve the mystery.

With the help of Miss Petra M. Armitage-Smith, of the University of Bristol, Miss Mireille Lamarque, Le Conservateur des Archives of the Académie Française, and Mrs. Anne-Marie Laffitte-Larnaudie, Le Conservateur en Chef des Archives at the Institut de France, we have now established that Hannah More was never a member of the French Academy. We are of the opinion that Mrs. Boscawen used the word ‘French’ with ‘Academy’ simply to denote that the academy in Rouen was situated in France. The first woman elected to the French Academy was Marguerite Yourcenar, actually in 1980.

If William Roberts can be relied upon in this matter, his footnote states that Hannah More remained in communication with the Academy in Rouen from the time of her election in 1784, until the outbreak of the French Revolution. Attempts to locate its records have not, so far, proved successful.

#### Notes

1. pp. 416–17.
2. Roberts, *Memoirs of Hannah More* i, pp. 262–3.
3. *Ibid.* p. 322.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 324–7.
5. p. 197. This error was perpetuated in M.J. Crossley Evans, ‘The English Evangelicals and the Enlightenment: the case of Hannah More’, *Trans. Eighth International Congress of the Enlightenment* (1992), pp. 458–62.
6. *Trans. B.G.A.S.* **110** (1992), pp. 181–211.

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