

An Englishwoman '*di grande dottrina e gusto*': Life and Work of Isabella Mary Anderton

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2018

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Hopkin, David, 2018. "An Englishwoman '*di grande dottrina e gusto*': Life and Work of Isabella Mary Anderton", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : article1549.html

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

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Visited on 19 January 2025 at 00:44

Publié dans le cadre du thème de recherche «Réseaux, revues et sociétés savantes en France et en Europe (1870-1920)», dirigé par Claudie Voisenat (Ministère de la Culture, Héritages) et Jean-Christophe Monferran (CNRS, Héritages).

Isabella Anderton's one work of folklore, *Tuscan Folk-Lore and Sketches*, appeared posthumously in 1905, and it is slight: a mere nine tales collected in the Pistoia region of Tuscany together with a handful of articles on Italian customs, joined with other pieces which are neither about folklore nor Tuscany. However, her relatively brief life illustrates the attraction that Italian folk culture held for English visitors of a certain class and education.

Anderton was the daughter of the schoolmaster Howard Anderton who ran a private school, Priory House, in Clapton, East London, where she herself was educated. The school was mixed, unusual at the time, and there are other signs of commitment to progressive ideas in education and society. The school was attended, for example, by the children of the German radical poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, then in exile in London. Isabella Anderton stayed in close contact with the Freiligrath family when she spent a year in Germany from 1877 to 1878. She had passed the entrance exam for the University of London in 1877: the University had admitted women, since 1869, though in small numbers. However, she appears not to have attended regularly until 1882, instead working as a teacher in her father's school; and she never graduated. In 1883 she went to Genoa to recover from ill-health. She stayed in Italy for the rest of her life, teaching English first in a private capacity and later, after she was married to Rodolfo Debarbieri, at the aristocratic Istituto Ss. della Annunziata in Florence.

Her health was always delicate, and after a breakdown in 1887 she went to recuperate in the beneficial air of the mountains above Pistoia. This region performed a similar function in Italian folklore studies to Hardangerfjord in Norway or Dalarna in Sweden: it was a relic area whose language and customs were more perfectly preserved, untouched by modernity, or so it was alleged. The language spoken was supposedly the purest form of Tuscan – and as Tuscan had become the accepted *koiné* for the newly united kingdom of Italy, it particularly attracted language experts turned folklore collectors such as Niccolò Tommaseo, Giuseppe Tigri and Gherardo Nerucci (himself married to the Englishwoman Fanny Carolina Chambers). It was Tommaseo who first came across the remarkable singer Beatrice Bernardi from Pian degli Ontani, who would be made famous in the 1880s among English readers by the publications of Francesca Alexander and John Ruskin.

It was in the hills above Pistoia that Isabella Anderton met her own guide to the popular oral culture of region, an old woman ‘Nonna’ Clementina from Cecafumo. She was the narrator of five of the tales first published in various English language journals in the 1880s and then collected by her brothers, Orsmond and Basil, for *Tuscan Folk Lore and Sketches* (1905). The others were due to a variety of other mountain acquaintances. Although the stories are recognizable classics of the European folktale tradition such as ATU [1] 709 ‘Snow White’ and ATU 311 ‘Rescued by the Sister’, as befits a region which prized improvisation in oral performance the texts are often interpolated by elements from other stories.

Anderton included little accounts of her interactions leading to these storytelling occasions, and these illustrate why travel enabled English visitors, and women in particular, to become folklore collectors. It is unlikely that Anderton would have entered into conversation or accepted invitations to visit from members of the labouring classes back in London, but in Tuscany it was perfectly acceptable.

In Florence Anderton was involved with literary and artistic circles, particularly those associated with the progressive journal *Il Marzocco*. She wrote for London journals, introducing their readership to Italian artists such as Domenico Morelli and Pietro Fragiaco, and Italian poets such as Ada Negri, Giosuè Carducci and Giovanni Pascoli, with whom she maintained an important correspondence. It was Pascoli who described her as an ‘Englishwoman of great learning and taste’. She translated English poems and articles, including one by Andrew Lang, for Italian readers, and had been working on a project with Pascoli to translate all of Shakespeare, though this came to nothing. No doubt her ill health, which would lead to her death in 1904, did not favour the project. Although her later publications were mostly literary, she clearly retained an interest in folklore related material: probably her most widely-read work was her translation into English of Domenico Comparetti’s study of *The Traditional Poetry of the Finns* (1898).

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[1] Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification of folk tales.