

## **Eveleen Tennant Myers: From Model to Portraitist**

**Judy Oberhausen & Nic Peeters**

Eveleen Tennant Myers' (1856-1937) successful career as a photographer has recently been re-examined by various scholars and museum curators. This was a happy consequence of the acquisition by the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), London, in 1991, of over 100 images and family albums from Peter Myers. Many of these works were catalogued and scanned not long ago and are now accessible online. Following this greater exposure and new research, Eveleen's works have been included in recent exhibitions such as *Who's Afraid of Women Photographers?* at the Musée d'Orsay (Paris, 2015/16), *Painting with Light* at Tate Britain (London, 2016)<sup>1</sup> and *A Century of Photography 1840-1940* at the NPG (London, 2016/17).

In our previous essays on Eveleen, we argued that her own artistic practice was greatly indebted to her earlier role as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Nic Peeters' review of this exhibition in *The PRS Review*. "Exhibition & Book Review *Painting with Light: Art and Photography from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Modern Age* by Carol Jacobi and Hope Kingsley" in Works Cited.

young model to prominent Victorian artists.<sup>2</sup> She was painted by John Millais in 1874, George Frederic Watts began two portraits of her in 1876 (Watts, 156) and Frank Miles drew her in the same year. She sat for the French artist Jean-Jacques Henner in January of 1880. Hayman Seleg Mendelssohn photographed her c.1883.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, we were understandably excited when we discovered two new portrait studies that further document this significant modelling phase of her life. One is Millais' pencil study *Eveleen Tennant* (pencil on laid paper. 209.5 x 161.9 mm. Given by Lewis and Louisa Creed. NPG, London, 1874)<sup>4</sup> and the other is Miles' *Brown Study* (oil on canvas. 508 x 609.6 mm. Maas Gallery, London, c.1876) **(pl. 1&2)**. This essay will include these works in our discussion of Eveleen's role as a model and its subsequent impact on her career as a photographer.

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<sup>2</sup> See Judy Oberhausen and Nic Peeters' "Excavating the work of Eveleen Myers. The Rediscovery of a late-Victorian Photographer" and "Eveleen Myers (1856-1937): Portraying beauty – The rediscovery of a late-Victorian aesthetic photographer" in Works Cited.

<sup>3</sup> J. Millais: *Miss Eveleen Tennant*. 1874. oil on canvas. 1079 x 800 mm. Tate Britain, London; G. F. Watts: *Eveleen Tennant, later Mrs F.W.H. Myers*. c. 1876. exhibited 1880. oil on canvas. 1003 x 711 mm. Tate Britain, London; G. F. Watts: *Portrait of Eveleen Tennant, later Mrs. F.W.H. Myers*. 1876. oil on canvas. 641 x 514 mm. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; F. Miles: *Eveleen Myers (née Tennant) as Vanessa after a drawing by Frank Miles*. 1876. platinum print. NPG, London; H.S Mendelssohn: *Leopold Hamilton Myers; Eveleen Myers (née Tennant)*. c. 1883. albumen prints. NPG, London; The Henner portrait is untraced.

<sup>4</sup> NPG D46002



**Pl. 1. Pencil Study for a Portrait of Eveleen Myers (later Tennant), pencil on paper, by John Everett Millais, 1874. © NPG, London.**



Pl. 2. *Brown Study - Portrait of Eveleen Tennant (later Myers)*, oil on canvas, by Frank Miles, c. 1876. © Maas Gallery, London.

The notion that she had been a muse to any of the various artists who portrayed her would have struck the mature Eveleen Myers as flattering but overstated. Although in her youth she was aware that she was one of a bevy of lovely girls who epitomised the ideal of Victorian beauty, Eveleen never aspired to be as celebrated as her acquaintances Ellen Terry and Lillie Langtry. Neither would she have compared herself to Jane Morris who served as the

embodiment of unattainable love to the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Instead she would have acknowledged that serving as the model for experienced artists gave her an invaluable education in the practice of portraiture.

Though her mother, society hostess Gertrude Collier Tennant, may have demurred at the term 'Professional Beauty' being applied to her daughter, it did not prevent her from launching Eveleen into London society by introducing her to its celebrated artists. The recently widowed woman was cannily aware that having two of her daughters (Eveleen and her older sister, the painter Dorothy Tennant, later Lady Stanley) painted by renowned artists was a respectable strategy in the Victorian 'marriage market'. Such portraits would be displayed in the artists' studios, galleries, and private homes and reproduced in the popular press. Therefore, when Millais, Watts and Miles asked to paint her daughters Gertrude was understandably delighted.

Eveleen's introduction to the world of the aesthetes started early. Gertrude and her husband Charles Tennant became acquainted with John Millais at the start of his career as a Pre-Raphaelite and by 1852 he was a regular visitor to their home in Russell Square. Later, after his marriage to Euphemia 'Effie' Gray, the Millais and Tennant families

occasionally spent their holidays together. They remained close friends for many years. On 17 June 1877 Dorothy recorded in her diary that she and Eveleen had had lunch with the artist at his new, palatial home that day: 'It is all very sumptuous – his beautiful suite of rooms, the unique fountain designed by Millais ...'<sup>5</sup> Other family vacations to the Isle of Wight brought the Tennant family into the Freshwater circle of artists and writers, which included G. F. Watts and the poet William Allingham (Frederick, 180, 274). Allingham was a friend of the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron who lived near Watts' Freshwater home 'The Briary', where the Tennants were regular guests. Perhaps more significantly, Eveleen herself recalled being taken as a young girl by her mother to visit Cameron's studio on the island where she claims to have posed for the celebrated photographer (Belloc, 763).

Eveleen's own actual participation in artistic activities probably began in the sphere of amateur theatricals. The NPG holds a photo of a young Eveleen Tennant posing as Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which may have been an early foray into this arena.<sup>6</sup> More important was Eveleen's participation in the famous Shakespearean Tableaux held at Mrs (later Lady) Freake's Cromwell House

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<sup>5</sup> For Dorothy Tennant's diaries: See Works Cited.

<sup>6</sup> NPG Ax68328



(Kensington) in April of 1874. This may have been initiated by Charles Hamilton Aidé, Gertrude's cousin and informal guardian to her daughters after the death of Charles Tennant in 1873. A gregarious bon vivant and aspiring playwright, Aidé often chaperoned Eveleen and Dorothy to social events. His connections to the theatre and art world were extensive and could have resulted in his nieces' inclusion in the Cromwell House performances.<sup>7</sup> Such theatricals, staged in private homes, were an important social nexus between artists and the wealthy classes. Although informal, they were professionally produced with prominent artists such as Millais, Frederick Leighton and Edward Poynter designing sets and costumes. Acting in these performances, like sitting for portraits, was a respectable outlet for Victorian women's desire for theatricality and attention. In photographs probably taken by Alexander Bassano, we see Eveleen as Shylock's daughter Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*.<sup>8</sup> Because this was part of a tableau vivant, the young Miss Tennant must have been already experienced in the discipline of being posed by professionals. It is equally significant that tableaux vivants were not only a popular form of theatrical entertainment in the nineteenth century, but were also used by

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<sup>7</sup> The actor Henry Irving, a friend of Aidé's and one of Eveleen's later sitters, provided the readings at the Shakespearean Tableaux. (Blackett-Ord)

<sup>8</sup> NPG Ax68342

photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron to create dramatic compositions akin to paintings.

A founding member of the rebellious Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in his youth (1848), John Millais spent much of his subsequent career as a celebrity portraitist. Millais' lucrative business of portraying the rich and famous depended on his social contacts. He frequented society events and even organised them; invitations to his parties and soirées were keenly sought after. His wife circulated during these events, discreetly reminding guests how prestigious it was to be painted by her husband (Fagence Cooper, 163-65). Not only were Millais' paintings exhibited at his studio, the Royal Academy and private homes, they were also widely reproduced as prints further enhancing the celebrity status of the sitter. To be painted by Millais became a milestone in the life of many well-situated Victorian girls because it could launch them into London society in a spectacular way. For this reason and because of her long-standing friendship with the artist, it was natural that Gertrude Tennant let Millais paint the portrait of Eveleen for which we now have a rediscovered study.

To understand what lasting influence Millais had upon Eveleen's later career it is important to describe her experience of observing both his artistic techniques and his



professional behaviour. We know that the painting was begun in rural Scotland in the summer of 1874 and seems to have been conceived *en plein air* (Waller, 189). However, it is possible that it was then finished in the artist's busy London studio. From his own correspondence we learn that it was not unusual for him to have as many as ten portraits in production at once (Rosenfeld, 188-91). He managed his studio not unlike a photographic studio where a quick succession of sitters, children as well as adults, appeared at clearly appointed times. To accommodate his own fast-paced schedule and that of his busy sitters we know that Millais sometimes had photographs made of subjects (Fagence Cooper, 167). In his book *The Art of Portrait Painting* (1910), John Collier gives us further insight into Millais' methods (62). He tells us that the artist usually dispensed with preliminary drawings for his portraits, preferring instead to quickly outline the position of the figure on the canvas; then proceed to paint the head in more detail; and finally, to hastily indicate the background elements. For his outdoor works he was little concerned with getting specific lighting or atmospheric effects. Even more significant than Collier's general descriptions of Millais' working methods are his very specific remarks about Eveleen's portrait. He tells us:

... in his later period he was one of the most rapid of painters, he would spare no time or trouble to get it right... for the portrait of Miss Eveleen Tennant (now Mrs. Frederic Myers) he had some eighty to ninety sittings. This was because something went wrong with it---and this labour was not thrown away for in the end it turned out one of the most brilliant of his numerous representations of beautiful women... its pose and simplicity... are quite as charming as the somewhat mannered grace of the earlier English masters. (61)

While Collier's statement about the number of sittings required of Eveleen may be exaggerated, there is no doubt that Millais expected patience, stamina and professionalism from his models. A contemporaneous report by the artist Louise Jopling in 1879 lends credence to Collier's account of how rigorous modelling for Millais could be:

...the sittings tired me very much. I was quite knocked up. Millais, talking of it afterwards, used to say, 'I nearly killed you!'... I knew that the better I sat, the sooner the work would be finished, and, also, the better the portrait would be. (140)

One senses that – even as a young model – Eveleen, like her fellow artist Jopling, observed that a portrait's success

relied upon an atmosphere of trust and professionalism between artist and model. During their time together, she undoubtedly heard the same dictum that Millais once shared with Jopling: 'It takes always two to paint a portrait - - the artist and the sitter' (140). This is quite significant, because it exposes the foundation of portrait-making, in photography as well as in painting: the highly personal collaboration between the portraitist and the subject. Further to this point, in her book *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008), Ariella Azoulay asserts that a mutual, unwritten agreement comes into action as soon as someone sits to have their likeness created. It is an agreement in which the sitter, no matter how distinguished, becomes the servant and the painter or photographer turns into the master whose commands must be obeyed (100-05). No doubt this was also the case in Millais' studio. Later, in her own career, Eveleen equally constructed a respectable reputation as a photographic portraitist. However, as we can deduce from her interview with Marie A. Belloc, in her studio she compensated for the asymmetrical relation between herself and her sitters by playing it down or by even making herself and her large camera almost invisible:

My great object has always been to catch [politician William E. Gladstone] as he really is, at a moment when his attention is attracted away from the camera. ... I

believe I am the only person who has ever taken Mr. Gladstone smiling ... and one of the best I ever did of him [was when he] was taking a cup of tea, and had, I suppose, for the moment forgotten that there was a camera in the room... (766)

Eveleen clearly altered the masculine status of the portraitist's studio, and she did it with more subtlety than the notoriously imposing Julia Margaret Cameron. The young Eveleen Tennant's experience as a model for the celebrated Millais had undoubtedly impressed upon her the combination of personal charisma, a disciplined work ethic and a discerning vision that was required of a successful portrait artist.

The great vigour with which Millais worked is demonstrated by the newly discovered NPG pencil study. Despite its lack of detail, – when put side by side with a photograph of her – one can see that it clearly represents Eveleen's typical smile and even her engaging personality (**pl. 3**).<sup>9</sup> In the oil painting her expression is dignified if not entirely neutral and yet it reflects an informality befitting the rural setting and the familiarity between artist and model (**pl. 4**). Upon first seeing the finished portrait of her daughter, Gertrude immediately

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<sup>9</sup> NPG Ax68782

decided to purchase it. Undoubtedly, she found the painting flattering and a useful vehicle for introducing Eveleen into London society.



Pl. 3. Left: *Pencil Study for a Portrait of Eveleen Tennant (later Myers)*, detail, pencil on paper, by John Everett Millais, 1874. Right: *Eveleen Myers (née Tennant)*, detail, platinum print on grey card mount, probably by Cyril Flower, 1890s. © NPG, London



**Pl. 4. *Miss Eveleen Tennant*, oil on canvas, by John Everett Millais, 1874.** © Tate Britain, [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk), released under Creative Commons.

The image presents her as the quintessential English Rose: lovely, fresh, virginal and eminently available for marriage to the proper gentleman. Eveleen and her sister soon realised the effect of this strategy when Dorothy declared ‘In fact we are novelties and sights, we are introduced as the Misses Tennant painted by Millais’ (qtd. in Waller, 192). Gertrude’s



plan was indeed successful. At the Royal Academy in 1874, the renowned scholar Frederic Myers saw Millais' portrait of Eveleen and fell in love with it. The two subsequently met in 1876, became engaged in late 1879 and married on 15 March 1880.

Frank Miles won the Royal Academy Turner Prize in 1880, but today he is best remembered as the artist who discovered Lillie Langtry at a reception given by Sir John and Lady Sebright in their Belgravia home during the spring of 1877. Miles launched Lillie's meteoric career as one of the 'Professional Beauties' ('P.B.s' as they were colloquially known) by drawing her and disseminating her image in popular media.<sup>10</sup> Usually he turned his sketches of fashionable women into cabinet cards, which were sold at penny-postcard stands and stationer's shops all over London. It was a medium by means of which Miles, together with his close friends Lillie Langtry, Oscar Wilde and James M. Whistler – each of them noted for their colourful social presence – assisted at the birth of today's 'professional celebrity': a person who achieves fame rather through the mass distribution of their image and their public appearances than through any other achievements.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Professional Beauties' is a rather deceptive term, because these attractive young ladies from the top social strata were never paid. They sat for popular artists and increased the success of social gatherings with their presence.



Having already modelled for Millais and Watts by 1876, Eveleen probably met Frank Miles through Millais or other contacts in the artistic *milieu*. She would have found Miles' studio intriguingly bohemian and as busy and socially rewarding as Millais'. Langtry describes in her autobiography that 'In the late afternoon interesting people, artistic, social and literary, of both sexes, found their way to [Miles'] dusty old studio.'<sup>11</sup> She mentions the wide range of celebrities whom she met there: Wilde (who lived with Miles 1879-1881), Whistler, Ellen Terry, Princess Louise, Prince Leopold, Violet Fane, D.G. Rossetti, William Morris, A.C. Swinburne, Walter Pater and the Duchess of Westminster (54-55). We also know that Eveleen's future sitter Henry Irving frequented the studio.

By allowing Frank Miles to sketch Eveleen, after her success with the Millais and Watts portraits, Gertrude certainly – but doubtless unintentionally – brought her daughter closer to becoming a 'Professional Beauty' because of the mass distribution of her image. The NPG portrait *Eveleen Myers (née Tennant) as Vanessa after a drawing by Frank Miles*

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<sup>11</sup> Langtry was referring to Miles' London studio at 13 Salisbury Street near the Strand (54). According to Beatty, he already lived and worked there when Wilde moved in on the floor below his studio (134). In 1880 Miles and Wilde moved into a house in Tite Street (Chelsea), there the studio on the top floor – like the rest of the house – was designed by the aesthete-architect Edward William Godwin in the fashionable Anglo-Japanese style (Cox, 44-45).

(1876) could very well be one of Miles' signature cabinet cards (**pl. 5**).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Terence Pepper, Senior Special Advisor on Photographs at the NPG, told us in private correspondence that he possesses a cabinet card with a similar print of the same portrait. Most importantly, Miles also worked as the artist-in-chief for *Life* magazine. Its owner, Heinrich Felbermann, remembered later: 'It soon became the rage among society beauties to be "done" by Frank Miles and be published in *Life*' (qtd. in Cox, 65).



**Pl. 5. Eveleen Myers (née Tennant) as Vanessa after a drawing by Frank Miles, platinum print, 1876. © NPG, London.**

<sup>12</sup> NPG Ax68345

Unlike Millais, Miles did not do many portraits in oil. Maybe the medium did not agree with him – he was almost colour blind – and that could also be the reason why his *Brown Study* of Eveleen at the Maas Gallery (for sale at the time of writing) is unfinished and quite different from the finished black-and-white *Vanessa* drawing. Nevertheless, the oil sketch displays a freshness and immediacy that are often missing from Miles' more stylised pencil/pastel drawings. Perhaps he envisioned completing an oil portrait of Eveleen and something intervened.

Though Miles' studio and technique were far less formal than Millais', Eveleen may have gleaned vital lessons from him that led her to a new naturalism. It was his convivial spirit and directness of approach rather than his flattering idealisation of sitters that we see in the oil sketch portrait he did of Eveleen. Miles and later Eveleen herself, as a photographer, had comparatively little time for studio props; the likeness of Sir Henry Irving she created is evidence of that.<sup>13</sup> As Marie A. Belloc on her visit to Eveleen's home noted;

... the absence of all 'properties', even those most often found in a photographic studio, is remarkable. It contains

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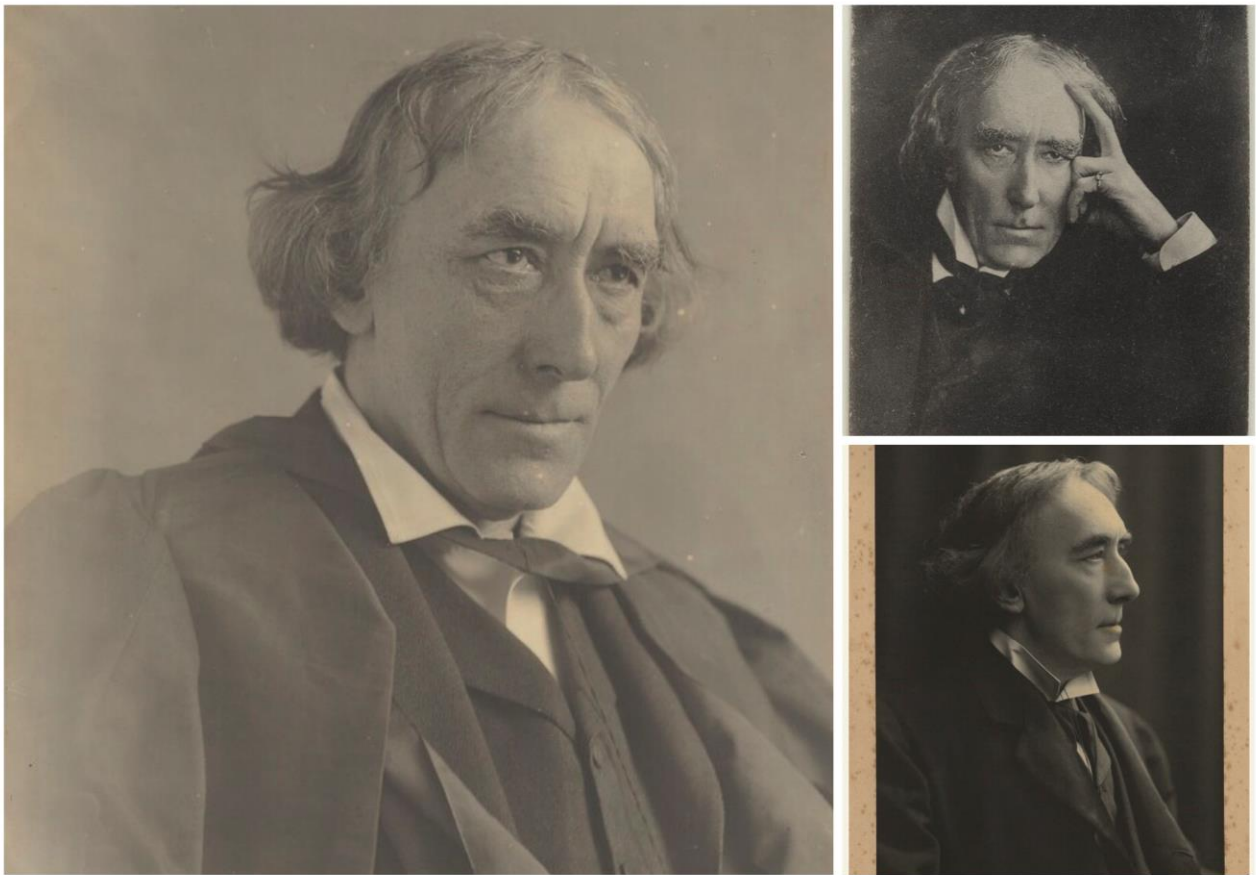
<sup>13</sup> NPG P143

only a couple of plain screens, a few chairs, and a plain wooden negative cupboard, with, of course, a large camera... (762)

The other lesson in minimalism Eveleen learned from Miles was to work intuitively without concern for revision. Her statement that ‘in men’s heads the less retouching the better’ indicates that she was aiming for naturalism rather than idealism (qtd. in Belloc, 770). The naturalistic approach to her portrait of Irving proves she acted on this dictum – note how the lighting accentuates the actor’s unkempt grey hair, the bags under his eyes and the graphic skin texture. To appreciate the originality of this minimally retouched portrait, one should compare it – as suggested by Carol Blackett-Ord in the NPG’s online catalogue – with studio photographs of Irving of a similar date, for example by Ernest Walter Histed or Window & Grove (**pl. 6**).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> NPG Ax45814, NPG x19009



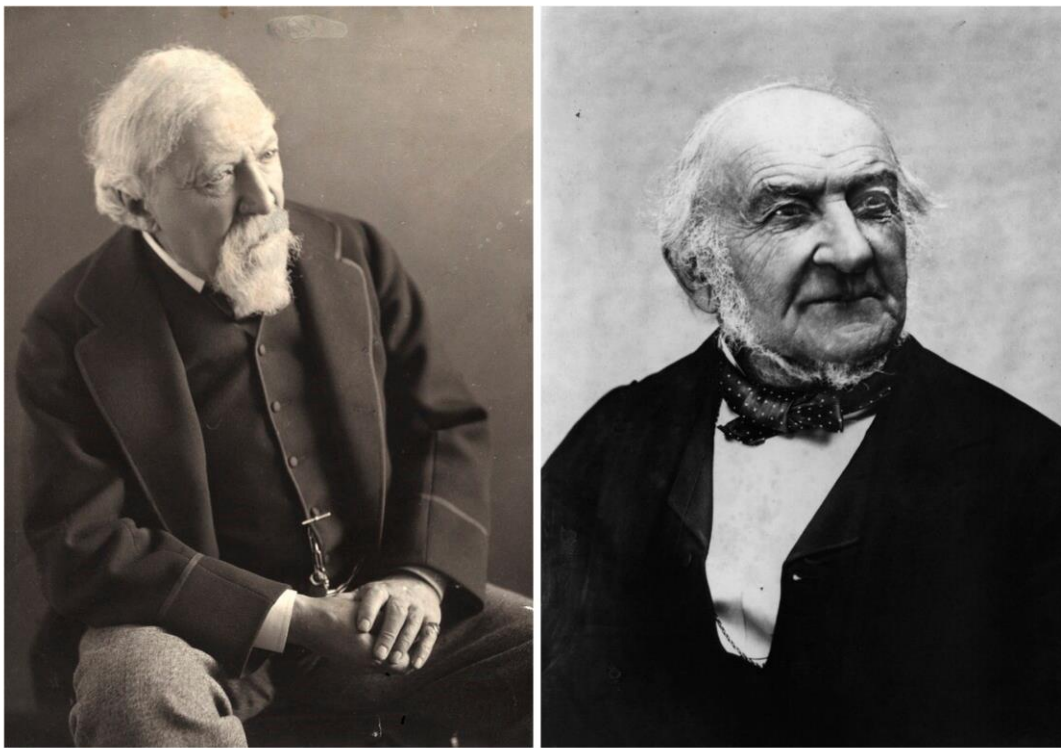
Pl. 6. Left: *Henry Irving*, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, published 1900. © NPG, London; Top right: *Henry Irving*, postcard print, by Ernest Walter Histed, 1899. © NPG, London. Bottom right: *Henry Irving*, platinum print, by Window & Grove, c. 1898. © NPG, London.

The same naturalistic approach becomes evident in her likenesses of other Victorian worthies such as Robert Browning and W.E. Gladstone (**pl. 7**).<sup>15</sup> These male portraits prove that Eveleen achieved a style that did away with Victorian idolatry and sentimentality to usher in a more modern and more psychological approach to celebrated sitters by revealing them in less-guarded moments. By

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<sup>15</sup> NPG x19812, NPG P146

working quickly and with few props, yet with great empathy, she allowed these cultural icons to reveal themselves more fully to the public. Likewise, her female subjects are ‘real’ women, depicted either ‘warts-and-all’ (as, for example Gertrude Collier Tennant)<sup>16</sup> or candidly sensual (e.g. Leonora Piper, Adelaide Passingham) **(pl. 8&9)**.<sup>17</sup>



**Pl. 7. Left: Robert Browning, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, 1889. © NPG, London. Right: William Ewart Gladstone, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, 1890. © NPG, London.**

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<sup>16</sup> NPG Ax68307

<sup>17</sup> NPG x36315, NPG x87656





**Pl. 8.** *Gertrude Collier Tennant*, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, 1890s. © NPG, London.



**Pl. 9.** Left: *Leonora Piper*, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, 1890. © NPG, London. Right: *Adelaide Passingham*, platinum print, by Eveleen Myers, early 1890s. © NPG, London.



Eveleen Myers' tutelage under John Millais and Frank Miles served her well when she initiated her own photographic portrait practice in the late 1880s. While learning technique, studio etiquette and interpersonal skills from both artists she nevertheless began an evolution towards a naturalism that went beyond their lessons. Distinct from Millais and Miles, she injected her subjects with psychology and life. The only subjects she frankly idealised were her children and even they often look less static, less posed than those portrayed by Julia Margaret Cameron or Lewis Carroll (**pl. 10**).<sup>18</sup> This livelier, more direct approach to images with children somehow foreshadows that used by Lewis Hine in the early twentieth century. In fact, outside of her endearing family photographs, there is in her later work a definite move towards a realism that announces a nascent modernism. Because she abruptly ended her professional career at the time of Frederic Myers' death in 1901, we can only see its gradual gestation, but not its full flowering.

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<sup>18</sup> NPG Ax68410



Pl. 10. **Leopold and Silvia Myers**, platinum print, by **Eveleen Myers**, c. 1890. © NPG, London.

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