

The Eminent Lesbian or the Passionate Spinster? Posthumous Representations of Amelia Edwards' Love for Women

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Travel writer Amelia Ann Blanford Edwards (1831-1892) loved women. This article examines how various generations of writers have represented her same-sex desire, which material and conjectures underpinned their representations, and how we might approach reading and writing about the desires of Victorian-era women-loving women today.



Amelia Edwards in 1890

Amelia Edwards was a talented writer, passionate traveller, and self-taught Egyptologist. She was a successful novelist by the time she was in her mid-twenties, but it was a trip to the Dolomites and a subsequent journey up the Nile that were to establish her fame as a travel writer. Her bestsellers *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* (1873) and *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877) captivated their audience with humorous observations and evocative descriptions of landscapes.

During her trip to Egypt, Amelia Edwards acquired a lasting fascination with Egyptology. In 1882, she therefore co-founded the Egypt Exploration Fund (today: [Egypt Exploration Society](#)) and, during the last ten years of her life, dedicated nearly all her time and energy to it. Her will stipulated that monies from her estate be used to endow the *Edwards Chair of Egyptology* at University College London, which still survives as the *Edwards Professor of Egyptian Archaeology and Philology*.

Amelia Edwards and Women

While Amelia Edwards' achievements already made her a well-known public figure during her lifetime, her private life has long remained an enigma – even to her biographers Joan Rees (1998) and Brenda Moon (2006). Amelia Edwards formed emotional attachments almost uniquely with women. As an adult, she lived with Ellen Drew Braysher, a friend 27 years her senior, whose husband and daughter had died

not long after Edwards had lost her parents. In early 1864, they moved to Westbury-on-Trym, where they were to live until both women died within the first months of 1892.

However, Edwards always had other attachments to women too. Her [papers](#), archived at Somerville College, Oxford, contain a number of letters from painter and world traveller [Marianne North](#) (1830-1890), whom she had befriended in 1870. While Edwards' letters have not survived, North's replies reveal that Edwards had developed quite a crush on her new friend. North, who did not reciprocate these feelings but was obviously relaxed about them, set her boundaries in a gentle and light-spirited tone: "Bless you, what love letters you do write", she wrote one Friday in May 1871, "what a pity you waste them on a woman!" (SCO ABE 228). A few days later, after Edwards had come up with the suggestion (or should it be 'proposal?') of giving North a ring to wear on her next journey, Marianne North writes:

"My dear Amy, what an unmitigated goose you are! There you have my whole opinion of you frankly – whats (sic!) the use of giving me rings – do you think I have no memory for friends & want playthings to remind me of them? & besides I have not the smallest intention of marrying you or anybody else – I shall have you bringing me up for a 'breach of promise' case next – I don't wish to lose my money in paying lawsuits." (SCO ABE 230).

The two remained friends, though they rarely saw much of each other in subsequent years. Marianne North set out to travel the world and Amelia Edwards embarked on a journey to Italy. Somewhere between Rome and Naples, she met the woman who was to become her travelling companion for the next few years: Lucy Renshaw (1833-1913), an unmarried, freedom-loving woman of independent means. Edwards' closest confidante from the second half of the 1880s until her death was Kate Bradbury, 22 years her junior, who would accompany her on the last two trips she took: to the United States (1889/90) and Italy (1891).

Enter the Biographers

There are few extant sources that reveal any information about the intimate qualities of these relationships. Joan Rees therefore concludes that "[t]he nature of Amelia's attachments to other women is not susceptible of easy labelling" (Rees 1998: 33). Departing from what appears to be a default assumption of heterosexuality, she allows that especially Edwards' friendship with Marianne North in 1870/71 "brings the possibility of lesbianism [...] to the fore" (34) and concedes that she may have "had lesbian tendencies at this stage in her life [...] but how much significance to attach to

this is doubtful." In the following passage, Rees draws a connection to the early death of Edwards' mother and speculates that a prolonged illness around 1871 may have been due to a "special stress of this period [which] may well have owed something to years of sexual abstinence or frustration." Therefore, Rees argues, it would not be surprising "if she became passionately heated in her feeling for Marianne, her emotions enflamed by the prospect of long periods of absence" (35).

Eight years later, Brenda Moon treads just about as softly around the issue, albeit without the psychoanalytic flourish. Referring to the same period as Rees, she finds "no evidence to suggest that [Edwards] still thought of marriage", which she "must have thought [...] unlikely", given that she was pushing forty (Moon 2006: 74). She notes Edwards' "fondness" for Marianne North but concludes that "it would appear to have been no more than a very close, platonic relationship" (77). In Edwards' attachment to Lucy Renshaw, Moon also finds "no evidence to suggest a lesbian relationship" (95).

Neither statement is per se off the mark, especially as Moon probably did not have access to a source that does point – at the very least – to an element of flirtation in the relationship between Amelia Edwards and Lucy Renshaw (see the poem below). However, even allowing for possibly limited research capacities or access to sources, it seems that neither Rees nor Moon made any great effort to pursue a possibility that even in the 1990s and early 2000s must have at least appeared plausible: that Amelia Edwards, although she may not have been entirely successful in her quest for love, was aware that the love she was looking for was precisely that of a woman, and that, with the possible exception of Ellen Braysher, she was not simply looking for a mother figure.

Underexposed Networks

One example: Neither Rees nor Moon pay much attention to the networks Amelia Edwards formed in the mid-1850s. In the literary circles Edwards frequented, most notably the salon of painter Samuel Laurence, she met poet Eliza Cook, actress Charlotte Cushman, and translator Matilda Hays. In the 1840s, Eliza Cook had had a short fling with Charlotte Cushman, but by the time Edwards joined their circles Cushman was in a relationship with Matilda Hays. In 1857, Edwards visited Cushman and Hays in Rome, where the couple regularly spent the winters in a household of "jolly female bachelors" (Merrill 1999: 169) including American sculptor Harriet Hosmer (who later became involved with Scottish philanthropist Louisa Baring).

Admittedly, spending time with lesbian friends does not make one a lesbian. Nonetheless, Amelia Edwards' [androgynous styling](#) (not entirely unlike that of [Matilda Hays](#) during the same period) and the way in which she gravitated towards female-only networks instead of more mixed-sex company that might have put her in contact with potential male partners suggest that Amelia Edwards was looking for a concept for her own female-centric life from as early as her mid-twenties.

Enter John Addington Symonds

More recent biographical sketches of Amelia Edwards have proven much more willing to reflect the centrality of women in her emotional life. This may also be due to a source that is now more readily available thanks to a 2012 publication: a letter by writer John Addington Symonds. Symonds lived in Bristol, not far from Edwards, and the two had become friends around 1864. Although he was a homosexual, he had married Catherine North, whose sister, Marianne, Amelia Edwards would meet in 1870. Only a few items – mostly poems – from the correspondence between Symonds and Edwards have survived. According to a note in the Edwards papers at Somerville College, the letters were "distinctly intimate & personal in nature" (Moon 2006: 74).

The exact contents of the correspondence remain unknown. However, a letter to a third party, published in Sean Brady's critical edition of selected letters of John Addington Symonds, may give us an idea: On 17 January 1893 – not a year after Amelia Edwards' death – Symonds wrote to sexologist Havelock Ellis, who was working on the second volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*:

"I had another eminent female author among my friends, Miss Amelia B. Edwards, who made no secret to me of her Lesbian tendencies. The grande passion of her life was for an English lady, married to a clergyman & inspector of schools. I knew them both quite well. The three made a menage together; & Miss Edwards told me that one day the husband married her to his wife at the altar of his church – having full knowledge of the state of affairs" (Brady 2012: 240).

This couple has been identified as John Rice Byrne and Ellen Byrne. References to a Mr and Mrs Byrne can be found in some of Edwards' letters during that period, albeit without first names and with no hint of an intimate relationship (otherwise they would probably not have been conserved).

John Rice Byrne was indeed a clergyman and school inspector; he and his wife Ellen had married in 1859; a son was born in 1863. According to official records, the boy

was born in London; it thus seems that the Byrnes moved to Westbury-on-Trym around the time Amelia Edwards and Ellen Braysher took up residence there.

A Lesbian Marriage?

Obviously, the letter leaves a number of questions unanswered. What really happened in that church? There is no particular reason to believe that Symonds had invented the episode, although it is impossible to say how accurately he had understood and/or recounted it. If Edwards and Ellen Byrne had indeed sought some sort of blessing for their union, they would not have been the first to do so: In 1832, Yorkshire landowner Anne Lister took the sacrament together with her partner Ann Walker during a church service and considered it a sealing of their relationship. It does seem unusual that the ceremony would be performed by a pastor who was (a) aware of what the act meant for the women in question and (b) the husband of one of them, yet it is not implausible that some sort of ceremony would have been important to two Protestant Victorian women.

Moreover, Symonds' letter does not reveal whether Edwards actually used the word "lesbian" herself. As far as we can tell, Victorian women-loving women were hesitant to attach a label to their love, especially given that the potential designations were associated with either sin or sickness. However, it becomes clear from the letter that Amelia Edwards was fully conscious of her desire, had the means to articulate it, and was relieved to have a friend to confide in.

For Amelia Edwards, the story ended sadly: Pastor Byrne was assigned a different school district and the couple moved away. Apparently, Ellen Byrne took whatever had happened in that church somewhat less seriously than Amelia Edwards.

It took Edwards a long time to recover. Her friendship with Marianne North probably helped, as did the remedy to which she always turned in emotional turmoil: travelling.

However, the last thing she would probably have guessed is that the episode of her "marriage" would figure in a German antifeminist treatise – 32 years after her death.

Sexological Telephone Games

In 1924, Ehrhard F. W. Eberhard published *Die Frauenemanzipation und ihre erotischen Grundlagen* ("The Emancipation of Women and its Erotic Foundations"). On 916

pages, the author minutely details why, in his opinion, feminists and indeed all women who seek independence are either morally corrupt, perverse, or downright criminal. There is a long chapter on "Sadism and Female Emancipation", one on prostitution, and a very long one on false accusations and deception. Chapter 6 is dedicated to "Tribadism and Female Emancipation". Here, on page 535, one finds the following passage (my translation):

"According to H. Ellis, in England it was even possible for a clergyman to formally marry his own wife to a tribad, in his own church, and in full cognisance of the circumstances."

The passage is referenced by a note, which points to *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.¹ Hirschfeld was also an activist for homosexual rights. In 1897, he had founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, which argued for decriminalisation of male homosexuality. (Female homosexuality was not punishable under German law). *Die Homosexualität* was published in 1914. On page 707, it reads (my translation):

"More often than homosexual men, homosexual women will strive to give their relationships a marriage-like character. H. Ellis mentions a case in England, in which a ceremonial marriage between two women was performed without any deception. A congenitally inverted Englishwoman of outstanding intellectual ability was united with the wife of a clergyman, who, in full cognisance of the circumstances, married the two ladies in his own church."

Here, the reference is to "Ellis, Sexual Inversion, page 146, footnote" (Ellis 1900) – which reads:

"I know of one case, probably unique, in which the ceremony was gone through without any deception on any side: a congenitally inverted Englishwoman of distinguished intellectual ability, now dead, was attached to the wife of a clergyman, who, in full cognizance of all the facts of the case, privately married the two ladies in his own church."

And thus the events that Amelia Edwards confided to John Addington Symonds ended up in a German antifeminist book, cited as an example of the moral corruption of women-loving women and the "double standards" whereby legislators allowed female same-sex desire to go unpunished (Eberhard 1924: 535).

¹ There is an English version entitled *Homosexuality of Men and Women* (2000), translated by Michael A. Lombardi-Nash, with an introduction by Vern L. Bullough, Amherst: Prometheus. As I did not have access to this publication at the time of writing, I translated the passage cited from Hirschfeld's original.

Perhaps it is no wonder that sexologists around 1900 had trouble finding women who were willing to talk to them.

What Does this Tell us?

We do not know how Amelia Edwards put her own desire into words or whether she would have described herself even in remotely similar terms to those that male sexologists used to define her. However, her example does tell us that not all Victorian women-loving women were so buttoned-up about their love. Some left clear traces of their desires for and attachments to women – all one has to do is read them.

Of course, Amelia Edwards might not have guessed that her friend John Addington Symonds would reveal her confidences to a third person (and a sexologist at that). Still, every advance always brought with it a certain risk of exposure. Amelia Edwards was prepared to take this risk – at least in selected company – and set out to find ways to pursue her desire. Perhaps her example shows us that the boundary between those women-loving women whose relationships have long been labelled (somewhat coyly) as "romantic friendships", "platonic relationships" or "Boston marriages" and those who assumed a more visible lesbian presentation was permeable – if it existed at all.

Epilogue

The Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago has a [Tumblr](#) account. In 2017, the Center published a [post containing images of a book](#) Amelia Edwards had given to Lucy Renshaw, probably during their trip through the Dolomites. It was an edition of ballads by Edwards herself, published in 1865.

This book contains two additional poems, written in Edwards' hand. One of them already appears in her diary, probably a few weeks before she wrote it into the book she gave to Lucy Renshaw (cf. Moon 2006: 89); I did not verify if an earlier reference to the other exists. Both are love poems.

While, admittedly, a distinction must be drawn between the author of a poem and its lyrical subject, it is remarkable that Edwards should have selected these poems for the hand-written dedication of a book to a woman friend. The first, which bears the title

"To Lucy Renshaw", ends on the lines "I love thee, & am loved – & lo! The sun's up in God's heav'n at last!"

The second one shall be quoted here in its entirety. Consider it bonus material.

On the Rose she gave me.

I hold in my hand the rose you wore
Last night in your bosom – its perfume shed,
The faint, sweet blush of its beauty fled
Like the bloom from the lips of a maiden dead; –
– a rose no more!

Rock'd on thy heart as it rose & fell,
For thy sake forgetting the sun & the dew,
Breathing thy breath the long ev'ning through,
What it felt, what it saw, what it dream'd, what it knew,
Who shall tell?

Turn'd it pale, do you think, for the wild, brief bliss
Of loving those treasures near which it lay
(Twin blossoms that know not the light of day)
Which I would barter my soul away
But to kiss?

Oh, that the fate of the rose were mine!
Just for one night in thy bosom to lie –
For just that one night in thy bosom, to die,
Yielding life, love, song, in one long sigh
Were divine!

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Image: Amelia Edwards in 1890, published: in Edwards, Amelia B. (1891): *Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers*, New York: Harper & Brothers (frontispiece).

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