

RADCLYFFE HALL

b. August 12, 1880

d. October 7, 1943

ENGLISH AUTHOR

“Our love may be faithful even unto death and beyond — yet the world will call it unclean.”

Her 1928 novel, “The Well of Loneliness,” laid the groundwork for lesbian fiction.

Radclyffe Hall was a British author best known for “The Well of Loneliness” (1928), one of the most significant novels about lesbian love. Though it was not sexually explicit, its publisher was tried for obscenity.

Marguerite Antonia Radclyffe-Hall was born in Bournemouth, England. Her father was a wealthy philanderer who left when she was a toddler. She despised her mother, who persistently reminded Hall that she had been unwanted and unadoptable.

Hall attended King’s College in London for a year, then studied in Germany. At age 21, she inherited a fortune from her paternal grandfather and began living on her own terms. She spent her young adulthood traveling, writing and pursuing relationships with women. A self-described “congenital invert,” a sexology term of the era for a lesbian born with male traits, Hall took to smoking, swearing and wearing tailored masculine clothing.

At age 26, Hall published her first book of poems. A year later, in 1907, she met the first of her two longtime loves, Mabel Batten, an aristocrat nearly twice Hall’s age. Hall’s second book of poetry, published in 1908, contains her earliest references to homosexuality. During this period, Hall began using the first name John, which she continued for the rest of her life.

Hall and Batten lived together until Batten’s death in 1916, although Hall started an affair with Batten’s cousin, Lady Troubridge, a renowned sculptor, the year before. Hall and Troubridge lived as a “married” couple until Hall’s death 28 years later. The pair developed an interest in the subject of lesbianism and their open defense of it influenced Hall’s subsequent work.

All told, Hall wrote five volumes of poetry and eight novels. Her first novel, “The Forge” (1924), about a heterosexual couple, closely reflected her life with Troubridge. Hall’s 1926 novel, “Adams Breed,” about a disillusioned waiter, won the Prix Fémina and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

Published in 1928, Hall’s famous, largely autobiographical lesbian love story, “The Well of Loneliness,” drew instant outrage and interest. The book’s main protagonist is a sexual invert named Stephen. The book was initially banned, and copies were burned. Its publisher was charged under English obscenity laws, and Hall figured prominently in the trial. Ultimately, however, by the time the author died, the novel sold more than a million copies and was translated into 11 languages.

In 1930 Hall received the Gold Medal of the Eichelberger Humane Award. Decades later, she was named 16th on The Pink Paper’s list of 500 lesbian and gay heroes.

Hall died of cancer at age 63. She is buried near Mabel Batten in Highgate Cemetery, London.

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