



The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship

Elizabeth Mavor

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Eleanor Butler's family wanted her enter a convent. Sarah Ponsonby was fending off the unwanted attentions of her guardian. All that both women wanted was to live together and devote their lives to each other, and in 1778 they ran away from their aristocratic homes in Ireland to settle in Llangollen, Wales, to devote themselves to 'delicious seclusion' and 'romantic friendship'. Their chosen path was not an easy one: their families disowned them, and, accustomed to a comfortable life, they were soon in debt. This did not stop them transforming Plas Newydd, the little cottage they chose, into the Gothic residence of their dreams, complete with well-stocked library and extensive gardens, while dabbling in genteel farming, and carrying out a rigorous programme of correspondence and self-improvement. Their determination to live private lives away from the glare of society was compromised by their growing celebrity, and prominent members of the intelligentsia and the literary and political circles of the day found their way to Plas Newydd to enjoy their company and wit and to admire their achievements. The Ladies lived into devoted old age, caring for each other to the last, and became a local legend. Elizabeth Mavor brings these two characters vividly to life: Eleanor with her forceful personality, French education and crippling migraines, and Sarah, much younger and more retiring, but quietly assertive as well as caring. This well researched and beautifully written account examines the nature of their intimate relationship, the relevance or otherwise of the term 'lesbian', and the notion of 'romantic friendship' in the eighteenth century and later. She takes an often humorous look at their tempestuous relations with family, friends, servants, neighbours and the polite society that they rejected in favour of the very special world they created for themselves.

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