

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2000.08.31

Mary Beard, *The Invention of Jane Harrison*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 229. ISBN 0-674-00212-1. \$35.00.

**Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, The University of Pennsylvania
(smurnagh@sas.upenn.edu)**

Word count: 1506 words

Mary Beard's *The Invention of Jane Harrison* is fun to read and must have been fun to write. Since the sources for antiquity offer so little to satisfy our desire for personal details, autobiographical expressions, and insights into the texture of ordinary life, classicists can find a particular pleasure in turning to the more recent past with its richer documentation in letters, diaries, photographs, and personal memories. The British classicist Jane Harrison (1850-1928), best remembered for her charismatic personal style and her championship of ritual as a key to the understanding of Greek culture, is a wonderful subject from this point of view. She is far enough away to form a proper subject of intellectual history, yet her story can be pursued in the memoirs and diaries of her contemporaries and in an archive at Newnham, the Cambridge women's college where she was a Fellow for twenty-four years. This archive contains many of her letters, the slides which she used when giving her sensational lectures on Greek art, a record of who contributed to her memorial fund and how much, and evidence of the efforts of her student and companion Hope Mirrlees to establish herself as the only person qualified to tell Harrison's life while coyly refusing to do it.

One of Beard's themes is the inseparability of personal experience and scholarship, and she draws brilliantly on this material to tell us as much about the ephemera of late Victorian and early twentieth century Hellenism as about Harrison's famous books on Greek art and religion. She includes accounts of a fashionable dramatization of *The Tale of Troy* in London in 1883 and of travels on mule-back through the Peloponnese later in the same decade. And she quotes from informal notes in which Harrison wrote to Mirrlees as the "Elder Walrus" to the "Younger Walrus", or presented herself as the "elder Wife" of the same stuffed bear to which Mirrlees was the "young Wife."

But Beard also takes away as much as she gives us. With a sophisticated postmodern awareness of the partiality and constructedness of all "information", Beard shows that our view of Harrison as more knowable than the far-off inhabitants of classical antiquity is an illusion. Relatively recent and intimate sources are no more definitive than broken columns and torn papyri. The subject of a photograph may be hard to identify (although Beard makes more of an issue than seems warranted over a photograph that is labeled back and front with the name of its subject but does not, to her eyes, resemble that person). Our own conceptions of love between women only occlude the irrecoverable experiences behind late nineteenth century references to a "GA" (shorthand for "Grand Amour"). In addition, three quarters of a century is plenty of time for a person to become the subject of myth, which is no less a feature of modern intellectual history than of Greek culture. Here Beard shows that Harrison can be studied in the same terms through which Harrison herself studied the Greeks--a point that is elegantly made by Beard's use of the titles of Harrison's works as her chapter headings.

Beard demonstrates that much of what is commonly said about Harrison is, in fact, mythology, produced out of the hagiographic impulses of her friends, who have constructed a more noble and mistreated character than the record shows, or out of the retrospective orderliness of intellectual history. She points out that attempts to construct a neat narrative of turn-of-the-century Classics have made Harrison a seminal figure, when she was in fact reflecting as well as creating the intellectual currents of her day; have stressed her work on ritual at the expense of her other interests; and have turned a messy set of friendships and intellectual alliances into a much more defined group, the "Cambridge Ritualists." The study of classical scholarship turns out to be just like the study of classical antiquity as Beard defines it in her *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 1995, co-authored with John Henderson): not the disinterested recovery of the past, but a subjective reconstruction that tells us as much about its practitioners as about its object of study.

True to her understanding of the academic enterprise, Beard is open about her own stake in studying Harrison. She writes from the perspective of someone who has herself spent twenty-five years at Newnham College and admits that her work springs from "that familiar combination of irritation and gratitude, devoted loyalty and rebellion that almost anyone feels for their own institution and its icons" (xiii). Generally speaking, the irritation and rebellion are more on display in the book than the gratitude and loyalty, as Beard seems determined to dislodge Harrison from a pedestal constructed partly by her former pupils, partly by recent interest in early twentieth century ritualism and its connections to modernism and in women scholars and writers. This stance produces an entertaining, irreverent style, but it also leaves the reader wondering why we should care whether we can really know Harrison or not.

Beard is rudely dismissive of the admittedly disappointing 1988 biography by a non-classicist American scholar, Sandra Peacock, *Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and the Self*. Peacock certainly is overmatched by Beard where expertise in the history of Classics, a feeling for the culture of Newnham, and sensitivity to British modes of indirection and self-deprecation are concerned. Yet Peacock's desire to write about Harrison because she sees her as someone who achieved great things despite inner turmoil and outer obstacles seems more compelling than Beard's mission of taking her down a peg or two. (Beard should instead go after her publisher which, in a press release, describes Harrison as "a don at the male-dominated Newnham College.") Given the marginalization of Classics since the days when Harrison was a glamorous celebrity and the educated public that Beard calls "the chattering classes" were excited by archaeological controversies and classicizing theatricals, it is hard to see the overestimation of Harrison as a big problem. To the extent that there is a danger in myths associated with Harrison, I would locate it in her connection to ideas about primitive matriarchies, which have a surprisingly wide currency far beyond the world of classical studies.

Despite her aporetic approach, Beard is most interesting when she brings her impressive knowledge of the history of classical studies to bear on aspects of Harrison's milieu. She gives brief, but fascinating accounts of such topics as the intensely-felt controversy between German and English scholars of the 1890's over the reconstruction of the Greek theater or the introduction in 1879 into the Cambridge Classics curriculum of a broadly conceived archaeological component that actually anticipates the attention to ancient material culture and religious practices usually credited to Harrison. These passages shed helpful light on features of the discipline that are still with us and provide an excellent advertisement for Beard's other work on the history of archaeology.

The most fruitful and interesting result of Beard's irritation with Harrison and her legend is an extended meditation on the ups and downs of academic fame carried out through a juxtaposition of Harrison with her near contemporary and sometimes friend Eugénie Sellers (later Mrs. Arthur Strong). Sellers emerges as Harrison's forgotten double. Like Harrison, she was one of the first women students at Cambridge and had a brief career as a school teacher, followed by a

more rewarding life in London as a disciple of Charles Newton at the British Museum and a free-lance lecturer. She was in the same theatrical productions as Harrison, made trips to Greece at the same time, championed the same scholars and causes, and even briefly lived with Harrison, under terms which we cannot now recapture. But there was a rupture, for reasons we can only speculate about, and Sellers eventually moved to Rome, where she became the Assistant Director and Librarian of the British School for Art and Archaeology. During her lifetime, she was highly celebrated, and she was the author of several works on Roman art that were arguably as path-breaking as Harrison's books on the Greeks. But while Harrison has been growing in interest in recent years (after several decades of near oblivion following her death in 1928), Sellers is now virtually unknown. Beard offers a number of reasons for this, none of them having to do with intrinsic merit: the lack of pupils eager to promote themselves by keeping the flame, an embarrassingly tolerant view of Italian fascism, the greater glamour of Greek studies over Roman studies for much of the twentieth century. Another factor would certainly be Harrison's connections to major literary figures: she influenced T.S. Eliot and H.D., and was famously mentioned by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. In her championship of Sellers, Beard's skepticism about the judgments of history acquires a humane purpose. As members of a profession that is as obsessed with reputation as the Homeric battlefield, we can use a reminder of how many strange contingencies determine who are the winners and losers in the race for fame.

[Read Latest](#)

[Index for 2000](#)

[Change Greek Display](#)

[Archives](#)

[Books Available for Review](#)

[BMCR Home](#)