

BOOK. A Victorian Heroine in Venice

Valeria De Bresciani (September 07, 2017)



Evelina, A Victorian Heroine in Venice, by Judith Harris, is published in the UK by Fonthill Media Ltd., including in a Kindle edition, and is available in print in the US in October.

In the age of Queen Victoria (1837 to 1901) women such as Florence Nightingale and suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst led extraordinary lives.

But for most, beginning with Queen Victoria herself, a woman's place was home and hearth, and little more. In that world Countess Evelina van Millingen Pisani was a rare, stunning exception. She was also a Cinderella at least twice over, as recounted in the first ever biography of her life, written by journalist and author Judith Harris, who had the advantage of unique access to Evelina's family archives.

The surprising and hitherto untold story of Evelina's long life is a compelling drama that begins in the era of Lord Byron.



Evelina's father, Dr. Julius van Millingen, freshly graduated from university in Edinburgh, fell in love with a young Scottish woman, whose Protestant clergyman brother forbade their union because Julius's mother was Catholic. Broken-hearted, Julius raced off to join Lord Byron in his defense of the West from the Ottoman Turks.

As it happened, Byron was already ill, and worsened rapidly. Together with an Italian doctor, young van Millingen agreed that the cure required Byron to be bled, as was common at that time. Byron succumbed, and the other doctor managed to lay public blame for the death of the poet upon van Millingen. As a result, van Millingen never returned to the England of his birth, but went on to spend the rest of his life in Constantinople. There he became a medical consultant to the sultan, and married a very young and very flighty French woman.

Evelina was their first of their three children. By the time she was five, Julius van Millingen's marriage was at an end, and he shipped the girl off to Rome, to stay with her Catholic grandmother in an apartment in Palazzo Odescalchi. Life was not easy: her ever more turbulent mother showed up from time to time. When Julius fought to bring Evelina home to Constantinople, granny refused. Only the 1848 revolution made her return possible, and Evelina, by then 18, went from semi-outcast to debutante.

At 21, however, she was a beauty but still unwed, a flower wilting in the Constantinople marriage garden. When kind Austrian friends invited her to visit them in Venice, she appeared at La Fenice dressed in Ottoman style. She caused a sensation. At sight of her Count Pisani, descendant of a famous doge, fell in love and married her.

For almost three decades their life was brilliant. They lived in a fine apartment in Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal whose upper stories were purchased by Americans. This was the dawn of the industrial revolution, and at that time Milan had eclipsed Venice, and most Venetian nobles were reduced to poverty. Instead Venice became home to Americans enchanted with the lagoon city's aura of elegant decadence. That palazzo became a haven for these, for intellectual British and for gays from England fleeing from the risk of imprisonment for homosexuality. These were her good friends, along with novelist Henry James. He described Evelina as a great beauty and indeed his ideal literary heroine. In that cosmopolitan society Evelina was a star, albeit a star with a broken heart because the couple had no children.

And then the roof caved in. After 27 years of marriage her husband died, and Countess Evelina discovered that he was deeply in debt. To repay his debts she borrowed money from a bank, and took over management of a vast but run-down Pisani property in the swamp-ridden Po Valley. Becoming a working farmer, aided by share croppers, she rebuilt the farm, adding extraordinary improvements, including a luxurious English-style garden of her design, which is still open to the public. Her apartment in Palazzo Barbaro is now a hotel, by the way.

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