Radclyffe Hall: The No-Man’s Land of Sex

Centuries of custom, centuries of precedent! They pressed, they crushed, they suffocated. If you gave in to them you might venture to hope to live somehow, but if you opposed them you broke yourself to pieces against their iron flanks.

The Unlit Lamp

[It] was fear that aroused their antagonism. In her they instinctively sensed an outlaw, and theirs was the task of policing nature.

The Well of Loneliness

The name of Radclyffe Hall has, until recently, been associated almost exclusively with the scandal surrounding the publication of her novel The Well of Loneliness, an outspoken exploration of the implications of lesbianism (or ‘inversion’ as she calls it) which was suppressed under the Obscene Libel Act in 1928. Although her central preoccupation and most enduring and original contribution was the portrayal of the problems of the ‘invert’ in a heterosexual and homophobic society, her works reveal a wide-ranging concern with the lives of both women and men and demonstrate a sensitive approach to the theme of the quest for meaning in existence and the fulfilment of individual potential.

Born Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall in 1880 she lived for most of her life in London, Paris and Rye, Sussex and produced a number of poems, a collection of short stories and six novels which achieved varying degrees of success in her own day. Her novel Adam’s Breed of 1926, which depicts an Italian waiter in a London restaurant who comes to detest the sight of food and goes off alone to find God (an idea first mooted during a dinner party with May Sinclair and Rebecca West), won both the Prix Femina and the James Tait Black prize.
Since being republished in recent years her novels have been praised for their lyricism, adept social comedy and acute psychological perception.

Details of Radclyffe Hall’s well-to-do background, difficult early life and unusual lifestyle are now well documented. Her parents were divorced shortly after her birth and she saw her father only rarely before he died leaving her enough money to be independent. As a young woman she preferred to wear male clothing and to be known as ‘John’, and formed a number of close but short-lived relationships with other young women, including one of her stepfather’s music pupils and two of her American cousins. In 1907 she became involved in a more permanent relationship with a married woman, a London socialite called Mabel Batton (‘Ladye’) which lasted until she met and began an affair with Lady Una Troubridge in 1915. The feelings of guilt Hall experienced after Mabel Batton’s death in 1916 led her and Una to attempt to contact her through a medium to ask her forgiveness and Mabel became a kind of third ‘presence’ in their lives (The Well Of Loneliness is dedicated to ‘Our Three Selves’). Una Troubridge’s book The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall, based lovingly on her memories of their nearly thirty-year long and often stormy relationship, depicts ‘John’ as a strong-willed, energetic and passionate woman of genius. In many ways she was a contradictory character, for despite her unconventional behaviour she was also very conservative. She supported the Fascism of Mussolini and became a convert to Catholicism. Yet she was also a disciple of spiritualism and became, like May Sinclair, a member of the Society for Psychical Research. She supported the notion of monogamy yet caused suffering to Una Troubridge by an intense relationship in 1934–43 with Eugenia Souline, a Russian nurse, an affair understandably played down by Una Troubridge in her book.

The implications of her own life as a lesbian and writer are hinted at in many of her works but are explored fully in The Well of Loneliness which also contains other specifically autobiographical elements such as her involvement with the members of Natalie Barney’s salon in Paris in the 1920s. Through her reading of the works of Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing and Edward Carpenter, Hall held the belief that most ‘inversion’ was innate and irreversible and that the female ‘invert’ was a kind of ‘third sex’ with a male mind and emotions trapped inside a female body. Such acceptance of (male) scientific thinking in the absence of other historical or literary models was typical of lesbian writing of the period and is frequently condemned.