

Queer Classics

Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness"

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

Though Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness" is probably the most famous lesbian novel of all time and is still a best seller today, neither it nor its author have ever enjoyed an easy popularity. As Esther Newton states in her article "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman": "Heterosexual conservatives condemn The Well for defending the lesbian's right to exist; lesbian feminists condemn it for presenting lesbians as different from women in general."

Since it was first published in 1928, "The Well of Loneliness" has been loved and loathed in perhaps equal measures. Unlike Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" (published the same year to far less notoriety), it contains little timeless ambiguity or literary hipness. It also lacks a reassuringly romantic happy ending à la E.M. Forster's "Maurice." What it does contain is a brave and compelling argument put forth with old-fashioned excess. You'll likely wince at Hall's "sexual inversion" theories (influenced by certain sexologists of the day), but it's hard not to find a kernel of truth in much of what she writes, or to deny the power of her convictions.

Marguerite Radclyffe Hall was born in England in 1880, was

known as Peter as a child, and called herself John. Her early years were privileged but unhappy, her care left mainly to nannies. When her father died in 1898, she inherited a fortune, enabling her to live lavishly. She published poetry and two well-received novels before "The Well" appeared. An outraged editorial (calling the novel "moral poison") was followed by a trial which declared the book "obscene libel." It was banned in Britain and endured a court battle in America as well. Hall continued to write novels, none of which contained overt lesbian themes or matched "The Well's" success. In 1907 she met Mabel Batten, with whom she lived after Batten's husband died. Her longest relationship was with Batten's cousin, Una Troubridge, and her novels are dedicated to "Our Three Selves," meaning herself, Batten and Troubridge. From all reports Hall was an unpleasant person with political leanings against feminism and towards fascism. She apparently demanded absolute fidelity from her lovers but applied less rigorous standards to herself.

"The Well of Loneliness" is undoubtedly an autobiographical work, its grandeur matching the oversized nature of its author's life. It follows Stephen Gordon from early childhood at her beloved fam-

ily estate, Morton, through her adult exile as a writer in Paris. Outlining the plot in any detail would far exceed the confines of this article; let's just say there's no shortage of melodrama along the way. What the novel is really concerned with, however, is what it means to be born with a gender orientation and sexual desires at odds with societal expectations. From birth, Stephen sees herself and is seen by others as an oddity, a girl who should have been a boy. As she grows older, her longing to love women "the way a man loves a woman" colors every facet of her existence. "The Well" is ultimately a plea for understanding and compassion towards those who, in society's eyes, "have no right to love."

Eventually the novel focuses in on the relationship between Stephen and Mary, a young innocent Stephen meets while serving as an ambulance driver in World War I. As strong as their love is, their relationship will never be sanctioned by society, a fact Stephen—who has no chance to be "normal"—can accept for herself but not for Mary. The way Hall resolves this dilemma is fascinating, if infuriating.

Much has been written about "The Well of Loneliness" and its "infamous mannish lesbian" protagonist Stephen Gordon. Until the

1970's it really was THE lesbian novel. That it's fallen out of favor somewhat since makes reading it all the more instructive. True, the prose is alternately leaden and overwrought, but it's expertly plotted and Hall's moral stance is never less than fierce. A tour of the "garish and tragic night life of Paris" and some colorful side characters only add to the intrigue.

"Why does this novel make so many lesbian feminists and their allies squirm?" Esther Newton asks in her article about "The Well."

Probably because it confronts all of the stereotypes some like to pretend don't exist. Few of us want to see our evolved queer selves at the bottom of "The Well of Loneliness," but the fact that it still touches a nerve suggests we haven't yet finished exploring its depths.

Further Reading:

"Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John" by Sally Cline

"The Trials of Radclyffe Hall" by Diana Souhami

Quotable Well:

"How she hated soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden - at least really adequate pockets."

"She would clench her hands in a kind of fury. How long was this persecution to continue? How long would God sit still and endure this insult offered to His creation? How long tolerate the preposterous statement that inversion was not a part of nature? For since it existed what else could it be? All things that existed were a part of nature!"

"But Mary would be thinking of all those things which she found so deeply appealing in Stephen - the scar on her cheek, the expression in her eyes, the strength and the queer, shy gentleness of her - the strength which at moments could not be gentle."

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