

Pauline A. Phipps
*Constance Maynard's Passions:
Religion, Sexuality, and an English Educational
Pioneer, 1849–1935*

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Constance Maynard is best known as a pioneer of female education in nineteenth-century England. Founder of Westfield College, London, she was committed to providing academic education for her sex. Her name appears in the standard roll calls of mid-Victorian feminists and educators that include Emily Davies, Barbara Bodichon, Dorothea Beale, and Frances Mary Buss. Maynard was educated at the Cambridge college founded by Davies, Girton College. Indeed, she was one of the “Girton Pioneers,” a small group of women who were the first to attend the college when it was located at Hitchin, near Cambridge. Pauline Phipps does not confine her study of Maynard to educational issues, though these certainly preoccupied Maynard. Rather, Phipps provides a thoughtful analysis of her subject’s personal life, her religious faith, and her often-tortuous emotional relationships with female colleagues and students.

Constance Maynard had a privileged childhood. Born in 1849, her parents were wealthy Protestant Evangelicals. Her father had consolidated a significant family fortune with successful investments in South African diamond mining. Maynard grew up surrounded by servants and by material comforts. Her father, however, was typical of Evangelicals, and shunned society events, dinner parties, concerts, and the theatre. From an early age, Maynard was aware of the tensions between good (represented by self-denial) and evil (evident in self-indulgent acts of depravity). This awareness never left her, and indeed grew to such proportions that it seems to have distorted her understanding of how to express human love. She had a series of intense emotional relationships, with both men and women, which are examined closely in the book.

It seems as though Maynard “performed” various roles, such as lover, wife, husband, and mother. Unsurprisingly, the relationships were either frustrated by outside forces or suffocated by the protagonists. By looking at Maynard’s life as a passionate engagement with love/sexuality and with religious belief, Phipps shifts the focus from Maynard as educator. Almost all of the discussions of Maynard’s educational achievements are backdrops for the main performance: Maynard as tormented lover.

Phipps is thorough in her research, and makes particularly fine use of Constance Maynard’s extraordinarily frank diaries. Maynard’s first great love was Professor Lewis Campbell, who was married to her cousin, Fanny. It was he who encouraged her to pursue higher education, telling her of the new “College for Women,” that Emily Davies had founded in 1869. Maynard persuaded her parents to allow her to go there in 1872. There she met a fellow “Girton Pioneer,” Louisa Lumsden, with whom she had a passionate relationship. She clearly loved Lumsden, who has emerged from the pages of history as a domineering, impetuous, and selfish woman. Lumsden, who was appointed to Cheltenham College in 1876, invited Maynard to join her there. Maynard was, at first, blissfully happy. Later, she reflected on the four years with Lumsden as an unhappy marriage. Lumsden’s agnosticism offended Maynard, and Lumsden clearly thought that Maynard was a poor teacher. They argued frequently, leaving Maynard feeling intellectually beaten. Maynard had other same-sex relationships (including strong attachments to students) that were characterized by periods of intense emotional turmoil. The book attempts to account for the complex ways in which Maynard engaged in these relationships, while also examining her introspective and self-denying spirituality. Phipps has produced a study that is thoughtful, scholarly, and engaging, despite its subject being both difficult to really know, and difficult to like.