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John Addington Symonds & Janet Ross: a friendship

by Ben Downing

On the warm friendship between the art historian & the Anglo-Florentine writer.

Although John Addington Symonds published dozens of books during his lifetime, he's remembered primarily for the one he didn't. A protégé of Benjamin Jowett at Balliol, a respected popularizer of classical and Italian subjects, a friend to the likes of Stevenson, Gosse, and Leslie Stephen, and a married father of four, Symonds seemed a model Victorian literatus. Underneath, however, the man was a cauldron of conflicted emotion, and for one simple reason: he was gay to his fingertips. After years of suppressing his desires, he began acting on them—quite prolifically—in his late twenties. The nervous ailments that had plagued him dropped away with his trousers, and he was easier in his skin from then on. Yet still he chafed at having to keep his proclivities hidden; only his wife (who grudgingly tolerated his affairs) and a few friends knew of them. And, so, determined to leave an honest record of his experience, he wrote a...

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Ben Downing's *Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross* was published in 2013 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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