

# WHO WROTE *MY SECRET LIFE*? AN EVALUATION OF POSSIBILITIES AND A TENTATIVE SUGGESTION

Vern L. Bullough

*3304 West Sierra Drive, Westlake Village, CA 91362*

*My Secret Life* is an invaluable source of information on sexual activity in the last part of the 19th century. It tells about prices of prostitutes, homosexual encounters, age of consent, and other similar information not available anywhere else. Scholars have long sought to identify the anonymous author. Gershon Legman, who wrote the introduction to the latest reprinting of *My Secret Life*, identified the author as Henry Spencer Ashbee, but most who have studied the manuscript do not accept this identification. The problem then is to find someone else. This paper examines various candidates, one of whom seems more likely than the others. No final solution is offered but it is hoped that, by laying out the facts, additional data will surface, which will better enable us to identify the author of not only the longest sexual autobiography in English history but probably the longest autobiography ever published.

## Introduction

This study was originally conceived of as a chapter in a book that the late Gordon Stein and myself were writing on myths and mysteries in human sexuality. He died in 1998 before completing the chapter, and his notes as well as a partial draft were sent on to me when his estate was settled. Stein was a bibliophile and bibliographer almost without peer in his lifetime. For the last decade of his life he spent much of his time gathering together a massive collection of books on free thought and agnosticism for the Center for Inquiry in Buffalo, NY. He was also interested in what might be called bibliographical problems, i.e., who wrote anonymous books, how many editions there were, and where they were located. One of his major projects was to identify the author of *My Secret Life*.

While I lack some of the expertise that Stein had, I felt it important to try to bring together the data he had collected as sort of a posthumous memorial to him. Thus I am the author, but without Stein there would be no article, and so I let Stein speak when I know what he believed. While Stein was unable to identify with certainty the real author, it is my hope that this comprehensive survey of what is known about the author and potential candidates be widely publicized and others can take up the quest where we leave off.

### About the Book

*My Secret Life* is one of the most valuable sources of information on sexual attitudes and practices in the last part of the nineteenth century in the English speaking world. It is an anonymous work. Most critics and historians believe the book is an actual autobiography, but the issue is clouded by the fact that the author has never been identified. If it is an autobiography, it is, I believe, the longest one ever published (over 4,000 pages in the original edition and over 2,300 larger pages in the 1966 reprint edition). The original was published in eleven volumes probably between 1888 and 1893, perhaps in Brussels. Many studies of sexuality in the nineteenth century have utilized it as a major source, even if the author was anonymous.

Steven Marcus held that *My Secret Life*

is a record of a real life in which the pornographic, sexual fantasy was acted out. That the writing is both authentic and pornographic at the same time tells us something again about the stage of intellectual and sexual development that Victorian culture had reached. (Marcus, 1964, p. 196)

Still, its authenticity would be enhanced if the author could be identified. This essay is an effort to summarize what we know about the author and, in the process, examine various candidates, none of whom as yet can be positively identified as the author. We do know that, whoever the author was, he would be quite pleased that no one as yet has been able to identify him. In a sense, he tried to have his ideas disseminated and widely read, yet not to reveal who he was.

All sorts of things are in dispute about the book including where *My Secret Life* was printed. Holland, Belgium, and France have been offered as possible sources but most probably it was printed