**Carpenter, Edward** (1844-1929)

Edward Carpenter was a British poet, essayist, philosopher, social activist, and early advocate for the social acceptance of same-sex relationships. Born in Brighton, East Sussex, the son of Charles Carpenter and Sophia Wilson, he was educated at Brighton College and studied mathematics at Cambridge. In 1868, Carpenter earned a fellowship at Cambridge and reluctantly took Anglican orders. When Leslie Stephen, later the father of Virginia Woolf, resigned his appointment at Cambridge due to religious doubt, he suggested Carpenter as his replacement. The reformist movement promoted at Cambridge by F. D. Maurice, Professor of Moral Philosophy and disciple of Henry Sidgwick, influenced Carpenter’s outlook. But Carpenter could not reconcile his clerical duties with his religious doubt and in 1873 resigned his fellowship.

By this time Carpenter had become aware of his homosexuality. He acquired a copy of William Michael Rossetti’s bowdlerized edition of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and in 1874 wrote to the elder poet initiating a relationship that lasted until Whitman’s death in 1892. Following Whitman’s lead, Carpenter wrote his poem *Towards Democracy* (1883). Like Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, the poem would grow in volume over the next two decades.

Edward Carpenter is best remembered as a pioneering advocate for the naturalness and social legitimacy of same-sex relationships, providing an intellectual defense as well as a practical model for such relationships in such works as *Homogenic Love and its Place in a Free Society* (1894), *The Intermediate Sex* (1912), and *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk* (1914). Yet, it is important to note that Carpenter’s activism in this area was connected to a broad agenda promoting the radical reform of contemporary British life and society. He became acutely aware of the impact of industrialization upon the working classes, including the effects of the decline of traditional methods of production, environmental pollution, the distribution and ownership of land, and the general degradation of workers’ lives. Though he was himself a beneficiary of a private income, Carpenter felt the elaborate, wasteful manner of upper-class life was fueled by the prevalence of such incomes. He advocated a simplification of life, including vegetarianism, austere, practical furnishings, manual labor, and utilitarian dress, which led to his signature woolen jacket and sandals. He pursued theosophy and Asian philosophy and religion, in part due to his acquaintance with Annie Besant and his relationship with the Cambridge educated Sri Lankan Ponnambalam Arunachalam, whom he visited in East Asia in 1890.

Carpenter’s activism brought him into contact with William Morris, John Ruskin, Roger Fry, Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx, Peter Kropotkin, Bernard Shaw, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the Fabian Society, and the British Socialist Party, among other groups. In this period, his thought is best summed up in his *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure* (1889/93). Carpenter became acquainted with the Bloomsbury group through his friendships with Goldsworthy Lowes Dickenson, Roger Fry, and E. M. Forster. By this time, he had settled in a Derbyshire farmhouse in the village of Millthorpe, living there with his life partner George Merrill. Forster visited Millthorpe and, deeply impressed with Carpenter’s life and his relationship with Merrill, was inspired to begin his *Maurice*, perhaps the first novel of an explicitly homosexual relationship. Though later derided as a faddist of the radical fringe, Carpenter took significant opposition to the Boer War and World War I, and he supported the Suffragist Movement and the reproductive rights and personal freedom of women.

Bibliography:

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