SYMONDS, John Addington (1840-1893)

John Addington Symonds was an English historian, biographer, and poet best known for his writings on sexuality. Though Symonds’s father was a well-known physician and author, Symonds did not distinguish himself academically early on. However, he met with success as a poet and a scholar while at Oxford. Though he had relationships with men as a student, he married Janet Catherine North in 1864; the couple had four children. Despite lifelong poor health, Symonds was prolific, publishing biographies of Michelangelo, Ben Jonson, Percy Shelly, and Walt Whitman, his seven-volume historical masterwork *The Renaissance*, and several volumes of poetry and memoirs. Symonds suffused his writing with references to homosexual love: for example, his translations of Michelangelo’s love sonnets correct previous translators’ excisions of male pronouns. In his 1873 work *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, Symonds pays tribute to Greek love between men, though dividing such relationships into “chivalrous” and “lustful” categories and categorizing the latter as “vice.” His 1891 *A Problem of Modern Ethics* argues explicitly for the understanding and decriminalization of homosexuality. Symonds’s influence can be seen in the work of Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, and Havelock Ellis, with whom he co-authored the sexological study *Sexual Inversion* before his death in 1893.

Bibliographies:

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A. Layne Craig

Texas Christian University