

Reviews

Axel Nissen, ed., *The Romantic Friendship Reader: Love Stories between Men in Victorian America*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2003; 286 pages; ISBN 1-55553-590-9; \$55.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.

At least since the publication of Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* in 1981 there has been a growing interest in the representations of same-sex love in Victorian literature. Faderman's classic study examines the numerous cultural variables affecting women's social and romantic relationships with each other. While Faderman's study focuses on love between women, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) explores the nature of homosocial relations between men. These two innovative scholarly landmarks can be seen as important predecessors to *The Romantic Friendship Reader*, a recent collection of love stories between men in Victorian America, edited by Axel Nissen.

The Romantic Friendship Reader includes fifteen stories and excerpts from novels, fourteen of which were written by male authors and one by a female author. Nissen's purpose in editing the anthology was "to bring back into view a representative selection of the largely forgotten texts" (3). The anthology does, indeed, contain some surprising excerpts from obscure and largely forgotten names in the literary past, together with very familiar examples from such classic American novels as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*, and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In addition to selecting the stories, Nissen has also written an introduction to the collection, and there is a brief headnote for the author of each story. Two of the selected authors, Charles Warren Stoddard and Bayard Taylor, are well-known figures in many gay literary histories, while Melville and James have long been popular subjects in queer literary criticism. Some of the remaining writers are more unusual choices, which shows Nissen's expertise in nineteenth-century American literature.

Nissen has edited an excellent selection of love stories between men in Victorian America. Frederick W. Loring's *Two College Friends* (1871) is a jewel of a book, and is reprinted in the collection as a complete text for the first time since its original publication. The historian Douglas Shand-Tucci rediscovered the text in 1996. Loring, a largely unknown author, was killed at the age of 21 by a band of Apaches while traveling to Arizona. *Two College Friends* is an exceptional story about the love of two friends which ends during the Civil War. Arguably the most interesting character is the sympathetic Professor who ardently loved the two friends, his former pupils, before they volunteered for the Civil War. Loring paints an exceptionally warm and daring picture of an older homosexual man – rare even in modern gay literature. *Two College Friends* has also inspired Nissen's choice for the cover of his book. An old

photograph (ca. 1860) shows two unknown young men sitting in an armchair. One of them has his arm round his friend's shoulders while the other rests his hand on his companion's lap.

Romantic friendship between men used to be sanctioned by historical models. As well as turning to classical antiquity, for example, Victorians invoked biblical models for loving ties between members of the same sex. The protagonists of the various stories in Nissen's collection repeatedly compare their friendship to the great and faithful friendships of ancient heroes, such as Orestes and Pylades or Damon and Pythias. It is no wonder, then, that contemporary readers see Hellenistic education and homosexuality in the Victorian era as practically synonymous. David and Jonathan are the two biblical figures who most frequently provide support for intimacy between men in the stories. As regards female love objects, they tend to be either a partner's sister or a close relative. As Nissen writes, "[a]s we will see time and time again, in bourgeois Victorian America, marrying your best friend's sister is the realistic alternative to marrying your best friend" (77). This observation reminds one of Sedgwick's study *Between Men*. She argues that homosociality, homophobia and homosexuality are essential ingredients in Victorian literature. According to Sedgwick, patriarchy has transformed homoerotic desire into homosocial bonding, but in each case the woman is left on the sidelines. A good example of a woman's problematic position in a love triangle is the excerpt from William Dean Howells's *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890).

Same-sex romantic friendships could have erotic overtones, but in the Victorian period they were ostensibly regarded as platonic, premarital and temporally limited among men of the middle and upper classes. In his introduction, Nissen uses Faderman's ideas and interprets the love stories between men as lacking overt sexual expression which would have implicated them in a dangerous "crime without a name." Most of the examples in this collection far from depict explicit erotic bonds between men, but they do not, however, exclude such a possibility either. Marylynne Diggs and Lisa Moore have strongly criticized Faderman, claiming that she desexualizes lesbians by making them invisible and depriving them of a historical voice. Furthermore, as Diggs argues, "the romantic friendship model overlooks both the pathologizing and the resistant discourses that emerged in the United States well before the turn of the century."¹ Nissen seems to ignore these other discourses in his evocation of an Edenic era of same-sex love. Indeed, in *The Romantic Friendship Reader*; he seems to paint an idyllic picture of love between men in Victorian America, much in the same way as Faderman deals with romantic friendship and love between women from the Renaissance to the present.

Nissen is not only content with his working definition of romantic friendship, he also wants to expand the term to include cross-racial intimate relationships as well as rela-

1. Marylynne Diggs, "Romantic Friends or a 'Different Race of Creatures'? The Representation of Lesbian Pathology in Nineteenth-Century America," *Feminist Studies* 21: 2 (Summer 1995), 320.

tionships between men who are not upper or middle class. Recent postcolonial queer criticism has explored colonial strategies used by western men who have developed homoerotic desire for men living in non-western cultures. In Nissen's collection, an excerpt from Stoddard's *A South-Sea Idyll* offers an excellent example of romanticizing the other, in which the Orient or the Pacific (America's own private Arcadia), easily becomes a playground for expressing suppressed same-sex longing. One can only surmise whether there would have been any texts depicting romantic friendships from the perspective of ethnic minorities.

One of our difficulties in understanding representations of romantic friendships is that the nineteenth-century reader was part of a system of connotations and assumptions that differ from our own. *The Romantic Friendship Reader* touches on one of the unspoken histories in the United States – the intimate partnerships of men in the West. Even today there are only a few authors who have tried to recreate the queer past of the American West, e.g. Annie Proulx and Tom Spanbauer. In Nissen's collection, their predecessors are Bret Harte and Bayard Taylor. As Nissen reminds us, women were only a twelfth of the population of California in 1850 and this disproportionate ratio left a lot of room for new patterns of affection between friends of the same-sex. Harte's "In the Tules" (1895) which, according to Nissen, is his most explicitly homoerotic story concludes the anthology. It is a morbid story about Martin Morse and Captain Jack Despard who meet, separate and reunite only to be savagely killed by the inhabitants of a lawless mountain town. For Nissen, "In the Tules" is more than merely a conclusion to his collection, it is a farewell to the period of romantic friendship.

The trial of Oscar Wilde took place in London in the same year as Harte wrote his short story. Harte was acquainted with Wilde and was aware of the widely publicized scandal. As Nissen writes, "[y]et Harte's story appeared at an explosive and conflicted time, when the paradigm of romantic friendship was increasingly under siege from medical, psychological, and legal discourses that would police and pathologize various intimate relationships between men and distinguish from the male population a subspecies to be known as 'homosexual'" (262-263). In other words, the stigmatizing word "homosexual" ended the romantic and idyllic – at least from a distance – period of male friendship in 1895. Is it really true that the late nineteenth century marked a watershed in the history of homosexuality in the United States? Or is this perceived presexological utopia a construction created to maintain the illusion that same-sex love was innocent and acceptable prior to its naming?

The Romantic Friendship Reader offers a rich picture of relationships between men in Victorian America. As is typical of anthologies, the reader is sometimes frustrated that some of the examples are only short excerpts and the novelistic whole is beyond his/her reach. The nature of anthologies, however, such as *The Romantic Friendship Reader*; is to awaken an interest in, and an understanding of, the topic of the anthology. Nissen succeeds well in this purpose. *The Romantic Friendship Reader* can be seen as an indispensable step towards rereading American nineteenth-century

literature, and it will provide its readers with many points of departure and debate. The anthology is carefully edited, and the reader will also warmly welcome the selected bibliography at the end of the book.

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Crux* (1911). Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003; 171 pages; ISBN 0-8223-3167-5; £12.95 paper.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1994,² and named the sixth most influential woman of the twentieth century five years later in a poll conducted by the Siena Research Institute.³ Acclaimed internationally for her 1898 *Women and Economics*, Gilman's prolific literary output included five additional nonfiction works, eight novels, and hundreds of short stories, poems, plays, essays and lectures from the 1890s to the 1930s. In the early twentieth century, Carrie Chapman Catt described her as "the most original and challenging mind, which the [women's] movement produced."⁴ Yet the majority of critical studies in the late twentieth century focused on just two of her many works, her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the utopian novel *Herland*. This pattern has been shifting in the past decade, and scholars of American studies, cultural studies, and women's studies have increasingly paid critical attention to the full range of her work.⁵ The 2003 reissue by Duke University Press of her 1911 *The Crux*⁶ is part of this larger process. As cultural theorist Dana Seitler emphasizes in her introduction to the new edition, we are fortunate to have the novel back in print. Seitler makes a convincing case for some of the ways in which the novel "enables an account of how the

2. The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Society – About Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Site hosted by Denise K. Knight, <http://www.cortland.edu/gilman/AboutCPG.htm>. Accessed Jan. 17, 2004. The National Women's Hall of Fame was established in 1969 in Seneca Falls, New York to acknowledge the contributions of American women both in terms of public recognition, and through a museum. See National Women's Hall of Fame – Our History, <http://www.greatwomen.org/history.php>. Accessed Jan. 17, 2004.

3. The Siena Research Institute was founded in 1980 at Siena College in New York. The organization conducts surveys from the local to national level in the United States on social, historical, economic, political, and cultural issues. Results have been published in both regional and national journals, academic as well as popular. See Siena College- Siena Research Institute – SRI, <http://www.siena.edu/sri/>. Accessed January 17, 2004.

4. National Women's Hall of Fame-Women of the Hall, <http://www.greatwomen.org/women.php>. Accessed January 17, 2004.

5. See for example Mark W. Van Wienen, "A Rose by any Other Name: Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman) and the Case for American Reform Socialism," *American Quarterly*, 55:4 (December 2003); Dana Seitler, "Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Regeneration Narratives," *American Quarterly* 55:1 (March 2003).

6. Excerpts from the novel were published in Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Fiction* (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1980).