

HARRISON, ORPHISM AND CAMBRIDGE

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Annabel Robinson. *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2002. Pp. xvi, 332. £45.00; CDN\$135.00.

Annabel Robinson thinks Jane Harrison (1850–1928) “deserves to be better known than she is” (p. 1). Robinson’s biography, well-argued and highly readable, may begin to remedy that historical injustice. Classicists will eagerly scan Robinson’s discussion of a scholar whose views on Greek religion and civilization still produce controversy. On another hand, enthusiasts of literary and social Bloomsbury will find much to occupy them, as the volume is speckled with sub-narratives of Harrison’s friendships with Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Lytton Strachey (whose sister Pernel also taught and administered at Cambridge University’s Newnham College and was Fellow and later Principal, 1917–41).

⁴ Suzara does include “A Complete List of Bertrand Russell’s Books”, but it is not as complete as Suzara thinks. Indeed, on page 63 of the text Suzara cites a Russell anthology not included in his list at the end. Suzara also provides a brief and highly selective list of books about Russell, marred most conspicuously by the claim that Katharine Tait’s *My Father Bertrand Russell* was edited by Ralph Schoenman (p. 114).

As for the university (and women in it), historians of Cambridge will find in Robinson's work an accessible sketch of a women's college (Newnham) in its early days, and a convenient review of the controversy over examinations and degrees for women. Indirectly, Robinson tells a good deal about the larger debate in early twentieth-century Cambridge over academic standards, quality, and assessment, a debate stimulated in large part by women's participation in a male-dominated institution.

The book is roughly chronological, taking Harrison from an emotionally difficult childhood in a well-to-do Yorkshire businessman's home, through secondary schooling in the Cheltenham Ladies' College, to Newnham as student (1875–79), and London, where Harrison lived on her £300 per annum private income. To this she added fees from lectures to colleges, societies, and museums. By the 1880s, she was publishing books and articles based on her close acquaintance with art and archaeological remains in the British Museum, and after 1888, knowledge of Greece acquired on visits there.¹

By 1900, her intellectual *modus operandi* was well established. Fascinated always by “the newest discoveries and theories” (Robinson, p. 113), Harrison tried to find the original folk-ways, the fundamental psychology, and the social practices that shaped the very earliest Greek religion, what she called “the links in the chain from primitive demons and spirits to the gods of Olympus” (*ibid.*). Harrison's work should be understood, along with that of Henry Butcher, Gilbert Murray, A. W. Verrall, and a whole galaxy of German researchers, as a determined attack on an older view: that the Homeric vision of the gods provided a complete account of Greek religion, and that literary sources were sufficient grounds for theory-making in the field. Harrison may have gone too far, too fast in the other direction, sometimes erecting uncertain, and even unbelievable theories on the basis of partial archaeological and anthropological evidence. Still, she was a courageous academic innovator.

Harrison “read her own experience into Greek literature” (p. 114). Her own religious views are an example of that reading. She was probably an agnostic in her early 20s, but her work on Greek religion gave Harrison a thorough basis for informed, sympathetic agnosticism about formal religious systems and practices.

Her disappointments with men are another example of the larger point, as those experiences led her to project a certain melancholy onto Homer, Pindar, Euripides, and so on. Even her commitment to feminist action, to peaceable

¹ For a convenient and thorough listing of Harrison's works, see Klaus-Gunther Wesseling's entry for “Jane Ellen Harrison” in the *Biographisch-bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2001), 18: cols. 576–601; and by the same author, *loc. cit.*, 18: cols. 956–1010, “Gilbert Murray”. See also Helmut Linneweber-Lammerskitten, “Bertrand Russell”, *loc. cit.* [1994], 8: cols. 1045–9. See the work's website at: <http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/> (consulted 1 April 2004).

political reform, and to sustained criticism of culture and politics in Victorian-Edwardian England, all owed something to her literary and scholarly excitements, and contributed to them. Harrison could not compartmentalize academic work and the usual emotions and occupations of an energetic woman.

Robinson uses three broad categories of evidence: the usual documentation of a private life in England and, after retirement, in France; the literary and scientific remains of a scholar; and, for my purposes, most importantly of the three, the dense relations between Harrison and her academic friends, mostly male. Because Robinson casts a wide net, her book distinguishes itself from all earlier works on Harrison; it comes as close humanly possible to solving the problems raised by the bonfire of many of Harrison's private papers (engineered by her young companion of the 1920s, Hope Mirlees). But for reasons to be made clear, I emphasize the third of Robinson's three evidential categories.

Robinson throws new light on the intellectual-artistic-political circle that included Bertrand Russell, the Darwins, Gilbert Murray, the Cornfords, A. W. Verrall, D. S. MacColl—in approximately descending order of political activism. All worked for peace, social democracy, internationalism, suffragism, and a modernized and popularized form of Hellenism.

The book is at least as much a study of relations between Harrison and other people, as it is of Harrison herself. We have dozens of pages on men that Harrison almost married—but who didn't wait around to get a commitment from her, or who moved away, or who died. There are fewer, but many pages on students and women colleagues in whose educational and social interests Harrison worked hard all her adult life. It is in her dense networks of relation and friendship that Harrison comes "to life" in this new book.

Two detailed examples will make the point, and incidentally show why the book deserves to be on a Russellian's shelf. The first is Jane Harrison's ties with Bertrand Russell himself.

Russell was a member of the Newnham College Council from 1901 to 1911,² concerned there with general administrative matters, and especially anxious to do something about lecturers' salaries. He joined the Council at the invitation of Mary Bateson and ... Jane Harrison. Bertrand and Alys Russell had already in 1898 donated the enormous sum of £1,000 to the College building fund, thus releasing Newnham from a bothersome debt. The Russell connection to Newnham and in some measure to Harrison was, then, significant in a formal sense. Besides, Russell's feminism was consistent from adolescence to death. Newnham, and all it represented, was a permanent concern. Newnham and the

² Sheila Turcon, "Russell at Newnham: an Unpublished Paper on Staff Remuneration", *Russell*, n.s. 7 (1987): 141–6.

cause of education for women were even more than that for Russell.

Robinson argues that Harrison experienced two “conversions” in her adult life, the first in response to D. S. MacColl’s well-founded criticism in 1887 of her research technique (pp. 87–91). That first experience sent her down a road on which she would be joined by Gilbert Murray, among others.

The second conversion was even more profound than the first. F. M. Cornford, yet another in the star-studded cast of Cambridge classicists, and Fellow of Russell’s own Trinity College from 1899 to 1943, had been one of the men with whom Harrison made a close emotional identification. So far as we know, like all the rest, that relation was emotional and no more. Even so, Cornford’s marriage had caused Harrison to be frankly jealous of his wife, Frances, and openly spiteful. Harrison employed “cruel words and unkind actions, with associated guilt” (p. 253). The whole thing came to worry and finally to depress Harrison. At last, to quote Robinson, “... like Bertrand Russell in 1902, she became more interested in ‘the religion of today.’”

... Last night I was awake all night with misery & utter loneliness such as often comes upon me now that I have to go about alone, only it was worse than anything I had ever felt, like a black despair & I was full of hate against Frances, unjustly of course, as the cause of my loneliness. I fell asleep at last & woke about 6 bathed in a most amazing bliss & feeling that all the world was new & in perfect peace. I can’t describe it—the New Birth is the best.... I will never call it God—that name is defaced, but it is wonderful, and you were right as always. (Harrison to Murray, n.d., *c.* late summer 1912; p. 253)

Russell’s conversion of 1901 was strikingly similar, and “Harrison admired this beautiful religion, but cannot have failed to notice Russell’s complete inability to live up to his ideals.”

The result for Harrison was a turn from her previous aesthetic, cultural, and psychological views. She took up the cause of Unanimism à la Charles Vildrac, and Solidarism à la Emile Durkheim and Henri Bergson, both of them nearing the height of their international influence. Her linguistic enthusiasms now led her on to master Spanish and Russian even more completely (she was expert in these, as in perhaps a dozen other modern tongues). When the Great War came, she found a “wedge was driven between her and Murray” (to which person I come in a moment), although this made her politics theoretically closer to those of Russell. Like Russell, Harrison thought the “dark side of the ‘herd instinct’” (p. 262) to blame for the War’s popularity, its savagery. She thought “fighting and sex are inextricably bound up” (quoted in Robinson, p. 263). Murray thought the herd instinct was a “natural” one, neither good nor bad, but open to be used well or badly by skilful leaders. Russell thought the herd instinct anti-rational and anti-humane (and this is a very short list of the epithets he might have preferred). Russell and Harrison were perhaps closer on

matters of violence and social order than were Murray and she.

It is tempting to downplay the Harrison–Russell connection, scattered as it was. But then Robinson suggests Russell’s “conversion” in 1901 led to a more intense relation with Jane Harrison than we had thought. Russell attended Harrison’s lectures fairly regularly in 1902–03, and Harrison was “among a group at the Russells’ home at Friday’s Hill, Surrey” at Whitsun 1902 (p. 149). The usual view is that Russell’s fondness for Evelyn Whitehead (was it love?) made it likely that her pain, during a mild heart attack, would cause him to have a mystical experience. Robinson now gives us a little more complete view of that experience and of its lasting effect, perhaps including a complex link between Russell and Harrison.

In 1903, Harrison published her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, and in 1912, her *Themis: a Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*. The second of these large books includes—in the subtitle—grateful references to Gilbert Murray and F. M. Cornford, but no mention of Russell. In correspondence (and here we have the help of Nicholas Griffin’s edited collection of Russell’s letters), and in Russell’s diary, there is sustained evidence of the interplay between these two. We know that Harrison had read and possibly understood Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics* in the year of its publication, writing to Murray to say so (quoted at p. 162). But nearly all of this was in private: not for Harrison and Russell the openness and self-publicity of Bloomsbury. When Russell made a clear and insightful list of Harrison’s faults and virtues, he put it in a private diary (quoted *in extenso*, p. 131).

By contrast, Russell’s survey of Greek philosophy (*HWP*, pp. 1–228) gladly and publicly acknowledged Harrison. (Indeed, he treats Harrison and Murray as central authorities [pp. 11–22] in discussing the rise of Greek civilization.) No wonder, as Russell found in Harrison’s Greeks two elements in his own personality: “It was the combination of passion and intellect that made [the Greeks] great, while they were great” (p. 21). “A revolutionary book, Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, emphasized both the primitive and the Dionysiac elements in the religion of ordinary Greeks ...” (p. 22). Alas! Harrison went further than Russell, celebrating the Orphic mysteries—ecstatic, mystical, and ascetic practices leading to personal union with the gods. For mysticism he grew to have little patience, and for asceticism almost none. Still, he could bow to Harrison’s original insight: the twofold genius of the Greeks.

Harrison’s relation to Gilbert Murray produced several hundred letters in both directions, as Murray professed in Oxford but Harrison taught in “the other place”. As ever, Harrison’s friendship with Murray carried an enormous emotional commitment. It was in one way the relation of pupil to master, as Harrison depended on Murray for detailed advice and criticism at each stage of her long and unpredictable intellectual voyage. In another, it was a friendship of

equally stubborn and determined egocentrics. Murray was a sweet egocentric, in the sense that he was ruthless about his work no matter how many children there were at home to care for, no matter how many calls there were upon his time. Because his work was in such a large measure for the sake of peace and harmony, especially after the War, one might not immediately notice his care for himself. Harrison was much less sweet, but not all that different in her intentions and her way of operating.

Harrison's friendships with Russell and Murray were carried on in frank and emotionally direct language. Neither of them posed a direct threat to Harrison's independence, and both were worthy comrades in the grand struggle for more understanding, for a more humane civilization, for women's rights and social justice generally.

Harrison's fascination with classical antiquity was overwhelmingly powerful. It filled a void in Harrison's mind and heart. Her story, well told here, forces us to ask if there were similar voids in the mind and heart of Russell, and indeed, of everyone with whom Harrison dealt in her long life.

There is at least one more book about Harrison to be written. Robinson hadn't room, for example, to make a thorough evaluation of Harrison's erratic rhetoric, of her inability to stay on theme and topic, to worry and to analyse a concept until it was perfectly clear (as Murray and Russell could do). Nor did Harrison maintain a steady balance between analysis, narrative, and pure description. Why was Harrison philological and antiquarian where Russell was analytical and carefully inferential? She wrote (with her usual frankness) to Murray: "I wish I had your mind which thinks things right thro' instead of my own troublesome one which stops short just to be a curse to myself & to my too kind friend [Murray]" (p. 145).

Although Robinson tells us of Harrison's work to make Newnham and Cambridge a centre of intellectual life for women, there is no sustained consideration of curriculum-making or administrative practice. We know Harrison had well-developed views on examinations and degrees, but we hear too little about her pedagogy. To see how such things matter, consider the fifth appendix to Russell's *Collected Papers* 3. Russell there gives his views on what a university might be, and underlines his opposition to traditional examinations. On similar lines, Russell a quarter-century later claimed that research "is at least as important" as teaching, that a passionate desire for knowledge is "a beckoning beauty luring men away from safety and ease to a glorious torment" (*OE*, pp. 242-3, 244). Did Harrison hold similar or different views on examinations, and teaching, and research, and why? I mentioned at the beginning of this review that Robinson had given an "indirect" picture of standards, values, and assessment. Despite the notoriously difficult problem of sources (those burnt letters), one would have liked the picture to be a little more direct.
