

## On the Other Hand: A Look at Vita Sackville-West

by Kimberly Ward

A poster in the Outright Vermont office says "History has set the record a little too straight." Several faces are on it: scientists, musicians, and writers — people who helped set records and start movements in their fields.

The one who always catches my eye is Virginia Woolf. Her Bloomsbury demeanor and sultry "bedroom eyes" bid me to look closer, dig deeper into what made the life of such a brilliant writer. She is known all over the world for her intellectual prowess, her deftness with a pen, and (to women) as someone who opened a world of career opportunity.

But what is her significance to the gay world? She was a successful lesbian, and when people in the straight community learn that a favorite writer, actor, musician, or scientist is gay or lesbian, it can often change attitudes. A prominent person who bucks gender roles can do the same, just as Babe Didrickson proved that women can be strong athletes and Dr. Spock proved that men can be nurturing parents.

So, what about the icon in our culture who is sexually more ambiguous? What do we do with a Madonna Ciccone, a Freddy Mercury, or a Vita Sackville-West? Because they cannot be categorized as easily as someone who claims loudly YES I AM GAY or YES I AM LESBIAN, we tend to try and explain away their other sexual/emotional activity. We even vilify them as the cause of heterosexual animosity.

Why? Is it the need to carve a niche that is distinctively different from the 90% heterosexual world? Or is it a need to be able to easily identify those that are "like me?" We want to feel that the one thing that is so important in defining us is not isolating, that there is a community for us. Once that has been established, we begin to look for people in history, forefathers and foremothers, with whom we can identify.

Earlier this year, I saw a collection of biographical stories about "lesbians in history" in the bookstore. Vita Sackville-West was in the index. I fumed. I felt invisible and slighted. After all, she had always been MY bisexual icon.

I decided to write a paper or an article "proving" that Vita was bisexual, that she belonged to "our camp," so to speak. In my mind's eye, it was the right thing to do, because there aren't enough people acknowledged to be bisexual in the public's eye. In other words, to me, history had also been set a little "too gay."

When I began researching the article, I had already read the collection of letters Vita and Virginia Woolf had written to each other over

their lifetimes. I knew she was married to Harold Nicholson; therefore, in my mind, she was bisexual. But when I read the introduction to *Harold and Vita*, I was sure I had been mistaken about the couple's sexual orientation.

Their son Nigel, who wrote the introduction to the book, tells the reader that Harold and Vita gave up sexual relations after their second son was born. "So there you have it," I thought. "They really were both homosexual, not bisexual."

I continued to read their letters, because bisexual or not, they defied society by staying together for 49 years and keeping their relationship on their own terms. People argue that they were in a marriage of convenience and protection, but the letters proved that this was a couple who loved one another. So what did that mean about their sexual orientations? How could a man who tells his wife, over and over for 49 years, that he adores her and the sun revolves around her *not* be bisexual? Should we call him "biamorous" to be more accurate? And what makes up a lesbian life? Don't we assert over and over to the straight world that our sexual orientation has just as much to do with how we form emotional relationships as it does our sexual relationships?

I came to the conclusion that yes, Harold and Vita had a marriage in the truest sense, just not in the most traditional sense. I saw with my own eyes the loving words that Harold wrote during their engagement: "I love you so far more than ever before — the longing after you is like a stretched cord within me" (May 11, 1913). And I saw Vita's words: "I write this on the 44th anniversary of that happy day (their marriage) and love you more now than I did then (which is saying a lot)..." (October 1, 1957).

Then and there, I decided that the most important thing was not that Vita and Harold belonged to the "bisexual camp" and there alone. It was important that all of us who had been told that everyone only likes the opposite sex see these two people as icons. They were a testament. Vita was a lesbian because she was a woman who was passionate about women. But she also had meaningful relationships with men, and one long-standing marriage to her husband.

I find myself explaining to friends that her relationship with Harold was just as valid as her many love affairs with women, including Violet Trefusses and Virginia Woolf. If we could all be careful not to let prejudices reverse until we are just as bigoted toward the heterosexual world as they have been toward us for centuries, we might be on our way to freedom for people everywhere. ▼

## AIDS Walk

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Brochures containing individual/family and team registration/pledge forms are available at several stores throughout Vermont or can be received by calling Vermont CARES at (800) 649-AIDS. You can also stop by one of the three CARES offices (30 Elmwood Avenue in Burlington, 78 South Main Street in Rutland, or 73 Main Street in Montpelier) to say hello and pick up the materials.

Registration forms are due on September 16 and are highly encouraged, though not mandatory for participation.

Vermont CARES looks forward to meeting a large number of allies as we all walk together to create a community of support.

### The AIDS Council of Northeastern New York Sponsors a Safer Sex Cruise

**Plattsburgh**—The AIDS Council of Northeastern New York will be providing educational activities and offering risk reduction supplies during a safer sex cruise on Lake Champlain on Sunday, September 15, 1996, for the Gay Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Community. The Cruise is sponsored by Blair's Lounge. The boat leaves at 3PM from Juniper Boat Tours, 2 Dock Street, Plattsburgh, NY (next to the Plattsburgh Marina) and will return at 5PM. **Tickets are \$15** per person, which includes the cruise, entertainment, music, safer sex trivia games and prizes. Soda and snacks will be served and a cash bar will be available. Contact Denise Burcume, at (518) 563-2437 for more information or ticket locations.



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