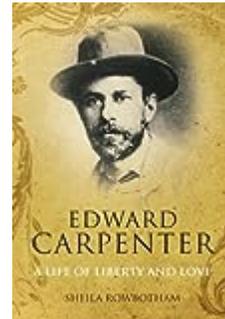




**Sheila Rowbotham.** *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love.* London: Verso, 2008. vii + 565 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84467-295-0.



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## Thoroughly Modern Edward

What are we to do with Edward Carpenter? Conventional wisdom suggests that the sage of Millthorpe's greatest influence coincided with the zenith of ethical socialism, that dizzying blend of leftist ideology, labor politics, alternative lifestyles, vegetarianism, aestheticism, arts and craft, feminism, mysticism, and homoerotically inclined comradeship. The rise of parliamentary labor politics and socialist thought with a more economic basis in the twentieth century, though, seemed to have left Carpenter somewhat high and dry. As a result, many of his enthusiasms looked rather old-fashioned and impractical to the more hard-headed leftists of the twentieth century, and his influence on progressive politics, at once so great, seemed to have become increasingly evanescent. Carpenter's bucolic "simple life" of sandals, raw food, and sun baths, all guaranteed by safe investments in the Victorian railways; his orientaling visions of Eastern mysticism; his enthusiasm for long-forgotten theories of higher perception or "cosmic consciousness"; his failure to ever commit himself to any particular avenue of practical politics; and perhaps,

above all, his view of homosexual men and women (the intermediate sex) as representatives of a higher evolutionary form seemed for a long time the very essence of blithe utopianism, and, to many on the left, he appeared every inch an embarrassing and irrelevant Victorian dilettante.

A proper intellectual biography of Carpenter has been long overdue, and, with this book, which places him at the center of many intellectual currents and movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he has finally received a full treatment that promises to do for him what E. P. Thompson's William Morris did for that other great Victorian seer. Sheila Rowbotham points out that Carpenter's ideas, which seemed so outrageous to many later socialists and even quaint to materialist moderns, were, in fact, not only typical of their time but also enormously influential on many of the figures who became significant in more orthodox forms of twentieth-century politics and trade unionism. In his own way, Rowbotham says, Carpenter participated in and anticipated much of the cultural politics that we

have inherited, helping to âprod the modern world into beingâ (p. 1).

Not only that, but Rowbothamâs Carpenter is one of the great networkers, forever placing himself at the center of almost all significant movements of Victorian and Edwardian social and political thought. Carpenter not only knew everyone—his house in the village of Millthorpe near Sheffield was a welcoming place of pilgrimage for almost anyone interested in socialism—but he also was able to remain on good terms with most of them for decades, at the same time gaining friends and comrades in new political and cultural movements. At various times, Carpenter counted among his friends and associates Walt Whitman, H. M. Hyndman, Olive Schreiner, E. M. Forster, George Bernard Shaw, Siegfried Sassoon, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramsay MacDonald, Keir Hardie, Tom Mann, Emma Goldman, Charlotte Despard, Isabella Ford, Havelock Ellis, and Marie Stopes, not to mention countless trade unionists and local working men, one of whom, George Merrill, shared his simple life in a Yorkshire village. Those influenced by his ideas were even more numerous, and included many whose minds were formed by the eddying currents of progressive thought. Embryonic poets, such as Robert Graves, who had picked up Carpenterâs defense of homosexuality *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) in 1913 and written to thank the author for its insights, became part of Carpenterâs ever-expanding circle, as did the progenitors of the garden city movement Raymond Unwin and Patrick Geddes, along with countless others engaged in the practicalities of simple living, trade unionism, pacifism, progressive education, and liberal sexual politics. He even had his readers and acolytes in the Harlem Renaissance.

This formidable address book helped him to stay abreast not only of socialism but also of trade unionism, theosophy, spiritualism, anthropology, sexology, syndicalism, guild socialism, vegetarianism, local government reform, free love, new theories of the dynamic unconscious, and even animal rights. Although his form of ethical socialism might be assumed to have been in decline as the twentieth century progressed, Carpenter remained a popular speaker and writer, addressing a varied audience. Between 1900 and 1910, he addressed local branches of the Labor churches, the Independent Labour Party, and the Fabians, as well as Theosophists, the National Federation of Head Teachers, and the Christian Social Union and Progressive League, attracting socialist intellectuals like Holbrook Jackson or J. M. Keynes as well as labor militants, like Alf Barton, a member of the Sheffield Trades Council.

Carpenter also acted as perhaps *the* focal point of the age for discussion of homosexuality and society, especially for those individual men and women seeking knowledge and reassurance about their own âhomogenicâ instincts. Many of them, some literary and some ordinary, made their way to Millthorpe to discover how a comradely life might actually be lived, and often to express their reverence for Carpenter as its personification. In this respect, Carpenterâs notion of an âintermediate sex,â and its relationship to higher consciousness, has to be seen not as some *recherchÃ©*, pre-scientific Edwardian dream, but as one of the most influential ways of understanding sexuality in the early twentieth century. In many ways, Carpenterâs views, which translated anthropology, sexology, and many spiritual speculations into more friendly and digestible forms, were far more influential than any of those ideas alone in defining what was meant by homosexuality, and how it might belong in the world. For Carpenter, the fact that homosexuality combined features of the masculine and the feminine, combined with the realization that âintermediatesâ had by definition to stand apart from custom and convention, meant that they were more acute and sensitive than ânormalâ people. This feeling was bolstered by his research into Eastern religions, which seemed to show a connection between homosexuality, higher perception, and the priestly or shamanistic roles allotted to intermediate types among âprimitive folk.â

Carpenter hoped that the special faculties of intermediates, and their desire for friendship with working people, would help them to cement relations between the classes, and thereby provide an essential element of social reform. This, along with his conviction that marriage should be a partnership of equals, proved difficult to sell to more mainstream thinkers, and by 1903 he was complaining that his socialist friends had begun to regard his sexual theories as a â'a red herring trailed in the path of democracy'â (p. 281). Yet, even though socialist politics might have been indifferent to the intermediate sex, Carpenterâs long-standing interest in questions of higher consciousness was by no means as outlandish as it seems. Rowbotham reminds us that it should be seen in the context of the many diverse investigations into the dynamic unconscious that took place at the turn of the nineteenth century, and which ranged from the philosophy of William James (yet another Carpenter correspondent) to psychical research and psychoanalysis.

Although he placed himself at the heart of many intellectual and cultural trends, Rowbothamâs Carpenter is preeminently someone intimately involved with prac-

tical socialist politics. In this guise, he was a facilitator, befriending, encouraging, and sometimes not only bankrolling Sheffield trade unionists, socialists, and syndicalists, but also helping national political figures. His writing and speaking in support of socialism was indefatigable. However, Carpenter was never a completely political animal, mainly for two reasons. The first is the fact that at the core of his politics lay the revolution of the heart, the transformation of self that ethical socialism so desired, and an increasingly unfashionable notion in the first decades of the twentieth century. This central theme was not only obscured by Carpenter's commitment to a variety of different causes, but also almost always went undercover for fear of annoying or alienating those with less expansive minds—his chief method was guile and indirection. The second obstacle to this reading is that he was never the committee man, and could not tolerate for long the everyday reality of meetings and resolutions. Instead, he, much like Morris, remained the keeper of the Left's political unconscious, always there to point out its obscure wishes and inconvenient visions. Forster noted after Carpenter's death in 1929 that the Labor movement had distanced itself from his legacy, and instead 'advanced by committee meetings and statistics towards a State-owned fac-

tory attached to a State-supervised recreation ground.' However, Carpenter, he suggested, 'felt no enthusiasm over municipal baths and municipally provided bathing-drawers. What he wanted was News from Nowhere and the place that is still nowhere, wildness, the rapture of unpolluted streams, sunrise and sunset over the moors, and in the midst of these the working people whom he loved, passionately in touch with one another and with the natural glories around them' (p. 442).

Rowbotham, however, disperses the mystical cloud that tended to gather around the sage of Millthorpe, and instead shows that Carpenter was not merely a utopian, a dweller in nowhere. Instead, he spanned mainstream and alternative politics, refusing to take up residence anywhere, or to belong wholly to any particular movement. Perhaps this explains his ghostly presence in the twentieth century, in which many Carpenterian ideas—organic farming, thinking locally and acting globally, companionate marriage, the simple life, egalitarian sexual politics—have long since been part of mainstream culture, though frequently denuded of their original political commitments. This book is an elegant argument for the reconnection of that Carpenterian unity and for the continuing, not to say pressing, relevance of the man himself.

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