

Louisa Stuart Costello

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Painter, poet, and prolific popular writer, Louisa Stuart Costello (1799-1870) was a well-known and highly regarded professional in many fields. Costello was born in either Britain or Ireland in 1799 to Colonel James Francis Costello and his wife Elizabeth née Tootridge, likely author of the 1809 novel *The Soldier's Orphan*. Costello's eldest brother died at sea in 1813, and her father was killed in war in 1814, leaving Costello, her mother, and her eleven-year-old brother to fend for themselves. Despite receiving a small military pension, the family struggled financially, and Costello and her younger brother had to work to fill the void. Costello's artistic career began at the age of sixteen with miniature painting and manuscript illumination, but she quickly moved into prose and poetry, which proved a more lucrative niche. As critic Clare A. Simmons observes, "The image of the nineteenth-century woman writer toiling in obscurity while ignored or underappreciated by the critics does not strictly apply to Louisa Stuart Costello. She may have been almost forgotten, but in her long and varied literary career her fellow authors, both male and female, seem to have liked and respected her" (218). While never entirely comfortable financially, she was able to support her brother's military education at Sandhurst College as well as make enough to take care of her mother, keeping a modest amount for her own expenses and to pay for her travels.

Costello published in excess of one hundred works over the course of forty years, turning initial small successes into progressively greater reward and regard. Although pretty and popular, she never married, preferring instead to support herself and her family with focused creative output. Her first poetic work to garner critical attention was *Songs of a Stranger* in 1825, and from that point on she developed a loyal following of esteemed readers. Over the course of her life Costello would come into contact with many of the age's most important figures, including Charles Dickens, Thomas Moore, Lord Byron, and French King Louis-Phillipe. She worked in many genres, but her most successful and well-remembered works were her biographies and travelogues, notably *Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen* in 1844, which "seems to have been researched mainly among the books and papers in the duke of Devonshire's library at Chatsworth" (Mitchell). Her mother passed away in 1846, and her younger brother followed in

1865. Costello retired in 1852 on a civil list pension of seventy-five pounds and spent her remaining years in Boulogne.

“On the Death of my Brother” is a poem from Costello’s first published collection, *The Maid of the Cypress Isle* (1815). This poem is about the sinking of the HMS Tweed, which is otherwise recorded in just a few newspaper articles and official listings. The Tweed sank during the height of the War of 1812, but given there is no historical record of an action where it went down, it is likely that it was a victim of Newfoundland’s famously treacherous waters rather than of an active conflict. The poem is written in three sestets, and it shows less subtlety and greater adherence to form than Costello’s later poetry, as is often the case with an author’s first publication. The poem uses a variation on ballad stanza. Every stanza ends with a couplet rhyming “thee” (referring to the brother) with “sea.” Where the first stanza ends with “thee,” the next two end with “sea,” a structural feature which reflects the way the sea overtakes and subsumes Costello’s brother in the text.

Further Reading

Costello, Louisa Stuart. *Memoirs of Eminent Englishwomen*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Saunders, Clare Broome. *Louisa Stuart Costello*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

References

Mitchell, Rosemary. “Costello, Louisa Stuart (1799–1870), Miniature Painter and Author.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford UP, 26 May 2016.

Simmons, Clare A. Book review, “Clare Broome Saunders, *Louisa Stuart Costello: A Nineteenth-Century Writing Life*.” *Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2015, pp. 218-219.

“On the Death of My Brother, Who
Was Unfortunately Lost in His Majesty’s
Ship Tweed, Off the Coast of
Newfoundland”¹³

Where rolls the wide Atlantic’s wave,
Which dashes ’gainst the shore
Of stern America’s bleak clime,
With hollow deathful roar—
There, there thou sleep’st beneath the sea, 5
Which swallow’d all our hopes with thee!

Remorseless death, in spring of youth,
Has snatch’d that much-loved form away;
Cold! cold, thou liest! a sea-weed shroud
Now wraps thy pale and senseless clay!¹⁴ 10
And vain are all our tears for thee,
For low thou sleep’st beneath the sea!

Tho’ lost for ever here on earth,
Oh, may thy soul ascend on high!
There, where no stormy winds assail, 15
Enjoy blest immortality.
May we in heaven again meet thee,

¹³ Copytext from the Google Play Books scan of *The Maid of The Cypress Isles*, first edition.

¹⁴ Referencing a metaphor in Isaiah 49:9 and elsewhere in the bible that describes mankind being made from clay. Also refers to “clay-cold,” an adjective often used to describe dead flesh.

Tho' now thou sleep'st beneath the sea!



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