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## Review of A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot. Edith J. Simcox's Autobiography of a Shirtmaker

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***A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot. Edith J. Simcox's Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, edited by Constance M. Fulmer and Margaret E. Barfield  
(Garland, 1998), pp. xvii + 293. ISBN 0 8153 2782 X**

The intensity of Edith Jemima Simcox's passion for George Eliot has been known to a twentieth-century reading public since the publication of K. A. McKenzie's *Edith Simcox and George Eliot* in 1961. McKenzie's book is a combination of summary and quotation of a manuscript acquired by the Bodleian Library in 1958. This manuscript, entitled *The Autobiography of a Shirtmaker*, is a journal kept by Simcox from 10 May 1876 until 29 January 1900. Gordon Haight wrote the introduction to McKenzie's book, relied on the Simcox manuscript in his 1968 biography of Eliot, and printed lengthy passages from it in *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol. IX (1978). Yet, as Constance M. Fulmer notes, more than half of Simcox's journal 'has never been published in any form' (ix). Fulmer and co-editor Margaret E. Barfield have produced a new annotated edition of this intriguing text which will be of interest to readers of George Eliot, scholars of late nineteenth-century culture, and to historians of women's sexuality.

Among the many advantages to the recovery of this unique work by two women scholars is its record of one nineteenth-century woman's passion for another woman. While I wish that Fulmer and Barfield had done more in their introduction to suggest the implications of their own scholarship, the complete *Autobiography* is now available to be read through the lens of recent revelations about and interpretations of Victorian women's sexuality as focused by historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, Martha Vicinus, and Sheila Jeffreys among others. Writing before this important research, Haight cautioned readers against seeing the obvious: 'The Victorians' conception of love between those of the same sex cannot be fairly understood by an age steeped in Freud. Where they saw only beautiful friendship, the modern reader suspects perversion' (McKenzie, xv). This defensive pronouncement is particularly curious when we consider that Simcox herself struggled with what she called her 'unwholesome reveries' (16) and 'unhealthy dreams' (45). Haight compares Simcox to fictional characters created by Henry James and George Meredith in *The Bostonians* and *Diana of the Crossways*. These male authors have dissected 'the twisted psychological strands without apparent horror of what the schoolgirl today labels Lesbianism' (xv). In fiction, as with Simcox, 'we must avoid reading back interpretations that could never have been suspected when they were written' (McKenzie, xvi).

But Edith Simcox is not a fictional character (though she did fictionalize her experience in *Episodes in the Lives of Men, Women, and Lovers*, published in 1882), and she certainly did fantasize about living with and satisfying the needs of Eliot, though she knew this to be impossible. The complete *Autobiography* shows that Simcox's love was emotional, spiritual, and sexual, and that Eliot's response to that love was ambivalent and conflicted as she sought, in her preferred role as spiritual parent, both to advise Simcox and to accept the nature of her devotion. Not surprisingly, later biographers of Eliot have dealt in more tolerant and sensible ways with the subject. Offering many historical examples, Rosemary Ashton observes that in the nineteenth century, 'relationships between women existed along a spectrum from shared sexual lives to loving but asexual friendships' (308). Ashton's emphasis is on Eliot's absence of sexual interest in Simcox's effusive love, and this we can gather from Simcox's comments,

despite the fact that no letters from Eliot to Simcox seem to have survived. The *Autobiography* allows us, however, to understand more about how Simcox both expressed and repressed her sexual feelings. She writes: 'I have forced myself into the acceptance of truths repugnant to my inmost nature ... Last night again – if my mother were a husband and lover how tragical it would seem – I lay in bed strangled with the sobs I could not stop and feared to have overheard' (18). Simcox describes a visit with Eliot: 'She had had headaches and was in a somewhat despondent mood, so I did nothing but make reckless love to her' (25). Struggling to accept her apparently marginal place in Eliot's life, she asks: 'But then – is it my fault that every wholesome, natural reasonable passion I have felt, from the young ambitions of the tomboy to the fierce worship of Her lover – is it my fault that all without exception have been choked off by a churlish fate and I hurled back upon the one inexhaustible gospel of Renunciation?' (114). Her use of the terms 'nature', 'natural', and 'wholesome', suggest that she accepted a standard of the 'normal' and the 'perverse', which Haight attributes only to a 'modern' sensibility.

What is so interesting about Simcox is that she lived and wrote about her longing for Eliot during an historical moment when pre-Freudian sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing were beginning to study and categorize same-sex love. One need not have read about the confluences of political and medico-sexual discourses which enabled the emergence of lesbian identity at the turn of the century to see that Simcox was part of an intensely female community in which unmarried women interacted in complex ways with each other and the world. Simcox lived with and cared for her mother; she ran a cooperative shirt and collar manufacturing business with her friend Mary Hamilton, which was a model of safe and fair employment for women (and from which Eliot and Lewes purchased clothing). She was active in trade union politics, and she served on the London School Board (1879-82). And she was involved in many close friendships with women both outside of and within the George Eliot circle (including Elma Stuart, the Cross sisters, and Barbara Bodichon). The love relationships in this community need to be read in the passing remarks Simcox makes about her active life. She writes: 'Mary [Hamilton] came back in another tribulation – some lovers' quarrel between Rhoda [Broughton] and Miss Richardson and herself' (61-2). After Eliot's death, Simcox herself becomes the object of a Miss Williams's devotion: 'the poor creature professed a feeling for me different from what she had ever had for any one, it might make her happiness if I could return it...' (159). Miss Williams's 'soul lays heavy on my conscience', and 'Miss Williams is very forbearing' (190). Unfortunately, Fulmer and Barfield are unable to identify this Miss Williams, whose affections Simcox could not return.

The events in Eliot's life, and later Simcox's memory of them, structure the *Autobiography*, which falls into distinct sections. The first major rupture comes with the death of George Henry Lewes on November 30, 1878. The role Lewes played in Simcox's emotional attachment to Eliot is extraordinary. Far beyond what Haight describes as his fostering Simcox's devotion 'as an aid in his endless struggle against George Eliot's self-depreciation and diffidence' (McKenzie, xv), Lewes's presence created a triangular relationship of which Simcox was entirely conscious. On September 28, 1878, she dreamed of receiving letters from Eliot and Lewes: 'I read (in my dream) not her letter but his, and found in it a sentence to the effect that it was possible to have too much of a good thing – even so good a one as my letters! I

woke myself with a blush' (43). In her initial despair over his death, she writes that 'all of her that I loved so has died with him' (54). In a bitter moment, she reflects: 'He was kinder to me while I thought of him as a stranger than she when I had given all my love' (57). For a brief time she feels that 'the craving of desire had died' (59). Simcox consecrates Lewes's memory, tends his grave ('where all my desires lie buried'), and reads the posthumously published final volumes of *Problems of Life and Mind* ('with a sad pleasure'). On February 9, 1880, she is still thinking of Lewes: 'As aforesaid I am dead beat – all round – and that being so; of course I can't go and see her. I will go to him instead – dear fellow he would forgive one for mourning several griefs together – knowing always which is the bitterest of them all' (115). Although she overcame an earlier instinctive jealousy of Johnny Cross, about which Lewes and Eliot teased her, she could never feel for him as she had for Lewes.

The next rupture comes, of course, with the death of Eliot herself on 22 December 1880, upon which follows Simcox's famous description of the funeral, her first investigative trip to Nuneaton and Coventry to learn more about Eliot's childhood, and her transcription of numerous letters shared with her by Barbara Bodichon. At one point Simcox speculates that the task (or privilege) of writing Eliot's 'Life' might fall to her instead of Cross. Eliot biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer writes: 'It is tempting to wonder whether the reputation of George Eliot would have had a different history had Edith Simcox loosed her far more penetrating and literary sensibility on that project' (Bodenheimer, 225). Instead, Simcox is all but cut out of Cross's 1885 *Life*, and she was dissatisfied with what few references appeared (211). She kept busy in various efforts to memorialize Eliot, including a 'valedictory article' in the *Nineteenth Century* (May 1881). Yet ultimately, Eliot's death made little difference to Simcox's spiritual devotion. The same phrases of love and worship recur, and this tells us much about the necessity of distance and separation to idealized love.

The descriptions of Simcox's life between 1881 and 1900 constitute the final section of the *Autobiography*, the part not used by Haight and summarized by McKenzie in a brief final chapter, 'Last Years'. McKenzie writes: 'One could perhaps conclude from what we know of her temperament and behavior that physically she belonged to the type which psychiatrists call leptosomatic, and that she tended toward schizophrenia' (McKenzie, 135). Even her slight build is transformed into a psychiatric condition, and he wonders further whether she 'reached the point of psychotic breakdown'. These claims seem to me exaggerated. The journal is characterized by extreme mood swings and abrupt transitions from emotional to practical subjects: 'Darling, to prove my happiness, I burst into tears, for love of you, just as of old. Now for an Agenda memo' (164). Rather than schizophrenia, Simcox seems troubled by what we might now call a 'bi-polar' personality. One cannot help being moved by the emotional ride her journal records between euphoria and suicidal depression. Yet she was also a responsible manager and activist, as well as a lucid, intelligent writer. What we have in the *Autobiography* is a record of the gradual diminishing of passion and despondency and an increasingly reflective examination of these earlier moods.

To their credit, Fulmer and Barfield do not pathologize Simcox's moods or her sexuality. Their brief, factual introduction states frankly: 'She enjoyed her own androgyny' (xvi) and points us to her fascinating account of her own gendered development – affinities for women and boys,

objections to a culture of compulsory marriage – in an uncharacteristically expository entry of 17 October 1887. With prescient feminist insight, Simcox confesses: ‘Historically, psychologically, intellectually – and it may be admitted from pure carnal curiosity too I should like to know how many women ... have some other story than the one which alone is supposed to count and how many of those who think it worth while to dissect themselves are in a position to tell all they know of the result’ (233).

The minimal commentary provided by Fulmer and Barfield, while it strikes me as a missed opportunity, nonetheless achieves what the editors intended, ‘to have her story read as she told it’ (ix). On the whole, the footnotes are helpfully informative. They tend toward the mechanical identification of names and titles, with information not always as relevant to context as might be desired. For example, when Simcox writes: ‘Well, I had better read Herodotus and forget as if I can which of the Arab’s “two comforts” is my chosen saviour’ (44), the footnote reads ‘*History of Herodotus*, new English version with notes by George Rawlinson (London: Murray, 1862)’. While it is useful to know the edition, what we really need is a gloss on ‘the Arab’s “two comforts”’. Additionally, some of the identifications are belated, coming on the second or third reference to a name, and occasionally there are redundancies, as in two notes on Giuseppe Garibaldi: ‘Italian general and patriot’ (218) and ‘picaresque Italian military leader and intrepid fighter’ (236). These editorial shortcomings, however, do not detract from the overall value of the edition.

As in McKenzie’s book, there seems to be tension in this edition between the value of the *Autobiography* as a text worthy of study for what it tells us about Simcox the nineteenth-century literary and political figure, and the insight into the last years of George Eliot’s life. Because much of the journal is a record of Simcox’s devotion to Eliot, it has always been approached as a supplement to our knowledge of Eliot’s life – hence the title of the present work: *A Monument to the Memory of George Eliot*. Simcox refers to her own life and aspirations as a monument: ‘I hope dimly to build your monument in the bettering of words and deeds to come’ (137). Yet, I still think this is an unfortunate (if commercially necessary) title. Prior to the efforts of Fulmer and Barfield to bring the complete journal to light, no one had seen the necessity to go beyond the significant portions of the *Autobiography* printed in Haight’s *Letters*. Simcox seems to me to be a subject worthy of her own biography, an account of her life drawn from sources other than this *Autobiography*. She paved the way for her life and career to be read as an appendage to that of her ‘beloved’, and this is what it has become. Such a talented, unconventional, independent woman deserves to be liberated from her voluntary emotional enslavement to the memory of George Eliot.

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