

Jenny White reflects on the legacy of Urania

Jenny White reflects on the pioneering paper *Urania* (1916-1940), led by five feminist visionaries who sought to contest the gender binary and celebrate same sex love. The unifying legacy of *Urania* challenges the idea that trans and non-binary identities are something novel, and shows the longstanding interconnections and solidarities between feminism, trans rights and sapphic lives.

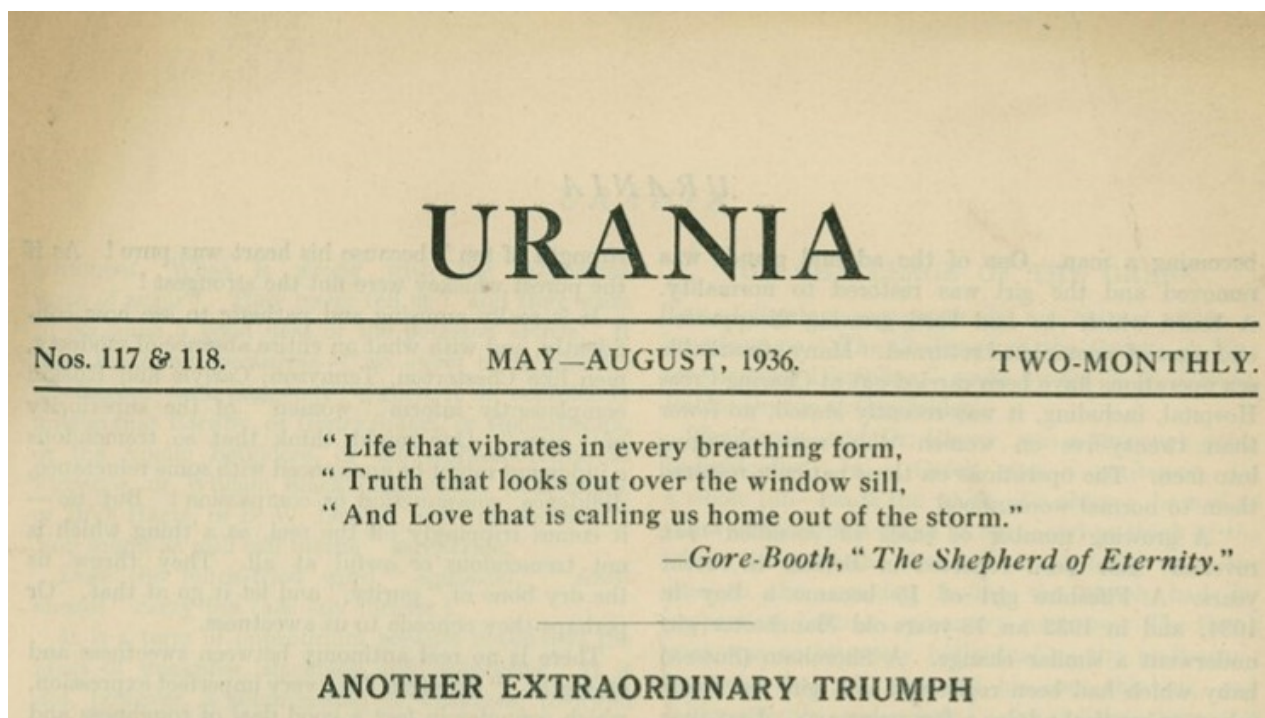


Image Credit: Banner of *Urania* Nos 117 & 118, May–August 1936. Courtesy of LSE Library.

Over the past decade there has been criticism of so-called ‘woke’ millennials ignoring essential truths about biological sex and promoting all sorts of new-fangled ideas about gender identities. But well over a century ago, a group of radical feminists began questioning sexual dimorphism and the rigidity of gender. In 1916 they launched a paper called *Urania* to explore pioneering views. Printed every two to three months, the final edition ran in 1940.

Urania was the brainchild of five feminist visionaries: sapphic suffragist Esther Roper and her partner, the trade unionist, poet and playwright Eva Gore-Booth; legal expert Thomas Baty who also went by the name Irene Clyde; animal rights campaigner Jessy Wade, [founder of the Cats Protection League](#); and novelist and Montessori champion Dorothy Cornish, who opposed the indoctrination of children into gender roles.

For the editorial team *Urania* symbolised a genderless paradise: ‘Sex is an accident’, the founding principle; ‘There are no “men” or “women” in Urania’, their mission statement. Heterosexual marriage was denounced as reinforcing sex differences. Same sex unions and androgyny were promoted as divinely transformative, a pathway to a higher state of human consciousness and spiritual perfection. A quote in Greek from the Gospel of Mark meaning ‘like the angels in heaven’ featured on the front cover of early editions. The snippet was taken from a passage discussing the nature of marriage in the afterlife – ‘they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are like angels’ – and revealed biblical backing for *Urania*’s views (*Urania* No 15, May–June 1919).

Thomas Baty / Irene Clyde and Eva Gore-Booth can be seen as the driving forces behind *Urania* (some historians view [Thomas / Irene as the leading figure](#); [others Eva](#)). They were both active members of the Theosophical Society, a New Age movement which embraced ideas on karma, reincarnation and spiritual androgyny. Theosophical teachings on divine wisdom, promoting unity over differentiation and the soul’s ability to change sex with each rebirth, clearly influenced *Urania*’s ideals.

Thomas / Irene, Eva and Esther had also been members of the Aëthnic Union, a short-lived group founded in 1911. An [advertorial published in feminist weekly *The Freewoman*](#) described the Union's aim to 'liberate' people from the 'soul murder' of artificial sex differentiation (*The Freewoman*, Vol. 1 (14), 22 Feb 1912, 278-79).

In today's terminology we might describe *Urania* as a zine – a self-published work combining original and appropriated texts with a small circulation. It was written by and for a community of people exploring radical ideas and sent free of charge to anyone who agreed with its principles. An editorial note on the front page of the May 1919 issue provides a rallying call – 'The ideal of freedom advocated by this little paper [is] a spiritual progress [...] It is the abolition of the "manly" and the "womanly". Will you not help to sweep them into the museum of antiques?'

While *Urania* had a fairly modest circulation of around 250, its influence spread much wider as it was stocked in a number of university college libraries, including in Oxford, Cambridge and the USA. It was, however, banned from a couple of Oxford women's colleges.

The editors curated clippings from a variety of sources, including international newspapers, journals and books, to reinforce their androgynous ideals. There were articles celebrating broken engagements and declines in marriage and birth rates; reports on people assigned female at birth who lived as men; and stories of famous women throughout history who'd never married, or who had passionate relationships with other women. There was a letters section, book reviews and a Star Dust segment profiling pioneering women who'd achieved success in areas usually reserved for men.

The stories of unconventional women, or spinsters left on the shelf, may have been negative in tone in the newspapers they were originally published in. But reprinted in *Urania* they take on a celebratory quality, a triumphant record of people going against the grain.

'No measures of "emancipation" or "equality" will suffice'

Set up slap bang in the middle of a World War, *Urania* was a direct response to the horrors of conflict and imperialism. From the late 1800s, anxieties over having fit and healthy men to maintain the British Empire, coupled with the growth of eugenics, had led to the promotion of extreme gender roles. A man should maintain a stiff upper lip and be ready to defend the Empire. A woman's function was to be [mother of the race](#), breeding fit and healthy specimens.

Urania's editors considered unchecked, brutish masculinity to be a destructive force. Society desperately needed to be organised around 'feminine' ideals of pacifism, sweetness and love. They looked forward to 'the day when Britain will be governed mainly by women' (*Urania* Nos 77 & 78, Sept–Dec 1929, 11).



Image Credit: Eva Gore-Booth drawn by her sister Countess Markievicz. Image is taken from the Lissadell Collection and reproduced with permission of Lissadell House.

Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper were committed pacifists. During the First World War they joined the Women's Peace Crusade advocating for a negotiated peace to end the conflict. They helped support the wives and children of imprisoned conscientious objectors, and offered friendship to German nationals who'd been living in the UK and now found themselves imprisoned.

While Thomas Baty / Irene Clyde shared these pacifist principles, they did not necessarily live by them in their day job. As legal advisor to the Japanese government, [their advice was used to justify Japanese imperialism](#) and the occupation of Manchuria in modern-day China.

Through their backgrounds in women's trades union activism, Esther and Eva had seen how the gender binary led to discrimination in the workplace. Women were paid far less than men, and were banned from most trades and professions. Moral crusaders were constantly attacking women's right to work in what they deemed to be unsuitable or dangerous roles. Esther and Eva helped groups of female workers self-organise to defend their rights, including coal pit women, gymnasts, barmaids and flower-sellers.

Through *Urania* Esther and Eva began exploring new approaches to overcoming sex discrimination. Instead of fighting for women's sex-based rights, they sought to abolish the very notion of a binary gender. A message to readers declares 'no measures of "emancipation" or "equality" will suffice, which do not begin by a complete refusal to recognize or tolerate the duality itself' (*Urania* No 15, May–June 1919).

Defining gender variance and same sex love on their own terms

Urania highlighted scientific discoveries that challenged the idea of sexual dimorphism: 'oysters addicted to a change of sex' and 'male guinea pigs who "behaved like ladies in every respect"'. Accounts of spontaneous sex change in animals were framed as proof that human sexual characteristics were 'accidental and variable' (*Urania* Nos 29 & 30, Sept–Dec 1921).

In the 1930s *Urania* excitedly reported on pioneering gender affirmation surgeries. Czech athlete Zdeněk Koubek's 'Authentic Change of Sex' was 'clinching corroboration of our main thesis: That sex is an accident' (*Urania* Nos 115 & 116, January–April 1936). News of Mark Weston's gender reassignment surgery ran under the frontpage headline, 'Another Extraordinary Triumph'. The article described the operation as resulting in a 'change of outward form', echoing the editors' New Age beliefs of an eternal genderless soul's temporary residence in human form (*Urania* Nos 117 & 118, May–August 1936).

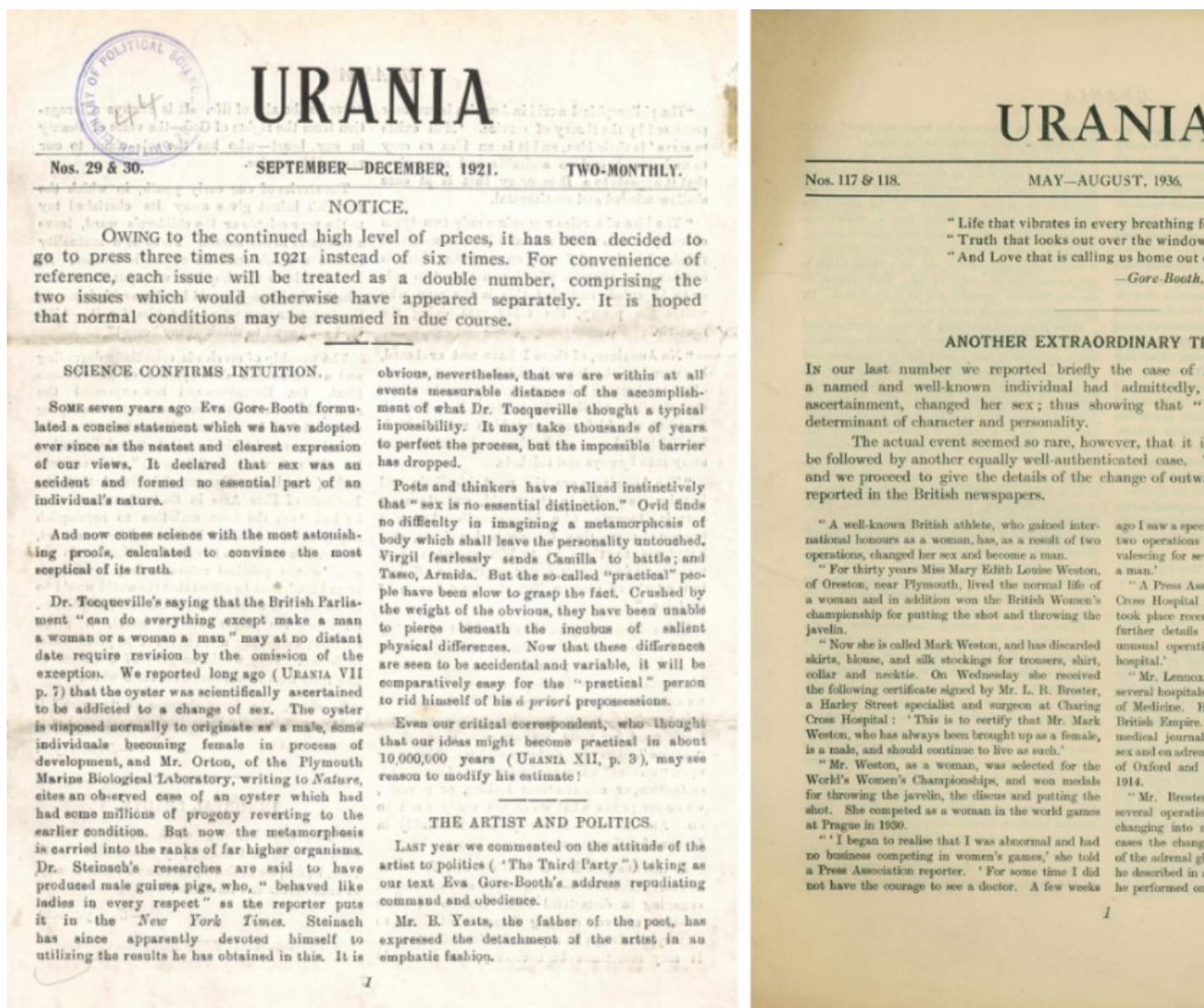


Image Credit: Covers of *Urania* Nos 29 & 30, Sept–Dec 1921, and *Urania* Nos 117 & 118, May–August 1936. Courtesy of LSE Library.

There is some debate about whether the ideal of same sex love promoted in *Urania* was strictly asexual. While the paper appeared to promote a spiritual connection over more earthly desires, some articles clearly endorsed physical intimacy between women. There are a number of other inconsistencies and grey areas in *Urania*'s messaging, perhaps due to different voices within the editorial collective. On the one hand, *Urania* shows a distaste for gendered performance – 'There is no attraction for anybody in mannishness or effeminacy' (*Urania* Nos 75 & 76, May–August 1929) – but it also championed tales of women masquerading as men. One article portrays same sex love between women as a way to attain a higher state of consciousness; another describes homosexual sex acts as 'perverse' (*Urania* Nos 75 & 76, May–August 1929). While editors sought to create a genderless society, it was to be based on 'feminine' ideals of tenderness and sweetness.

This tension is also found in the meaning of the word 'Urania'. The term was coined in the 1860s by German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs to describe male same sex attraction. It was taken up in Britain to refer to same sex romantic love, notably [in the work of early British gay rights activist Edward Carpenter](#). The expression is also loaded with spiritual connotations. In Greek mythology Urania refers to the goddess of astronomy, and is used to signify Aphrodite's heavenly or noble love, as opposed to purely physical lust.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, sexologists such as Havelock Ellis began speculating on the causes of homosexuality. Ellis saw sexual inverts as people born with a reversal of gender traits: female inverts had manly qualities and vice versa; a chap with a passive feminine character would be attracted to an active masculine man. He argued, quite radically for the time, that sexual inversion was not a disease, immoral or criminal, but a naturally occurring 'abnormality' comparable to colour blindness.

Urania challenged contemporary medical ideas on same sex love. Rather than existing merely as case studies in sexology research, *Urania* allowed a community to voice their feelings about gender variance and same sex love, carving an identity on their own terms.

Thomas Baty / Irene Clyde explored their approach to same sex love and the gender binary in other written works. In today's terminology we could describe Irene Clyde as trans feminine and/or non-binary or gender fluid. In 1909 she published *Beatrice the Sixteenth*, a science fiction novel set in a genderless land called Armeria where people with feminine characteristics form life unions. In 1934 she issued *Eve's Sour Apples*, a collection of essays attacking sex distinctions and heterosexual marriage. Irene looked forward to a time when all manly behaviour had been eliminated, and provided guidance on how a person assigned male at birth could achieve a more feminine gender presentation.

Irene Clyde viewed the framework of sexual inversion as reinforcing sex differences and aping heterosexuality. In *Urania* she printed a mixed review of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which explored the sad life of a sexual invert. While the story's celebration of feminine love was positive, Irene felt there was no need to make Stephen the heroine 'a boy in skirts, masculine in shape and taste [...] we venture the hope that Radclyffe Hall will give us another book in which no imitation men need figure' (*Urania* Nos 75 & 76. May–August 1929).

What lessons can the *Urania* collective teach us today?

Over the past decade, [Sonja Tiernan's research on Eva Gore-Booth](#) has caught the imagination of people suffering from Pankhurst fatigue, thirsty for stories of other women's lives. Her tales of Esther and Eva's exploits in Manchester, including thwarting sexist Winston Churchill's attempt to get elected as a local MP, have inspired many grassroots celebrations of the couple, including needlework, street art and a [play at the Women in Comedy festival](#). Their lives plug a gap in queer women's history, so often lumped in as an afterthought in the history of gay men. We can understand how the fight for lesbian rights is very much tied in with the general struggle for women's rights.

Now *Urania* is being recognised as an under-discussed element of trans history. The paper currently features in [Unfinished Business](#), an exhibition at the British Library exploring feminist activism and the history of the fight for women's rights. The curators highlight that [Urania is significant as it shows that trans people have always been part of feminist history](#).

Urania is the inspiration for a brand new research and moving image project by artist [Renée Helène Browne](#), commissioned by the Project Arts Centre, Dublin. Their project brief highlights that creating accessible and critical creative work on trans experience, history and memory 'feels imperative to pursue in 2021 [at a time] when trans people's existences are being questioned and erased'. Renée Helène told me: 'I'm extremely interested in *Urania* as a world created as both alternative and beyond a binary gendered society. It meant so much to me as a non-binary trans person to see a legacy of trans/gender non-conforming people on such an international scale not just documented but connected to each other on paper.'

We can see the legacy of *Urania* as a unifying force. People today identifying as trans, lesbian, gay, asexual, queer, bisexual will each find their roots in its pages. *Urania* challenges the idea that trans and non-binary identities are something novel, and shows the longstanding interconnections and solidarities between feminism, trans rights and sapphic lives.

To find out more about Esther Roper, Eva Gore Booth and their involvement in *Urania*, check out Jenny White's LGBT+ History Month talk for LSE Library: <https://youtu.be/CNvDtYVUkPU>.

LSE Library's reading room is gradually re-opening for use and you can [discover more about the Collection Highlights online](#).

Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.
