

POSSESSION

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Possession, AS Byatt's intriguing multi-layered 'romance', juxtaposes two parallel stories — an evolving relationship between modern-day academic sleuths (Dr Maud Bailey and Roland Michell) with a gothic tale of love and tragedy, involving 'imagined' 19th-century poets (Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash). The novel, like the recent Neil LaBute directed film adaptation, is also part detective story, concluding with an archival denouement in the final stages.

The author achieves the novel's successful duality through 'time-travel' across two centuries, supported by the literary outpourings, both public and private, of her 19th-century poets. Altogether these documents provide evidence of an association, which is both surprising and challenging to our modern-day detectives. Byatt adds what turns out to be another 'twist to the tale' by making Christabel a four-times great aunt to Maud (or is she?) and also an advocate of the feminist cause. Significantly, Maud is in charge of the Women's Archive in the Lincoln Library, which houses some of Christabel's manuscript records.

The recurring theme throughout the novel is the unique value of archives as evidence. Byatt also offers an insightful understanding of archives as iconic items of moveable cultural heritage with great importance to their original 'homeland' — a view that is somewhat surprising in today's era of digital surrogacy.

The story begins with Roland's chance discovery of drafts of letters, written by Randolph Henry Ash to an unknown woman. They are secreted in a book at the London Library that has been 'exhumed from Locked Safe no5'. Roland's unauthorised removal of the drafts is

guaranteed to send a chill through all rare book and manuscript custodians.

These letters immediately question established preconceptions about Randolph Henry Ash as a faithful and enduring husband to his wife Ellen, whose own diary also provides critical supporting clues for Maud and Roland. Roland almost immediately establishes the probable identity of the intended recipient of Ash's letters: the poet Christabel LaMotte. He does this through evidence supplied in another historical figure's 'monumental Diary' in which the previously undocumented fateful meeting of the two poets is recorded.

As with all groundbreaking historical research, detection and the demolition of past assumptions are a key element. Maud and Roland's research journey takes them from Lincoln to the Yorkshire coast and Brittany as they are pursued by the larger-than-life feminist Leonora Stern, dour Ash scholar Professor Blackadder and the more ominous character of Mortimer Cropper. We learn that Cropper will go to any lengths, even grave robbery, to acquire the Ash-LaMotte letters for the Stant Collection of Harmony City in New Mexico. At each step of the journey Maud and Roland are fuelled by the evidence found in the historical lovers' own letters and supported by contemporary diaries, journals and other personal papers.

The penultimate chapter of *Possession* is played out on a night of high winds and tempest in the graveyard where Randolph Henry Ash and his wife are buried. The grave robber Cropper, aided by Ash descendant Hildebrand, remove a box which has shared the grave with Randolph and Ellen for so long. When opened, the box provides us with the last moving testament to a love won and lost. The letter found inside validates the conclusions drawn by Maud and Roland and offers a last surprise.

Thus *Possession* confirms that archives do not always provide us with the answers that we expect or, indeed, want to find. They may in fact provide a new and confronting answer to that age-old question: 'who am I?'

Christine Yeats is Manger of Public Access at State Records



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