

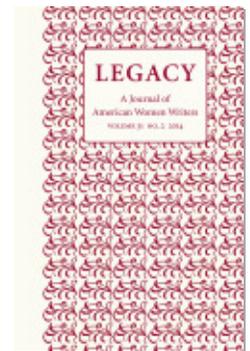


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FROM THE ARCHIVES

“Not Ruined, but Hindered”:
Rethinking Scandal, Re-examining Transatlantic
Sources, and Recovering Madeleine Pollard

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In the spring of 1894, American newspapers captivated their readers with intense coverage of the latest political scandal. Madeleine Pollard, around thirty years old, had sued Kentucky congressman William C. P. Breckinridge for Breach of Promise for failing to marry her. Court testimony revealed Pollard's brief course of study at Cincinnati Wesleyan Female College, her acceptance into Washington DC society, a summer at Vermont's Bread Loaf Inn, and her relationships with Charles Dudley Warner, William Dean Howells, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, among others in the arts and literature. Pollard's lawyers used all of this as evidence of her nascent intellectual gifts and her dream of a literary life, thwarted by the congressman's seduction and betrayal; Breckinridge's lawyers used this same history as evidence that Pollard was an adventuress, manipulating a host of powerful men to suit her own ambitious desires.¹

Pollard had learned early on the necessity and the challenges of relying on men. When she was ten years old, her father died suddenly, leaving her mother with scant financial resources and a houseful of children. The family was split up, and Madeleine spent her childhood with a succession of aunts with whom she witnessed unending domestic labor on top of what she had seen of her own mother's struggles to raise her family. At an aunt's near Lexington, Kentucky, Pollard began to focus her attention on higher education but knew that without financial resources she had little hope of formal schooling. She needed means, and that meant men to pay her way. She found an ingenious way to achieve her goal: she convinced a local farmer, James Rodes, to pay her tuition, and in exchange she promised to repay or marry him. But very early in her college

career she had a change of heart and sought extrication from this agreement. In 1884, recognizing the prominent lawyer and soon-to-be elected US congressman on a train, the then twenty-one-year-old Madeleine Pollard engaged Breckinridge in conversation, following up this chance encounter with a letter seeking his advice on resolving her dilemma. He came to Cincinnati to discuss the matter; a few days later, their illicit relationship had begun. For Pollard the relationship was perhaps a mixed blessing: she left school and endured three pregnancies, but Breckinridge eventually provided entrée to the life she wanted to lead. In 1887 she moved to Washington, worked for the Department of Agriculture and the Census Bureau, and hobnobbed with the well-to-do and the literati until the summer of 1893, when she learned that Breckinridge, despite his promise of marriage, had married another woman.² Pollard sued Breckinridge and won—and then disappeared.

As a historian interested in the lives of women who come to short-lived fame and then are swept away into a domestic dustbin of history, initially I imagined Pollard's narrative as one in which she survived the trial but, ruined, spent the rest of her life in obscurity. My first look at Pollard's post-trial history seemed to confirm this early impression. She did not take to the stage, as newspaper commentary suggested she would, and in fact, with her former lover absolutely broke, she never received a penny of the \$15,000 awarded her by the court. Her Washington socialite friends abandoned her. Beyond 1894, newspapers that had once covered Pollard's every move failed to mention her. Twentieth-century scholarship gives brief attention to the scandal that ended Breckinridge's political career and little attention to Pollard (Fuller, "Congressman Breckenridge" and "An Early Venture"; Klotter, "Sex, Scandal, and Suffrage"). In these works, Pollard represents a type: the mistress who seeks revenge and whose complaints bring an otherwise good civil servant to public shame. While neither condemning nor supporting Pollard, such scholarly accounts of the scandal offer little information on or insight into her background beyond what was reported in the newspapers. Of particular interest to scholars was Breckinridge's failed 1894 reelection campaign, a loss due in large part to the moral outrage and political organizing of Kentucky women. "Never before," writes James Klotter in *The Breckenridges of Kentucky*, "had 'the fairer sex' played the leading role" in a political campaign. "Though without the vote, women exerted tremendous influence" in the contest, a success that propelled Kentucky women, including Breckinridge's future daughter-in-law Madeline McDowell, to leadership positions in the suffrage movement (170). While these works examine women's growing political power and Breckinridge's contributions and life beyond 1894, there is not a word about Pollard's future, perhaps reflecting the all-too-common assumption that former mistresses, even

those vindicated in court, did not have one. Madeleine Pollard becomes one name in a long list of women embroiled in political scandals. Indeed, it was the twenty-first-century John Edwards scandal that started me on this project. As Edwards was castigated for cheating on his dying wife, I wondered what would happen to Rielle Hunter—and what had been the fates of Donna Rice, Monica Lewinsky, and many other women before them.³

It was right about this time that I encountered Pollard's story. I admit I initially bought into the narrative of ruin: the scandal constituted the pinnacle of her life's arc, and all that would follow was predicated on that event. As many had done before, I framed Pollard's life dichotomously as "before" and "after." The scandal loomed large. My intention was to tell the story of that scandal. I knew little of her post-scandal life—scholarly sources were silent, and I could not locate Pollard in US census records, find a death notice, uncover evidence of a subsequent marriage, or discover her in any newspaper articles after 1895. She had apparently vanished. How, I wondered, do you recover someone who may not want to be found? And what of her dream of a literary life, repeatedly referenced during the trial? Was this a serious consideration for Pollard, or was it indeed a schoolgirl's fantasy?

Having reached this seeming dead end but determined to learn Pollard's denouement, I rethought my approach to recovery. If the archives directly *about* Pollard shed no further light, perhaps the archives *around* her would provide new leads. Indeed, reading the archives around Pollard and looking to nontraditional sources enabled me to bring Pollard out of the shadows. More importantly, this strategy resulted in my reframing my narrative of Pollard's life and opening up new avenues for research. To my delight, I found that Pollard had not vanished. She was hiding historically in plain sight, and I realized that her later life was not a re-creation marked by before and after a scandal; instead, beyond 1894, Pollard's life evinced a continuity of the hopes and dreams she had held since her youth.

What did happen to Madeleine Pollard? A search of digitized newspapers from the period after the trial revealed two brief mentions and provided important clues. First, a succinct notice in 1895 stated that Pollard was going to Europe with an unnamed charitable woman as a companion ("Madeline Pollard").⁴ Second, in 1896 the *New York Times* published a notice of passengers returning from Europe and listed among them Madeleine Pollard ("On European Steamship"). Following Pollard on her European travels, I moved my search overseas. Widening my view to a transatlantic frame made me reconsider Pollard's literary dream. In her introduction to *Transatlantic Women*, Brigitte Bailey notes a vibrant transatlantic web of ideas and networks among American women writers who traveled to or lived in Europe, from the well

known to the less visible. With many American options closed to her, perhaps Pollard sought a British entrance into the literary life she desired. Anne Boyd suggests that women who aspired to literary fame needed “[a] certain degree of privilege in terms of education and exposure to literature and the arts” and that they typically “read high cultural periodicals like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic Monthly*” (6). Pollard, although by no means enjoying the advantages of middle-class, northeastern, educated women, did enjoy such familiarity with this literary world. Boyd also notes how women literary hopefuls had knowledge of and connections to the creative world they wished to enter. Pollard, too, had such access: similar to the women authors of Boyd’s study, Pollard was exposed to leading male authors; she was aware of successful female authors; she had access to a wide variety of reading material by way of Breckinridge’s borrowing privileges at the Library of Congress; and, critically, as Boyd indicates of women who achieved literary success, Pollard was free from domestic duties, which gave her the time to write (6). In addition, her single status was not a barrier to European travel. As Libby Bischof notes, in the second half of the nineteenth century increasing numbers of American women traveled Europe “independently or with other female companions rather than with a male escort” (153). Their motivations were several: they traveled “for education, enjoyment, rest, inspiration, and often to escape the sometimes narrow confines of their lives in the United States” (153). Whether alone or as a companion, whether to escape fame or to find it in Europe, Pollard embarked on a transatlantic life.

Breckinridge’s legal team and much of the press dismissed Pollard’s writing skills and literary aspirations, suggesting that instead of seeking writing advice from Charles Dudley Warner, whom Pollard knew well, she was, in fact, having an affair with him. Attorneys and antagonistic newspapers connected Pollard’s being ambitious, which was not a compliment in the 1890s, with her being an adventuress. They turned her stated desire for the study of the arts and literature into a sexual strategy to achieve the ultimate goal of the adventuress: social climbing.⁵

Yet using new sources for researching Pollard reveals that her youthful dream of a literary life did not end with the trial; it was, in fact, the predominant motif of her post-scandal identity as well. Looking beyond the objectifying posturing of male attorneys and moralizing newspaper editors to engage historical sources of Pollard’s own unmediated creation—such as passport applications, wills, and census records—suggests an entirely new, likely more accurate narrative for her life. Rather than accepting the received approach that would frame her experience through a US versus European or pre-scandal versus post-scandal dichotomy, I was led by these new sources to think of her

life as one continuous story. In fact, her life did not end at the scandal. As one supporter wrote to Pollard at the conclusion of the trial, “It remains with *you* whether you will be a useful woman. . . . You are not ‘ruined,’ but [merely] *hindered*” (Parker 201).

So to Europe. Consulting ships’ passenger lists helped me to chart Pollard’s trips back and forth across the Atlantic and provided dates for her leaving and entering New York, establishing points on a growing timeline (“New York Passenger Lists”). Pollard’s passport applications from 1908 to 1923 helped tremendously.⁶ Mining these surprisingly rich documents allowed me to uncover where she planned to visit, how long she had been out of the United States, her activities abroad, and her addresses in Europe—particularly, I noticed, in London. Yet still, my picture of Madeleine Pollard lacked context. She traveled to Paris, Italy, Egypt, and Germany, and in each document her stated purpose was to study art and learn languages. But I reached a dead end. I did not know when and where Pollard died, what sort of life she had lived, with whom, or if the scandal had indeed “ruined” her socially, personally, or financially.

Then, in 2012, I got my big research break: the 1911 United Kingdom census was released, and, as I had with the 1901 version, I searched for Madeleine Pollard. I found her living in England and studying literature.⁷ Then I noticed in the list of residents of her boardinghouse the name Violet Emily Hassard, a name I knew I had seen before (1911 England Census). Hassard, I recalled, had provided a reference on Pollard’s 1915 passport application attesting to Pollard’s good character (US Passport Applications). As I looked anew at Pollard’s listing in the 1901 census, there was Hassard again—right in front of my eyes. Having dead-ended with Pollard and extant sources, I wondered if perhaps Hassard was a means into Pollard’s post-scandal years. Researching Hassard was a way for me to work my way back into Pollard’s story and raised a host of new, interesting questions—not the least of which were, Who was Hassard, and What was her relationship to Madeleine Pollard?

Violet Emily Hassard was Irish, the wife of Richard, a yachtsman, sports enthusiast, Trinity College graduate, and son of a prominent Waterford family (O’Sullivan 32). In 1892, just three years into their marriage, Richard died, leaving Violet a woman of means. I used online British public records to trace her life: born, like Pollard, in the 1860s, by World War I, Hassard lived in the Chelsea area of London, then an artsy, bohemian neighborhood whose residents had included Henry James, George Eliot, Sylvia Pankhurst, and James McNeill Whistler (Brown 13–14). She lived there until around 1940, when she relocated to the other side of the Thames and then to coastal Devonshire—moving, no doubt, in the shadow of the Blitz during World War II. Hassard died in Devonshire in June 1945. The death record indicates she lived with her

sister-in-law, the wealthy spinster Catherine Hassard. Hassard's death date yielded a probate record from which, much to my surprise, I learned that she named Madeleine Pollard as her executor ("Hassard" 188). Suddenly I knew Pollard was still alive in 1945, still in England, and still associated with Hassard. Hassard's will revealed more: that Madeleine was Hassard's "old and dearest friend" and was the sole inheritor of her estate (Hassard, Will). With a Devonshire location, a 1945 date, and a hunch that the two old friends had stayed in close contact, I returned to death records—and six months of records later, I found Madeleine Pollard, who died in the same Devonshire town in England in December 1945, having most recently lived at the home of Catherine Hassard ("Pollard, Madeleine").

Having learned Pollard's date of death, I again sent off requests for copies of wills and probate records from probate offices in the United Kingdom. The records revealed that Pollard had planned to leave her very modest estate to her "beloved friend" Violet; with Hassard's passing, the estate passed to Vida Doping. Doping was Violet Hassard's niece, also a spinster (Pollard, Will). The date on Pollard's will, signed in 1938, located Pollard in the London home Hassard indicated on her UK voter registration record, and Hassard and Pollard are recorded at the same address in the 1939 National Registration, which documented the location of each civilian in England and Wales on 29 September 1939 (Health and Social Care Information Centre).⁸ The evidence was clear. Pollard and Hassard lived together and had done so, evidently, since as early as 1901. As I fleshed out the details of Hassard's life—she appeared in London phone books and voter registrations, UK tax lists, and census records—I began to see Pollard in a new light. Madeleine Pollard may have been hindered from gaining a husband, the expected social cost of her seduction, but she was not ruined. She avoided the fates many commentators and wags thought were unavoidable for a former mistress. Pollard did not go on the stage, become a prostitute, or die in invisible poverty.

Hassard and Pollard were apparently lifelong companions, traveling Europe and sharing a home in London. Pollard learned language, studied art, and styled herself a writer. She took on the unusual middle name Urquhart (variation Urquart), recorded in the 1911 UK census, which she used in various forms on subsequent documents as well. Repeatedly, and on all the documents I've located, Pollard identified herself as a student and writer. So did she write?

I don't know. Other than a newspaper essay Pollard published during the scandal, I have yet to identify any books, stories, or other works by Pollard—but perhaps Urquhart was part of an alias. As Boyd notes in her study of transatlantic writers, challenges such as a failure to secure an editor or publisher often prevented women from achieving publication (7). In Pollard's case,

it appears that her previous literary connections ceased with the public revelation of the scandal (and, more pragmatically, Pollard outlived her literary friends by decades). She also lacked financial resources of her own. As she stated on a form regarding her continued expatriate status, she was dependent upon the woman with whom she lived. Or perhaps the taboos against women's ambitions kept her writings private. Or perhaps she simply wasn't any good.

This transatlantic research narrative answers one query—What happened to Pollard?—but raises several new questions: How did Pollard and Hassard meet? What drew and kept them together? And what was their economic relationship? When Pollard was a young girl, her family of birth was shattered by her father's death; when she was a young woman, her expectation of being a society wife was thwarted by Breckinridge's lie. Pollard's dreams rested upon financial security that was—with both James Rodes and W. C. P. Breckinridge—bound up with promises, both broken, to marry. What was the nature of Pollard and Hassard's relationship? Did Pollard find the stability she yearned for with Hassard in what in the United States was called a Boston marriage? Or did Pollard find a new companionate family with Hassard and relatives—a group of single and widowed women who were connected for decades? Perhaps Pollard and this community of women found a way to mitigate financial constraints; perhaps, in the company of women, they found a welcoming audience for their ambitions. As Sharon Marcus suggests in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, the defining issue may be less one of sexual identity than of Pollard and Hassard's social relationship and how that social relationship was understood by themselves and their friends and acquaintances (20). In seeking to understand the nature of women's bonds in the past, Marcus argues, historians using women's "lifewriting"—"any text that narrates or documents a subject's life"—attempt to decipher linguistic codes, a "repertory of gestures, emotions, and actions [that] defined friendship" and other relationships between women (34, 54). While these codes may be illuminating to scholars, Marcus cautions that "the meaning of an individual statement must be established in relation to a biographical archive, and when that archive is sparse, we may be unable to determine what a given term or exchange meant" (54). For as much as archival research has revealed about Madeleine Pollard, the archive is silent on her longest-lasting relationship. In the absence of personal letters or other private writing that might provide an illuminating biographical archive, I simply cannot ascertain the nature of the bond Pollard and Hassard shared.

Rethinking the Breckinridge-Pollard scandal offers some lessons for reconsidering and recovering transatlantic women. First: question received historical narratives. In terms of my own project, gaining a window into Pollard's

life beyond 1894 decreases and decenters my focus on Breckinridge in this story. He is not the pivot on which Pollard's narrative hangs. Rather, I now see their narratives as separate stories with intersecting threads. As historians have given Breckinridge's post-trial life exploration and explanation, Pollard's deserves the same, but her narrative arc does not entirely hinge on his.

Second: search the archives around the principal characters; find the parallel stories, and this may lead to a new group of characters as well as a new vision of one's subject's life. Names, dates, and places discovered in UK records led me back to US records, further uncovering and extending Pollard's network. This project began as an investigation into the life of one woman, but, clearly, I've learned, that frame is too narrow.

Third: avoid dichotomous thinking. At the outset of this project, I had a chronological framework in mind consisting of "before the scandal" and "after the scandal." This segmented Pollard's life artificially and assumed the scandal was the tipping point in her life. Like my chronology, my geography was reductively binary in nature: I viewed one side of the Atlantic as an escape from the other. But perhaps it is too simplistic to see that as an either/or choice, and a richer view is possible when Pollard's biography is framed as a life lived in both.

Finally: consider alternative sources. Using sources less mediated by men and more under Pollard's agency revealed how she—not the press, not lawyers—defined herself. Although no less constructed than the depictions of Pollard advanced in court and print media, Pollard's self-fashioning, in jest or in seriousness, claimed for herself a writer's identity, and that led to my rethinking the notion of reinvention. The scandal and Pollard's transatlantic experience did not redefine her life. The growing evidence points to a continuity of literary aspirations first publicly noted in 1884 when, prior to encountering Breckinridge on the train, the then-schoolgirl "engaged in a merry war of words for the prize—a verdict . . . as to superiority in literary attainments" ("Wesleyan College"). The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that Pollard, representing her debate team, "knew how to attract the popular ear" in winning the contest ("Wesleyan College"). A decade later in a DC courthouse, lawyers for both the prosecution and the defense acknowledged Pollard's literary dreams, although with differing interpretations as to what those dreams meant. Then further, thirty years after the scandalous revelation that gave Pollard brief national recognition, Madeleine Pollard enrolled in literature classes at Columbia University (Office of the Registrar). Seeing her life in this new light, as a contiguous whole, keeps me looking on both sides of the Atlantic, her youthful dreams and her adult realities each giving clues to the full narrative of Madeleine Pollard, an arc that is not defined by one point in time or by one scandal in Washington.

In searching to reconstruct the fabric of women's lives, finding those places where women speak for themselves gives us more accurate information, provides more avenues for scholarly exploration, and ultimately enriches the resulting historical narrative. And critically, recovering the evidence of lived moments in time restores the voices of women like Pollard who were silenced by stereotypes and assumptions, returning to them the agency in their own lives and the rich complexity of their own stories.

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NOTES

1. For a day-by-day account of the trial, see *The Celebrated Trial*. In print, Pollard's first name was spelled variously Madeline or Madeleine. I use the latter, following the spelling Pollard used in signing her will.

2. Pollard left Cincinnati Wesleyan at the end of the summer 1884 and enrolled in the Sayre School in Lexington, Kentucky. She left Sayre in February 1885 when she discovered she was pregnant ("Memorandum"). She gave up that baby, who died in infancy. In early 1888 she gave birth to a boy, who died two months later. In May 1893 she miscarried a third pregnancy. On Pollard's pregnancies, see *The Celebrated Trial* 132, 190–91, 203, and 246–47.

3. John Edwards, the former senator from North Carolina, admitted to his affair with Rielle Hunter, a filmmaker, in August 2008. The Monica Lewinsky scandal, alleging sexual improprieties with then president Bill Clinton, came to light in 1998. In 1987, photographs of Donna Rice and Gary Hart, taken on a yacht named *Monkey Business*, brought an end to Hart's campaign for the Democratic nomination for president.

4. See "Madeleine Pollard Goes Abroad" and "Madeleine Pollard." Both Pollard stories indicate a New York byline.

5. On the taboo against women's ambitions, see Boyd 3–7.

6. Passport applications and associated documents up to 1928 are available on microfilm from the National Archives and Records Administration. *Ancestry.com* also provides these records. Passport applications beyond 1928 are retained at the US Department of State.

7. The United Kingdom places a one-hundred-year moratorium on census records. The 1901 and 1911 UK censuses are available on *Ancestry.com*, as well as on partner sites of the UK National Archives.

8. The information on Pollard and Hassard's residence was provided by the Health and Social Care Information Centre, which holds the registers from the 1939 National Registration (1939 National Registration Transcript Books, Registration No. AFBY 26).

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