

## **IRISH LESBIAN HISTORY**

### **SEARCHING FOR SAPPHISTS**

An influential group of historians of sexuality argue that the ‘species’ known now as the homosexual is not recognisable until the late nineteenth century. They say that before that date a propensity towards engaging in homosexual love or sex does not mean that people understood this desire or practice to be central to their identity. While this argument might have some relevance in the discussion of male homosexuality there has always been a category of women which has been variously identified throughout European literature since the age of Classical Rome, as Sapphists, fricatrices, tribades, tommies, lesbians: women with unnatural, monstrous appetites for sex with women, who might also have an overbearing, demonic love and attachment for other women. In travel writing, sermons, romances, poetry, plays, journalism, pornography and essays these freakish women are discussed and depicted. The fate of these women in literary texts has been to die suitably horrible deaths, unless their sex with women was shown to be a prelude to a more mature love for a man. By the early modern period theories as to the cause of lesbianism fell broadly into two camps, much the same as today there were those who thought that lesbians were born queer and there were those who thought that lesbians who were taught to be deviant. Some argued that lesbians were female hermaphrodites who had enlarged clitorises, who preyed on ‘innocent’ women and that this species abounded in the dark continents of Africa, India and the Far East and there were those, like Dean Swift in early eighteenth century Ireland, who saw lesbianism as an

unnatural vice of the overly educated and culturally refined woman:  
“entirely the Productions of Art and Reason”.

It had been different in the age of Classical Greece when the poetry of Sappho from Lesbos, described as the tenth muse, took erotic love between women as her main theme and dwelt on the many passions this love inspires. Her poetry was admired for centuries, and the love was not regarded as perverted or deviant but as Christianity became widespread throughout Europe there was a systematic purge of these Sapphic texts, helped greatly by the accidental burning of the library at Alexandria.

Ireland's rich literary tradition is similar to Greece in being rooted in a highly sophisticated oral culture and like Classical Greece the textual fragments that remain of the earliest poetry by women contain unabashed depictions of romantic and erotic love between women. The question debated among historians of sexuality is can we say that these women identified as lesbian? Besides the fact that our sources about women are scarce in this period (a major problem for women's history) the question is perhaps impossible to answer: for example can we say these women identified as Irish? Would they have understood 'Irishness' to have implied a national character distinct from other nations? We can answer that they certainly would not have had a concept of national character as we can trace this concept from its first development in the early modern period and we can rephrase our question to ask, what did it signify to call oneself Irish in this period? We have to be careful of anachronisms when talking about pre-modern people forming 'identities' of any description and when it comes to finding the lesbians in history we must pay attention to our desire to use our

contemporary list of what constitutes a lesbian as a checklist of characteristics, which will lead us to lesbians of the past. The more difficult, but perhaps more rewarding approach is to ask how was love and sex between women constituted in the past? Were there conventions and boundaries that signified the limits of non-sexual love between friends? How were these limits exceeded? Were there penalties for exceeding the limits? How were these penalties avoided?

Early Irish writing provides many temptations for lesbian-spotting according to the lights of how we might characterise a contemporary lesbian: there are many female characters who might fit into our modern mould of the lesbian if we understand the lesbian to be resistant to marriage or sex with men, to subvert gender roles and to have intense passionate relationships with women. For example the hagiographies of St Bridget recount that her resistance to marriage was so strong that she plucked out her eye rather than marry her betrothed. Bridget was a bishop rather than a mere abbess, and is traditionally depicted in male dress with a crosier. She had a beloved bedwarmer, Darlughdacha, whom she forced to walk in shoes filled with hot coals when she saw her look admiringly at a passing male soldier. Enjoyable though this vision of a lesbian St Bridget might be the scribes who recounted these stories understood them to reflect Bridget's closeness to God, the male honour of a Bishopric underscoring that she had attained the masculine virtues necessary for salvation. The early Irish custom and elevated status of same-sex 'bedwarmers' underscores the differences in the sexual mores of that age and today. It is difficult for us to discuss homosexuality without a context of homophobia and Early Ireland is remarkably free of homophobia. The Brehon Laws were not concerned with homosexual relations unless they

contravened the strict hierarchies of class boundaries, for example an aristocrat having sex with a servant could be grounds for divorce.

### **FROM PREMODERN TO EARLY MODERN**

The Church Penitentials of Ireland, which were compiled in the early middle ages, do condemn sex between women, though the penance prescribed is less severe than that for men who have sex with men. However, the penance is increased if a phallic substitute is used. The condemnation of special friendships between nuns and the ensuing lusts these friendships engender came to Ireland from medieval Europe but does not seem to have been as much a worry for Irish churchmen as it was for their colleagues on the continent. Witch hunts and witch burning had a devastating toll throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, most of the victims were unmarried or widow women and many of the women accused of being witches were also accused of promiscuity and of having sex with women. The mania for witch-hunts was remarkably absent in Ireland except cases, one in Kilkenny in 1324 and the second in Youghal in 1661. Central to this witch trial of Florence Newton was the accusation that she had ‘violently’ kissed a woman called Mary at a well and bewitched her. The records end with the torture of Florence.

Women who dressed and passed as men was an on-going phenomenon throughout European history and perhaps still is where the sexes are severely segregated. The penalties on discovery could mean death if the woman was found to have used a phallic substitute. What motivated the women who passed as men? Some perhaps wanted to be men, others wanted to study, to travel, to get better work, or to become ‘female husbands’ and live as a

married couple with another woman. We also have evidence of these motivations overlapping and changing. A number of Irish women passed as men and had sexual relationships with women; most notable perhaps is Anne Bonny, born in seventeenth century Kinsale. She disguised herself as a man to become a pirate and met another passing woman, Mary Read, together they were notorious not only as pirates but as lovers.

### **MODERN AGE**

William King's mock epic-poem *The Toast* (1736) was a revenge on the widowed Duchess of Newburgh, Lady Frances Brudenell, written after he had lost a court case that argued that she owed him thousands of pounds. Throughout four books he depicts the Duchess as a bisexual, hermaphrodite promiscuous witch, in passionate love with Lady Allen and ruling over a circle of 'Tribades or Lesbians' in Dublin. The poem went into four editions, remaining popular for decades. King made a particular point of deriding what he saw as the Duchess' pretence of a chaste romantic friendship with Lady Allen as a cover for the 'practice [of] Lesbian Loves'. Romantic friendships were popular among upper class women in this era, (our sources for middle class and working women are scant.) This was a time of arranged marriages, early deaths of women in childbirth and a strict segregation of the sexes so it is little wonder that women formed deeply passionate relationships with other women. These romantic friendships were fuelled through letter writing and many caches of letters involve protestations of undying love, descriptions of kisses and embraces, tremblings, references to shared beds, jealousy (of other women), flirtation, care, concern, longing and fond appreciation of the beloved's beauty. This embarrassment of riches initially prompted historians of sexuality to decide that all of these romantic

friendships were sexually chaste and therefore cannot be termed lesbian. Love, romance, eroticism, emotional commitment, passion were taken out of the equation, the word lesbian could only be used when we had incontrovertible evidence of genital sex between women. More recent studies have taken a more sophisticated approach and ask questions as to the circumstances that allowed for these relationships and what threatened them.

Lady Eleanor Butler and her kinswoman, Sarah Ponsonby fell madly in love in eighteenth century Kilkenny. They defied family pressure to marry and on their second attempt, and with the valiant assistance of their maid Mary Carryll, they eloped in 1778, escaping Ireland, like so many women after them, on a boat bound for Hollyhead. They settled in Llangollen, North Wales, in a perilous financial and social position. Over the years they became more secure through small annual pensions hard won from their families and the monarch's Irish Civil List and eventually they became known as The Ladies of Llangollen, successfully capitalising on the sentimental vogue for the idealisation of romantic friendships between women and retirement to the country. Positioned as they were on the route from London to Dublin and their 'life of retirement' was full of visits from notables, travelling between the two cities, especially leading Romantic figures such as Wordsworth. They had to constantly be vigilant as to their reputation, relying on their class position to gain credit both in financial and social terms

Nineteenth century Anglo-Ireland was fascinated with the literary depictions of lesbians: Edgeworth's Belinda, introduced us to the redoubtable Harriet Freake who favoured dressing in men's clothes leading Lady Delacour

astray with night-time adventures and duelling escapades. In a memorable scene she literally bursts out of her female attire, but has her just reward when she gets mangled in a mantrap that so disfigures her legs she is never again able to wear men's clothing. Sheridan Le Fanu's Carmilla is one of the first literary depictions of a vampire; in this case, Carmilla the vampire is a typical nineteenth century literary creation of monstrous women in that she is a lesbian. George Moore's A Drama in Muslin gives us another creepy lesbian in the character of Cecilia, a hunchback, who although Protestant, finds that her 'scarcely sane' passion for Alice is synonymous with a desire to be a Catholic nun. The yoking together of these desires has also had a long and salacious history in European writing. Biographical studies of actual nineteenth century Irish lesbians remain rather thin on the ground, though there are a number of likely candidates such as the philanthropist and feminist Frances Power Cobbe. Studies of writers Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin) do make varying attempts to come to terms with their avowed devotion to each other.

## **TWENTIETH CENTURY – PRESENT DAY**

Twentieth century Ireland owes a lot to Irish lesbians, particularly to a network of lesbians living in Dublin, many of whom met each other through their involvement with the suffrage movement and many of whom later became actively involved in the Revolution, in Trade Unions, local government and the issues of poverty such as healthcare and social housing. These Irish lesbians visited and were in contact with other lesbians in Europe, America and the UK who were also involved in addressing social inequities and so they were part of a broader network that shared ideas, information and encouragement. Most notable among these are Dr Kathleen

Lynn and her partner Madeleine French-Mullen, suffragists, members of the Irish Citizen Army, founders of the pioneering hospital St Ultan's; nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell and her partner Julia Grenan, buried together in the Republican grave plot at Glasnevin; Helena Molony, Republican Revolutionary, Trade Unionist, Abbey actress and her partner, psychiatrist Dr Evelyn O'Brien; and the Trade Unionist and Peace Activist couple Louie Bennett and Helen Chenevix.

Eva Gore Booth, (1870-1926) a poet, playwright and sister of Constance Markievicz, did not live in Dublin, though she did visit and was in close contact through her sister with a number of the Dublin lesbians. Eva lived in Manchester with her partner, Esther Roper. They met in Italy in 1896 in the house of George MacDonald at Bordighera while they were recovering from illnesses. "For months illness kept us in the south, and we spent the days walking and talking on the hillside by the sea. Each was attracted to the work and thoughts of the other, and we soon became friends and companions for life." Esther Roper Introduction to the *Poems of Eva Gore-Booth* Longmans, 1929 page 9) Together they were leading lights of the British Suffrage movement, pioneering Trade Unionists and active pacifists. (She was instrumental in bringing the labour movement and suffrage movements together and she brought Christabel Pankhurst into the suffrage movement). In common with other homosexual thinkers of the time, such as their friend Edward Carpenter, they both shared a pantheistic philosophy and had a chauvinistic pride in the shamanistic qualities of lesbians and gay men. Besides this view of the essential (better) qualities of homosexuals they also had radical ideas about gender roles, which they believed were entirely constructed through culture. Eva and Esther became friends with a gay



London barrister, Thomas Baty (1869-1954), probably through the suffrage movement. The three of them were founder-members of a short-lived society called the Aëthenic Union in 1912 which was working for the elimination of gender distinctions (with the ancient Greek trio Penthesilea the warrior queen, Sappho the lesbian poet and the goddess Pallas Athene born from her father's forehead as its totems). In 1915 Eva, Baty & Esther and a J. Wade and D.H. Cornish founded a remarkable magazine called *Urania*, which is one of the earliest examples of lesbian and gay men collaborating on a shared cultural project. 'Uranian' was a widely known synonym for homosexual and uranianism was used in the same manner as we would use the word homosexuality. Privately printed and circulated to a membership (not officially published nor for sale), *Urania* was initially published 6 times a year dropping to 3 times after 1920 and it ran until 1940. Each issue, between 10 and 20 pages long consisted almost entirely of clippings of articles from newspapers all over the world, on cross-dressing, life-long transvestism, passing women, hermaphrodites, transsexualism, and same-sex 'marriages'. Attention was also given to women who achieved success in male fields such as those who won open scholarships, built ships, beat off attackers, and to men who knitted exquisitely. Each issue of *Urania* carried the statement:

Urania denotes the company of those who are firmly determined to ignore the dual organisation of humanity in all its manifestatations. They are convinced that this duality has resulted in the formation of two warped and imperfect types. They are further convinced that in order to get rid of this state of things no measures of 'emancipation' or 'equality' will suffice, which do not begin by a complete refusal to recognise or tolerate the duality itself. If the world is to see sweetness and independence combined in the same individual, *all* recognition of that duality must be given up. For

it inevitably brings in its train the suggestion of the conventional distortions of character which are based on it.

There are no 'men' or 'women' in Urania.

*Urania* argued that there were no innate differences between men and women and that gender was an artificial cultural construction that worked against the true realisation of an individual's potential. *Urania* also argued that once women and men escaped the imposed limits of gender, heterosexual relationships could no longer be prioritised over same-sex relationships. One of Eva Gore-Booth's favourite sayings was that 'sex is an accident', ie.. that biology is arbitrarily and no-causally related to cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity. One of the on-going problems in recording the rich history of lesbians and gay men is the constant presence of homophobia that leads at best, to a poorer understanding of the influences, support systems, achievements and struggles of the historical subjects. Historians who ignore or deny the lesbianism of women both in their domestic sphere and in the wider terms of their national networks and international relations greatly impoverish and damage their historical analysis, though the anxiety of homophobic historians can often raise a smile: "Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper never entered each other's bedrooms except in illness." Lewis Gifford Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography. Pandora, 1988 p8)

There was a network of lesbian artists centred on Dublin that included Mia Cranwell – the metal worker who worked in An Túr Gloinne and made a commitment ring for the popular writer Ella Young (see MA Women's Studies Thesis, 2006 by Cynthia Brannigan). Artist Willeminha Geddes who taught the stained glass artist Harry Clarke had lesbian relationships and Evie Hone, Manie Jellet and Sarah Purser all merit attention for the student

of Irish lesbian history. The Trinity College historian, Constantina Maxwell was lovers with Myra Curtis, President of Newham College, Cambridge.

Paris in the early twentieth century was a mecca for wealthy lesbians and bisexual women, especially those who were interested in art, indeed European modernism is deeply indebted to the money and talents of these Paris-based women such as Sylvia Beach, publisher of *Ulysses*. Oscar's niece, Dolly Wilde was part of this set as was the decorative artist, designer and architect known as Eileen Gray. Born into the Brownswood family of Enniscorthy in 1878, she was one of Modernism's most innovative and original artists.

Ireland after independence was not an easy place for women who did not conform to the narrowly defined role of wife and motherhood. There were bars and cruising places where gay men could meet but these public spaces were just not open to women. Through a variety of private networks lesbians managed to find each other and oral histories report that many lesbian relationships went undetected as it was popularly assumed that spinsters were asexual. However, actress Marie Conmee and her partner Marie Brady were a notorious couple in Dublin in these dark decades and Limerick-born lesbian writer Kate O'Brien also kept the scandalmongers active. O'Brien lived for a while at the Shelbourne Hotel in the late 1940s and later moved to Roundstone in Galway. Scandal dogged O'Brien in a way that it never haunted her friend Michael MacLiammoir. Two of her novels were banned: The Land of Spices because two men were found 'in the embrace of love' and in Mary Lavelle she gave a sympathetic portrayal both of Mary Lavelle falling in love with a married man and a lesbian called Agatha Conlon.

According to oral histories, by the 1960s there were certain bars in Belfast, Cork and Dublin where lesbians met each other, generally on Saturday afternoons but lesbian activism in Ireland did not have a visible presence until the 1970s and this was limited to Belfast and Dublin. The main influences on lesbian activism are still feminism, socialism and gay liberation/civil rights movements. Although thousands walk in annual Lesbian & Gay Pride parades and there are now hard won social spaces, community services (largely supplied by volunteers) and annual cultural events, to be found across Ireland, including in rural areas, most lesbians find it necessary to be discreet and many find it necessary to be secretive about their love lives. Recent equality legislation exempts religious run institutions from hiring those who would undermine their ethos. As most schools and hospitals are directly controlled or subscribe to the ethos of the Catholic Church there is a fear among many lesbians who are nurses and teachers that they could be unfairly targeted. There is also a growing discontent with the discrimination suffered in the lack of recognition for lesbian and gay couples, particularly in the areas of property ownership and immigration rights. Like their foremothers in the previous century, Irish lesbians still continue to be at the forefront of those working for social change and greater equity in Ireland though many are discreet as to their sexual identity.

Dr Katherine O'Donnell  
WERRC (Women's Education, Research & Resource Centre)  
University College Dublin  
Ph: 353-1-716-8581  
Fax: 353-1-716-1195  
Email: [Katherine.ODonnell@UCD.ie](mailto:Katherine.ODonnell@UCD.ie)