

# Victorian Proto-punk, Riot Grrls

## The Literary Legacy of Helen and Olivia Rossetti

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In 1903, two young sisters, Helen and Olivia Rossetti, published a novel under the pseudonym Isabel Meredith, chronicling their lives as radicals, propagandists, and key figures in the European anarchist movement of that era. Prior to that, while still in their teens, they edited *The Torch—An International Newspaper of Communist Anarchism*, from 1891 to 1896, which scandalously called for sexual equality, the destruction of religion, and the end of state rule by violent means.

Their novel, *A Girl among the Anarchists*, was unprecedented for the scope of its political content, and revelatory of life in an underground movement. Though it remains a keen study of radical responses to universal feelings of rage, boredom, and resignation at the heart of girlhood experience, it has managed to slip through the cracks of anarchist and feminist history.

The book's honest and unapologetic depiction of subversive culture contains an irreverence, pride and swagger that would not appear in women's literature for another sixty years. It rings with self-possession that is still broadly lacking from the modern "chick lit" of today.

Originally published in London by Duckworth & Company, the novel was met with hostile criticism and perceived as an oddity to the extent that it disappeared for ninety years, burying with it the history of *The Torch*.

In 1992, during a resurgence of interest in anarchism created in part by growing international awareness of militant opposition to the World Bank and IMF, the University of Nebraska Press republished the text. Now, 16 years later, it is distributed by the anti-authoritarian AK Press.

The novel's protagonist and the DIY attitudes and histories of the authors fit well with the anarcho-punk rock aesthetics associated with AK. The book's reemergence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century makes it possible to recast the Rossetti girls in a new light as proto-"riot grrls;" young, educated middle-class women, violently opposed to authority, the dominant culture, and feminine aesthetics. The sisters were a recognized part of a counter-culture, but irreverently critical of their own "scene," particularly in terms of misogyny, incompetence and irresponsibility toward others.

While the issues addressed in the novel concerning power, violence, authority, and the idiosyncrasies of anarchists, possess a timelessness within the movement, readers who could probably best relate to the book's protagonist, may have been several generations from being born. *The Torch* anticipated the radical girl-zines and blogs of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and in many cases went well beyond them in its analysis.

Readers of contemporary magazines like *Bust* and *Bitch*, *Fifth Estate*, and *Anarchy*, would find their politics and aesthetics fully represented by the literary and journalistic writing of the Rossettis and the book's narrator, Isabel Meredith.

## Emma Goldman describes the sisters

The Rossetti sisters (Olivia-1875 to 1960; Helen-1879 to 1969) were nieces of the English, Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Their mother and father were interested in art, literature and politics. It is easy to picture the privileged Victorian sisters taking up a cause that would hold social, aesthetic or academic interests, but it is a stretch to imagine girls just past the age of puberty cranking out feminist and anti-government tracts in their bedroom.

Emma Goldman describes the sisters and their publishing efforts in her autobiography, *Living My Life*, thusly: "They were developed in mind and body beyond their age. They did all the writing for the newspaper, even setting the type and attending the press work themselves. *The Torch* office, formerly the nursery of the girls, became a gathering place for foreign anarchists, particularly from Italy. While in London I spent much time with them greatly enjoying their prodigious hospitality and atmosphere of their circle."

Helen and Olivia quickly became pivotal figures in the European socialist and anarchist movements, soliciting and publishing seminal works within the movement including articles by Goldman, Sabastien Faure, Louise Michel, Malato and Malatesta. They were also the first to print George Bernard Shaw's, "Why I am an Anarchist," as well as stories by Emille Zola and illustrations by Pissarro.

At the time of *The Torch's* popularity, women worked primarily as teachers, household servants, or prostitutes. Upper class women, like Helen and Olivia, were expected to read, sew and receive guests, changing into a variety of different restrictive v-waist dresses for each activity. They were entirely dependent on male family members and no laws existed to protect their economic, social, or reproductive rights.

One can imagine the spiritual impoverishment of this kind of life—the horror and rage of living under these expectations. This institutionalized repression was a catalyst to the privileged Rossettis who championed political causes in ways others could not or would not due to limitations in their intellectual, economic or social upbringings.

## Desperate acts of women

In contrast to Helen and Olivia's literary and political interests, the majority of writing by English women published during the same period comprised romances, children's literature, fairy tales, historic, and patriotic novels. Even today the majority of women's literature is focused on romance, mysteries, and sensationalist memoir.

According to Angus McLaren, who wrote about sexual restrictions of the era, "*The Torch* stressed that it was necessary to understand, if not condone the desperate acts of women who, given existing social mores, were endangered by their own fertility. The journal defended Minnie Wells and Amy Gregory, who were sentenced to death for having ... drowned her two babies. In March 1895, *The Torch* similarly represented Amy Gregory, who had strangled her child, as a victim of society. Was it a surprise it asked, that Gregory a twenty-three-year-old laundress who having given birth in a workhouse, starving, turned out of her house and unemployed should have killed her baby daughter to protect her from a life of pain?"

Before the Rossettis were eighteen, they had used their privilege and connections not only to publish, but to fund anti-state activities, host, hide and transport anarchist radicals, and maintain a covert network of support for a group of militant Italian anarchists and internationalists.

In addition to reproductive rights, the sisters were in complete support of free love and sexual equality for women. In the novel, their alter-ego, Isabel Meredith, is not stigmatized by speaking frankly about sex and politics with men, and she often sleeps with them in the paper's office. Meredith also gives many examples of characters for which non-traditional sexual arrangements are working well. The sisters used their newspaper as a platform to bring these issues to the public.

McLaren writes, "*The Torch* paraded an advanced sex-radicalism. It attacked as 'the goody-goody old cats' the prudes who attempted to close the Empire, a popular music hall, castigated the police for harassing prostitutes, and leapt to the defense of Edith Lanchester, a young woman who had been committed to an asylum by her parents when she sought to live, unmarried with a socialist." Ideas that women should experience the same pleasure and control over their sexual lives were also part of the newspaper's vision.

“In Britain, *The Torch* went further in its sex radicalism than any other leftist journal,” McLaren noted, “The nineteenth-century British Socialist movement was fairly prudish. Most of *The Torch*’s articles on sex issues were the product of Fersenheim, a Berliner who wrote under the name of F.S. Paul. He followed a familiar leftist line in attacking bourgeois marriage as a crass commercial transaction, but also chided other anarchist males for not recognizing women’s sexual needs. He sounded a new note for the left in England in defending birth control. Fersenheim also said ‘every woman has an inalienable right to do with her body whatever she likes, to give herself to whomever she likes.’”

The girls’ writing on women’s sexual equality prefigures the work of Simone de Beauvoir on sexual liberation by decades.

## **A specific call to smash the state**

The fact that this work was being disseminated by young women living at home was unprecedented, but the popularity of *The Torch* indicates that their political views had found a readership interested in both anarchism and feminist cultural aesthetics. And, indeed, there were young educated people turning away from traditional Victorian life, answering a specific call to smash the state.

Like many in that era, the girls were radicalized by reading Peter Kropotkin’s pamphlet, “Appeal to the Young,” a slim publication written in 1880 which was directed by the Russian anarchist mainly to an audience of “intellectuals.” Kropotkin appears as a major character in the novel, his name changed to Voratin, and readers can only assume that this is a true account of Helen and Olivia’s coming to anarchism. The Rossettis also met Kropotkin shortly after they had begun production on the paper as is described in David Weir’s *Anarchy and Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism*.

Weir writes, “When Prince Peter Kropotkin first visited Rossetti, he was informed that his presence was requested in the nursery. He bustled off full of benevolence and was considerably surprised when a girl of fourteen handed him a printed sheet of paper and said dryly ‘will you sign a statement to say that you agree with the political platform of *The Torch*?’ The eminent anarchist was delighted to do so...”

As *The Torch* gained recognition and popularity, the Rossettis moved their office out of their nursery and into the London streets, renting (and being evicted from) a series of bohemian digs.

Their character Meredith lauds the others in the novel for their complexity, intellect and plain hard boiled eccentricities. But she also assigns mocking nicknames to slacker comrades such as “the buttered muffin” who is described as “a youth of no particular intelligence, and certainly no ideality or political or anti-political convictions. I was quite at a loss to conjecture why he had followed the anarchists into exile—his only apparent reason being a disinclination to study and a desire to escape from school.”

Another character, emblematic of masculine laziness is named simply, “Short.” Which he is in every way; short on intelligence, patience, compassion, dedication, solidarity, money, ethics, and perhaps there is a sexual innuendo as well. Short is no doubt the anarchist foil which has made some critics feel the book is little more than a mockery of the movement. Even in the introduction to the 1992 edition, Jennifer Shaddock criticizes Meredith’s characterizations of anarchists as “camp” and “parody.”

## **Girl’s guide to revolution**

But as many of us know, Short is very real, and the movement is constantly at risk of attracting “Shorts,” those who see the philosophy and aesthetics of anarchism as a way to avoid personal responsibility, or are short on sanity. I would hazard to guess there are few anarchist or left publications in the world that do not struggle with the ethical question of what to do with the member or contributor whose mental health issues masquerade as ideology.

The Rossettis bring this fully to light, expressing exasperation at the Shorts and at the tolerance within radical circles for the Shorts of the world. These common characters and very common questions make the book a sardonic sort of girl’s guide to revolution.

The novel also exposes misogyny within the movement, something Helen and Olivia were confronted with continually, as this fictionalized comrade makes clear: “Women are so rarely of much use in a movement like ours. They so rarely seem able to forget themselves, to detach themselves from the narrow interests of their own lives. They are slaves of their past. Of their passions and of all manner of prejudices.”

Their answer to the masculine slackers and misogynist ideologues appears in the form of Vera Marcel—an amalgam of females in the movement described as: “A woman of blood and smoke and infinite mercies towards men and beasts...who had never hesitated at shedding blood in the good cause, nor feared to face death for it; but with her friends and especially with children, she was gentle as the gentlest of her sex and nothing can describe the extreme sweetness of her voice.”

Marcel is the Rossettis’ direct answer to the sexism that was (and still is) so much a part of the experience of being a politically active woman.

In their novel, the Rossettis took on the topic of creating an anti-authoritarian movement with a practicality that is still often lacking in anarchist circles, combining the principles of mutual aid and personal responsibility with a call for the love of beauty and reflection. Their work predates Guy Debord and the Situationists by half a century in decrying boredom among all classes as a corrosive social evil and anarchism as the answer.

Theirs were not party line attitudes gleaned from reading Bakunin, but individual voices that were brushed aside by anarchist and mainstream critics alike. The only widely published review *A Girl among the Anarchists* received was rife with misogynistic hostility.

In 1903, *The New York Times* ran a few brief paragraphs on the novel which appeared alongside praise for Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad, both of whom were publishing new works that year. (Conrad had, in fact, interviewed the Rossettis for his novel, *Nostramo*, and used the girls’ accounts of the 1894 anarchist bomb attack on the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, London, which he recounted in *The Secret Agent*.)

In his *Times* review, W.L. Alden wrote that he had not even read the book, but went on to say, “If the writer had described herself as a woman among the anarchists, no fault could have been found with her title page, but when she deliberately asks us to consider her as a girl, she impliedly asks us to consider her book as unworthy of attention. For surely there can be little worth noticing in what a girl might write concerning political matters, or for that matter, concerning anything.”

Anarchist historian George Woodcock writing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century also has condescending words for the sisters whose work he describes as “inspired in admiration.” His account of their life in the movement reduces the girls to a happy accident in radical history.

He failed entirely to discuss the merit of the ideological and political work taken on by the Rossettis, including their funding of direct action and providing sanctuary for fugitives, work which is explicitly and complexly covered in the novel and achieved at the risk of imprisonment. The critics who do tackle the Rossettis seem stuck on a constant refrain pointing to their immaturity, privilege, naivete, and charm, an utterly strange response in discussing children who, for their entire adolescence, called cheerfully for murder.

The book’s final pages deal specifically with Meredith’s desire to have a fully integrated life, one allowing for sexual and intellectual freedom, revolutionary activity, loving commitment, and acceptance of beauty and complexity. Unhappy with both the romanticism of patriarchal society and the masculinist revolution that seeks to correct it, she is left looking at the emptiness of living with either of these choices. This romanticism, which places ideology over individual pleasures and human necessities, convinces her to leave the newspaper.

The decision resonates with Meredith’s existence as an ordinary, solitary, individual without faith in romantic prospects, not even for the political movement in which she was held in thrall. This dislocation is born from a desire that comprises the very core of anarchist thought expressed, even if fancifully, by Emma Goldman: “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

The Rossettis remained controversial figures after ceasing publication of *The Torch*. Olivia married an Italian anarchist, moved to Italy where she worked for the League of Nations. She also, shockingly, was an early supporter of fascism and campaigned to release poet Ezra Pound from prison for his collaboration with the Italian fascists. Helen continued to write, publishing three significant books on art history.

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