



Marchant, Anyda [Sarah Aldridge] (1911-2006) and Muriel Inez Crawford (1914-2006)

by Fay Jacobs

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Muriel Inez Crawford (left) and Anyda Marchant in 1992. Image courtesy Fay Jacobs.

Anyda Marchant and Muriel Inez Crawford were pioneering lesbian-feminist publishers who, in 1972 co-founded Naiad Press, the premier lesbian publishing house in the U.S. throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. They were life partners for almost 57 years.

They became same-sex lovers in 1948, in the heyday of McCarthyism, at a time when discrimination against gay men and lesbians was widespread and virulent.

They necessarily remained closeted, each pursuing professional careers, Marchant as an attorney and Crawford as an executive secretary, until their retirement in 1972. Throughout the previous decade, Anyda Marchant had published under the pen name Sarah Aldridge short fiction and essays with lesbian themes in *The Ladder*, a newsletter of the lesbian organization The Daughters of Bilitis.

Upon retirement their pioneering publishing days began. Marchant and Crawford, along with Barbara Grier and Donna McBride, launched Naiad Press in 1973 and incorporated it in 1974. Naiad Press's first book was the first Sarah Aldridge novel, *The Latecomer*.

Naiad Press went on to be arguably the most successful lesbian publishing house in both the U.S. and Europe, ultimately publishing 11 Sarah Aldridge novels, and a myriad of books by some of the best known lesbian authors in the world.

Marchant served as President of Naiad Press from its inception until the mid-1990s. In 1995, Marchant and Crawford withdrew from Naiad Press to start A&M Books in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, which published three more Sarah Aldridge novels, as well as several new writers. Following their deaths, A&M Books continues in business under their hand-picked leadership.

Early Lives

Marchant was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on January 27, 1911. She moved with her family to Washington, D. C. at age six. Her birth name was Ann Nelson Yarborough De Armond but, using her initials, she called herself Anyda.

After earning her undergraduate degree in 1931, followed in 1933 by her law degree from what is now George Washington University, she was admitted to the bar in Virginia and Washington, D. C., and before the U. S. Court of Claims and the U. S. Supreme Court. As a law student, she served for a year as assistant to women's rights pioneer Alice Paul, who was then doing research for an Equal Rights Amendment.

In 1940, she was appointed assistant in the Law Library of Congress in the Latin American Law section. When the man who was head of the Anglo-American Law Section was drafted, Marchant was appointed in his place. When he returned in 1945, she relinquished the post, but declined, on principle, the lesser

position she was offered.

Marchant returned to Rio de Janeiro to work and then did a brief stint as a translator at the 1948 Pan American Union conference in Bogotá, Columbia. From there she went back to Washington as one of the first women attorneys for the law firm now known as Covington and Burling. She then served briefly with the U. S. Department of Commerce and in private practice before becoming an attorney in the Legal Department of the World Bank. She served the World Bank for 18 years until retiring in 1972.

Muriel Inez Crawford was born on April 21, 1914 in Washington, D. C., where she grew up and completed her schooling. Crawford served as an executive secretary at the Washington law firm of Covington and Burling, where she met Marchant, followed by a long-term position as executive secretary to the president of the Southern Railroad, now Amtrak.

It was at the Washington, D. C. law firm that the women caught each others' attention. Shortly after Thanksgiving 1948, Crawford asked Marchant, who was living in a rooming house at the time, to move into the house she shared with her aunt. Crawford was taking care of her elderly relative and Marchant joined her in the responsibility.

Naiad Press and A&M Books

The founding partners named Naiad Press in allusion to the figures from Greek mythology. Naiads were beautiful water nymphs and Naiad Press would allow lesbian feminist writers' words to flow.

With an initial investment of \$2,000 from Marchant and Crawford, Naiad Press was officially launched on January 1, 1973, with the publication of *The Latecomer* a year later.

One of the first tasks Marchant and Crawford undertook for the new firm was the then difficult one of finding a printer willing to print lesbian-themed books. Although many of the editorial decisions were made in Kansas City by Grier and McBride, the finished books were shipped by the printers to Marchant and Crawford, who distributed them from their garage.

Thanks to the large network of independently owned lesbian-feminist bookstores cropping up throughout the 1970s, and the burgeoning of glbtq newspapers and journals, Naiad Press soon made a name for itself.

In addition to the early Sarah Aldridge novels, Naiad Press began to publish romances, mysteries, and novels by other women writers--authors such as Katharine V. Forrest, Renée Vivien, Valerie Taylor, and many more.

Marchant was most proud of the business for its role as an incubator for lesbian writers who otherwise might never have been published. She and Crawford never expected great financial success. They used the money made from the sale of *The Latecomer* to pay for publication of the next book, which in turn financed another. And another.

In 1995, Grier and McBride bought full control of Naiad from Marchant and Crawford, who then launched A&M Books. As part of the financial settlement with Naiad, A&M Books retained both the existing stock and the rights to all of the Sarah Aldridge titles.

Between the ages of 83 and 92, Marchant wrote three more Aldridge novels, which were published by A&M Books, along with books by authors Ann Allen Shockley and Fay Jacobs.

The Sarah Aldridge Novels

Naiad Press was founded in part to provide a venue for the novel Marchant wrote under the pen name Sarah Aldridge, *The Latecomer*, which she believed would not be published by a mainstream press at the time. The novel, however, was such a success that it not only spawned many more Sarah Aldridge titles, but also helped support Naiad Press's other titles and helped further the popularity of lesbian romance novels in general.

At a time when lesbian pulp fiction required that the protagonist had to be punished in some way--either killed or commit suicide or suffer some other terrible fate--the Sarah Aldridge books were refreshingly different. As Lillian Faderman remarks, early lesbian books were "generally cautionary tales: 'moral' literature that warned females that lesbianism was sick or evil and that if a woman dared to love another woman she would end up lonely and suicidal."

In contrast, the Sarah Aldridge novels had happy endings, strong feminist characters, and a world where long-term lesbian relationships were possible.

Beginning with *The Latecomer* in 1974 and ending 14 books later with *O, Mistress Mine* in 2003, these romance novels are rich in historical detail. They celebrate American and European locales and make a case for lesbian equality, subtly in the early titles and more fervently toward the end of the series. They feature lesbian doctors, attorneys, professors, and other independent women. The books, which have never gone out of print, are all still available.

The Salons

Marchant and Crawford began coming to the gay-friendly ocean resort of Rehoboth Beach on weekends in the early 1960s. They first owned a weekend home, and then upon retirement, moved to a beach home in downtown Rehoboth Beach.

The Marchant-Crawford home became the site of legendary Saturday evening salons, where an amazingly diverse crowd--neighbors, clergy, writers, musicians, young and old, gay and straight--would gather for cocktails and conversation. In the winter, the cocktails and conversation would relocate to the couple's home in south Florida.

Both Marchant and Crawford had a special appreciation of Dewar's Scotch and it became a tradition to toast with Dewar's at sunset each evening on the large porch of their home.

The Ladies of Rehoboth Beach

In their later years at least, Marchant and Crawford were deeply complementary in temperament and style. Marchant, tall and imposing, could be rather curt and imperious at times, while Crawford was shorter, outgoing, and had a devilish twinkle in her eye. While both were required to dress in appropriate ladies' attire throughout their careers, after retirement they retreated to comfortable flannel shirts and corduroy pants except on special occasions.

Crawford drove her big Lincoln Continental, swiftly, until she was 92, and flirted with all of the young women who came to visit their porch. Marchant read *The Washington Post* daily and railed against right-wing Republicans.

Indeed, both continued reading until the end of their lives. Marchant favored Virginia Woolf, Henry James, and *The New Yorker*, while Crawford buried her nose in romance novels, both gay and straight.

The women were fiercely devoted to each other, but both developed deep friendships with others as well. They loved international travel, and adored spending the summers in Rehoboth Beach and winters in Lighthouse Point, Florida. Their generosity to young writers and friends in need was legendary.

Anyda Marchant died two weeks shy of her ninety-fifth birthday, at home in Rehoboth Beach on January 11, 2006. Muriel Crawford followed five months later on June 7, 2006.

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About the Author

Fay Jacobs has contributed feature stories and columns to such publications as *The Advocate*, *OUTtraveler*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Washington Blade*, *The Wilmington News Journal*, and *Delaware Beach Life*. Since 1995 she has been a regular columnist for *Letters from CAMP Rehoboth*. She is author of *As I Lay Frying--A Rehoboth Beach Memoir* and *Fried & True--Tales from Rehoboth Beach*. Recipient of the national 1997 *Vice Versa* Award for excellence and the 2008 National Federation of Press Women's Award for Best Book of the Year, she lives with her long-term partner in Rehoboth Beach Delaware, where she is publisher of A&M Books.