Radclyffe Hall as a Catholic novelist

One feature of artistic life in England between the wars which has surprised subsequent secular critics is how many homosexual people converted to Catholicism. In her most famous book, *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall poses the rhetorical question: "what of that curious craving for religion which so often went hand in hand with inversion?" (Hall (3), 459). Her book is, among other things, an attempt to frame an answer to that question.

The conversions of such markedly aesthetic individuals as Oscar Wilde, the artist Glyn Philpot, and the novelist Ronald Firbank is often associated in a rather simple-minded way with the ritualistic and aesthetic elements of the Catholic tradition, the incense and brocade, the altar-boys and the music. But there is a great deal more to it than that. It is to do with Catholicism's inclusivity; as we shall see, this is particularly the case in interwar France. The French convert Catholic and decadent novelist Barbé D'Aurevilly wrote in 1920, "what is mentally magnificent about Catholicism is that it is wide, comprehensive and unbounded, embracing human nature whole … it unfurls still the great maxim: Woe to him that taketh scandal!" (Schloesser, 161). As Oscar Wilde wryly said, "the Catholic Church is for saints and sinners alone. For respectable people, the Anglican Church will do" (Ellman, 548). There is also sacerdotalism to take into account: the Catholic tradition offers sacraments of penitence and absolution by which sin can be forgiven. Hall is only one of a number of lesbian writers in the early twentieth century who converted to Catholicism: they include her two principal lovers, Mabel Batten and Una Troubridge, and quite a few of her friends, including the writer Christopher St. John (née Christina Marshall), the painter Tony (née Clare) Atwood, and the middlebrow novelist Micky (Naomi) Jacob.

While Wilde's airy formulation may contain a germ of truth, there are some specific reasons why interwar homosexuals were drawn to Catholicism. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*, issued in 1879, argues that modern social and political problems could be remedied by returning to the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. Among the chief principles of the new Thomism of the twentieth century was the common good as the measure of the political order. Jacques Maritain, one of the most influential of the neo-Thomists, wrote in 1946, "No one more than St. Thomas has emphasized the primacy of the common good in the practical or political order of the life of the city" (Maritain, 427). Hall herself was deeply

concerned with social justice and the common good, and not only with justice for lesbians. She wrote, “I claim emphatically that the true invert is born not made … only when this fact is fully grasped can we hope for the exercise of that charitable help and compassion that will assist inverts to give of their best and thus contribute to the good of the whole. When I wrote *The Well of Loneliness* I had in mind the good of the whole quite as much as the good of congenital inverts” (Baker, 238). In 1929, she sold a portrait of her dead lover Mabel Batten by John Singer Sargent, a most treasured possession, on behalf of striking miners. The mention of Maritain is a reminder that Twenties France was the scene of a remarkable Catholic renaissance in which a variety of public intellectuals converted to Catholicism and initiated a dialogue between Catholicism and modernism. At the same time, Twenties Paris was the centre of an international lesbian community, principally British and American, which was connected in complex ways with the demi-monde and the arts, because it was possible to live an openly Lesbian life in the city. Hall knew Natalie Barney, who was one of the central figures of this world, and through her, met many of the others.

Additionally, a variety of Hall’s Catholic contemporaries in France were concerning themselves with outcasts and the marginalised, notably the novelist Léon Bloy, and the painter George Rouault. The Christ to whom homosexuals like Radclyffe Hall were drawn was, above all, the Christ who suffered, who was resistant to religious and social authority, always on the side of the social outcast, and a model of “compassion and justice” for publicans and sinners. Christ was mocked, scorned, despised, shamed, and forsaken, a condition which a gay person in the nineteen-twenties could understand only too well. Like Oscar Wilde before her, Radclyffe Hall was devoted to the figure of Christ *in extremis*. For queer Catholics, the suffering of Christ provides a context for experiencing, understanding and giving dignity to the social suffering which was associated with sexual nonconformity in the 1920s.

Hall’s novels focus principally on three themes, the destructive effects of parenting which pays no attention to the child’s specific nature and capacities, the position of women, and the imitation of Christ. All her seven novels are suffused with a preoccupation with the quest for acquiring spiritual self-knowledge through suffering and self-denial, and before *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928, her readership would have received her either as a feminist writer, a Christian one, or both. To our eyes, her very short hair and masculinely styled jackets have a story to tell, but before she took the extremely courageous decision

deliberately to out herself in 1928, her readers did not perceive that she was sexually unorthodox unless they were also her personal friends and knew how she lived her life. To the fashion magazine *Eve*, far from appearing sexually suspicious, she "was in the front rank of those active women who really carry off modern fashions in dress" (Doan, 111). Ethel Mannin recalls in a memoir that in the mid-twenties, "the most heterosexual of women appeared in severely tailored suits worn with shirts and ties", as she did herself (Mannin, 71). The "London Diary" of the *Newcastle Daily Journal* wrote of Radclyffe Hall, "[She] may frequently be seen at the West End theatres dressed in what is, save for the tight skirt, a gentleman's evening dress suit, with white waistcoat complete. She wears her Titian hair in a close Eton crop, and looks the strong and silent woman to the life. With her notably fine forehead and beautiful hands, her whole aura is high-brow modernism" (Rolley, 57). It was only after the trial of *The Well of Loneliness* that women's masculine tailoring aroused suspicion in the general public: the journalist (and lesbian) Evelyn Irons complained "the minute [*The Well*] came out, if you wore a collar and tie, "Oh, you're Radclyffe Hall, Miss", the truck drivers used to call on the street. And I wasn't at all happy" (Doan, 123).

Hall's first novel, *The Unlit Lamp*, introduces several of her key themes: bad mothering, the social constraints which prevent women from living up to their potential, and that using one's talents is an imperative. It is the story of a misused and wasted life. The protagonist is called Joan, and presented as a failed Joan of Arc. She is a potentially brilliant girl who allows herself to be trapped by her mother's emotional neediness, and fails to commit to the woman who loves her. Her dream is to become a doctor; which Hall presents as chivalric self-dedication, most notably in an exchange between Joan and her closest male friend, who shares this ambition. He asks her,

> "Have you prayed over your sword?"
>
> She knew what he meant. "No", she said. "I haven't had the courage to unsheathe it yet." (Hall, 209)

Chivalric values were important to Hall, or perhaps rather, the romantic dream of knightliness which evolved in the nineteenth century from works such as Kenelm Digby's *Broadstone of Honour, or Rules for the Gentlemen of England* (1822) and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. The title of Hall's book is taken from a poem by Robert Browning, "The Statue and the Bust", about two heterosexual lovers who delay the consummation of their mutual desire love for reasons of convenience until death comes decisively between them. As a title, it signals that unrealized love, as well as unused talent, is central to Hall's intentions in the novel.

Hall's most critically successful novel was *Adam's Breed* (1926). Its hero is a second-generation working-class Anglo-Italian in Soho. He is brought up by his grandmother who hates him because he is illegitimate, and his birth ruined the life of her adored daughter. Aged fourteen, he becomes a waiter, saying hopefully, "Perhaps I can serve well" (Hall (2), 94). His employer soon discovers that "Gian-Luca possessed that rarest of all gifts, the instinct for perfect service" (Hall (2), p. 118). When World War I breaks out, his illegitimacy debars him from serving in the Italian army. He joins the British army hoping to fight, but finds himself assigned to the Army Service Corps, looking after an officers' mess back at base. Like Hall's female heroes, Gian-Luca finds that his yearning for heroic male action is sidelined and trivialised. After the end of the war, he goes back to his job as head-waiter, but he has been disoriented by his war experience and can take no interest in his work, or in his wife. Ultimately, the only solution he finds is to renounce the world and become a homeless pilgrim, dying alone in the New Forest aged only thirty-four (Christ is traditionally thought to have died aged thirty-three). There were many traumatized men in the aftermath of the First World War who found the return to their previous life extremely difficult, so the book resonated with the public. It sold very well, was critically acclaimed, and won both the Prix Femina and the James Tait Black Prize.

Her next book was *The Well of Loneliness,* which, like *Adam's Breed,* invokes World War One as a crucible for personal change. While male writers from Robert Graves to Wilfred Owen emphasized the savage futility of the war and its destructive effects, it had a special and rather different significance for those women who craved to live with the freedom of men, because it gave them a chance to do so. Hall's circle of friends included one such woman, the redoubtable Toupie (Barbara) Lowther, the oldest daughter of the sixth Earl of Lonsdale. The product of an extremely athletic family, Lowther spoke excellent French, she was a champion fencer and tennis player, and above all, she was an expert driver (and also one of the first women in England to ride a motorbike) (Halberstam, 85). For early twentieth century women, driving a car expressed freedom and independence both practically and symbolically (Doan (2)). In popular novels of the Twenties such as Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924) and Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (1928), or Tamara de Lempicka's well-known self-portrait, "Woman in a green Bugatti" (1928), a woman behind the wheel of a big fast car stands for a reckless subversion of social norms; so it is hardly surprising to find that a number of women motor racers seem to have been lesbians. The best remembered of

them is probably Joe (Marion) Carstairs, who held a variety of speed records on water, though Violette Morris, a French racing driver, was the most thoroughgoingly Amazonian: naturally ample-bosomed, she underwent a double mastectomy in order, she claimed, to fit better into the tiny cockpit of a Twenties racing car (Bonnet, 44-5).

At the outbreak of war, many women were anxious to help in whatever way they could: 25,000 British and American women, both expatriates and temporary residents, joined various volunteer relief organizations in France during the Great War (Latimer, 21). For many, the experience was traumatic, but it could also be liberating, since the imperative of service trumped the social pressures which normally kept unmarried women at home. Joe Carstairs experienced her first real liberation from family control when she went to France in 1916, aged sixteen, and drove an ambulance for the American Red Cross. Between runs to the trenches, she shared a flat in Montparnasse with several other women drivers, one of whom was Dolly Wilde, Oscar's lesbian niece. She and Joe became lovers. The schizophrenic existence of these women was far from unusual. Jean Cocteau, unfit for army duty, volunteered for the Red Cross in 1914, and was among those who drove down towards the battle of the Marne, where half a million men were killed or wounded in less than a week, to care for wounded soldiers with French and German shells screeching overhead, but he returned between missions to Paris (Steegmuller, 125). War service gave women such as Toupie Lowther and Dolly Wilde a kind of freedom and dignity, an escape from the petty and trivial lives forced on unmarried middle- and upper-class women. The discovery that it was possible to live an openly lesbian life in Paris was another kind of revelation for them. A number of recognizably lesbian bars had opened in Paris as early as the 1890s, such as the Brasserie du Hanneton, advertised as such in the *Guide des Plaisirs à Paris*, and Mme Palmyre's Le Souris, while there were other establishment favored by a mixed clientèle of gay men, lesbians, and prostitutes, such as the Rat-Mort (Albert, 101). Montmartre was a cruising area for lesbians from the 1880s (Choquette, 155-6). After World War One, there was an overtly lesbian bar, Le Monocle, in Montmartre, and other venues in the same area where gay women could socialize, including Palmyre's new venture, Chez Palmyre, opposite the Moulin Rouge, which Colette wrote up in *La Vie Parisienne* (under the thin disguise of Semiramis Bar) in 1909 (Choquette (2), 85).

Toupie Lowther put her talents as a French-speaker and skilled driver to use by collaborating with Norah Desmond Hackett to organize an all-female team of like-minded women and

offering the unit to the French as ambulance drivers. It consisted of 20 cars and 25 to 30 women drivers (mostly British), and, after some initial opposition from the authorities, was attached to the 2nd Army Corps of the French Third Army, operating close to the front line in Compiègne (Baker, 125). The work was unrelentingly hard and dangerous (Doan (2) 26-41. Evadne Price wrote a novel based on the diaries of another Englishwoman, Winifred Constance Young, who had served as an ambulance driver behind the front line, called *Not So Quiet … Stepdaughters of War* (1930). Price, drawing on Young, summed up the experience as "wounds and foul smells and smutty stories and smoke and bombs and lice and filth and noise, noise, noise … of cold sick fear, a dirty world of darkness and despair" (Smith, 30). As Jane Marcus writes, "they [were] experts in the geography of hell, driving at night with their lights off in freezing cold and snow ... with their loads of screaming and moaning wounded" (Smith, 244-5). Not the least of the horrors was picking up men who were nightmarishly wounded and barely recognizable as human beings: "spare a glance for my last stretcher ... that gibbering, unbelievable, unbandaged thing, a wagging lump of raw flesh on a neck, that was a face a short time ago" (Smith, 94-5). Mary Borden, an American VAD, recalled in 1929 that "there are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs, shapeless; and stumps where legs were once fastened. There are eyes — eyes of sick dogs, sick cats, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate" (Borden, 60). Apart from the horror of the mens' injuries, the utter antithesis of the romaticized, chivalric notion of warfare cherished by the English popular press (and, indeed, by Radclyffe Hall), the women's personal danger was very great: there was a perpetual risk of being shelled, or pitched into a shell hole car and all. But paradoxically, when Lowther gave an interview to *The Times* after the war, she recalled, "it was a wonderful time. We were often 350 yards from the German lines awaiting the wounded, under camouflage" (Baker, 126). At first sight, this seems to make no sense at all; but the chance to serve, as opposed to living a life measured out in teacups, made even this appalling experience glorious to her. The sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebing commented on the "inverts" he studied, "the consciousness of being a woman, and thus to be deprived of the gay college life, or to be barred out from the military career, produces painful reflections" (Newton, 566). Lowther's unit served with tremendous bravery and effectiveness, and several members were awarded the Croix de Guerre, including Lowther herself. She became friendly with Hall and Una Troubridge after the war, and in 1922, she taught both women to drive. They referred to her as "Brother", and it is clear that her wartime career made a great impression on Hall.

Hall drew on Lowther's experiences in a short story and a novel, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, and *The Well of Loneliness.* Both of these works place the protagonist in a version of Lowther's ambulance unit. In the short story, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, we are shown a woman whose only opportunity for recognizing her true identity as a masculine soul in a female body was the Great War. We meet her first when she has been demobilized, after being the head of an ambulance unit in France for three years. The armistice has left her with a shattered identity which only the war had allowed her to put together in the first place. More importantly, Radclyffe Hall incorporated a great deal of Lowther's achievement and experience into the story of her invert protagonist Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*. Like Lowther, she is an accomplished fencer and motorist. Also like Lowther, Stephen Gordon serves in an ambulance unit at Compiègne, and is awarded a Croix de Guerre.

As Hall meditated on creating a novel which would dramatize the plight of sexual nonconformists in a hostile world, Toupie Lowther's heroic wartime service gave her the model she needed. Toupie, like Hall herself, was perhaps transsexual rather than lesbian in terms of the vocabulary which is available to us now: certainly both women saw themselves within the terms suggested by Krafft-Ebing, as quoted in a previous paragraph, as people who would much rather have been born in a male body and entitled to male privileges. But whatever Toupie was, her war service, and that of Enid Elliot and Eileen Plunkett, members of Toupie's unit who lived as partners after the war, and socialised with Hall and Lady Una (Baker, 134), gave Hall the material with which to create a sexually dissident protagonist whose heroic actions ought by rights to have earned her the respect of society. Hall says of her fictionalised version of Toupie's ambulance corps, "War and death had given them a right to life" (Hall (3), 306). She passes rather lightly over the genuine horror of the work these women were doing. For one thing, she had no personal experience of it, but remained in England throughout the war fussing over the increasingly-invalid Mabel Batten, for another, she retained the blind, sentimental patriotism which enraged writers such as Wilfred Owen. She focuses rather on camaraderie; and she calls her fictional corps the Breakspeare Unit, a strong hint that the reader should perceive the women's service in the light of medieval chivalry. Certainly, her hero Stephen Gordon is nothing if not chivalrous and self-sacrificing.

Lesbians in more recent times have been uncomfortable with the *Well of Loneliness*, not just because Stephen does nothing but suffer, but because she is represented as a male soul in a

woman's body. When Hall's biography came out, a reviewer in *Gay Times* wrote rather grumpily that Hall "must have done the greatest single-handed disservice to the lesbian cause since Adam was a lad", on the grounds that the message seems to be that lesbian relationships are lachrymose, abject, doomed, and effectively sexless (Reid, 84). Esther Newton observes, "why does this novel make so many lesbian feminists and their allies squirm? Unable to wish Radclyffe Hall away, sometimes even hoping to reclaim her, our feminist scholars have lectured, excused, or patronized her" (Newton, 559). But today's classifications of gender dysphoria might allow us to ask whether Hall was actually transsexual in an era which hadn't yet evolved the concept, and drew Stephen Gordon in her own image, in which case she wasn't talking about lesbian life at all (Halberstam, 85). It is also worth observing that the minor characters of the novel include a version of Natalie Barney who is patently having a perfectly satisfactory life among a community of the like-minded, as, of course, did Barney in reality.

But whatever Stephen is, her constructed loneliness is quite unlike her author's experience. Like her creation, Radclyffe Hall had a miserable childhood and a terrible relationship with her mother, but for the novelist, things looked up when she became independent, and she seems never to have been without at least one girlfriend from her twenties onwards. She successfully made a life with Mabel Batten, and when the older woman died in 1916, with the glamorous and talented Lady Una Troubridge. She and Una were publicly acknowledged as a couple, and were socialites, whose lives were respectfully chronicled by the papers that reported "Society" news. She had dozens of gay friends who were successful both personally and professionally, including Noel Coward (Castle). But she gives Stephen a far lonelier kind of life, in which her protagonist keeps gay men at arms' length, and has one brief relationship with another woman whom she renounces on the grounds that, unlike Stephen herself, her girlfriend was capable of living a heterosexual life.

It is easy to see why this plot structure has irritated generations of lesbians. But Hall's narrative has a clear religious dimension which is often overlooked. Stephen has to suffer through the novel because she is being represented as a suffering servant. Hall may well have encountered the work of a slightly earlier French novelist who was instrumental in the conversion of many French intellectuals, Léon Bloy. Bloy used fiction to offer a model of suffering as a privileged mode of redemption, and to suggest that those who suffer, especially

those who are despised by a self-righteous society, such as prostitutes and Jews, are religiously blessed (Schloesser, 65). That is, the last shall be first and the first last. Hall was poorly educated and may or may not have read Bloy at first hand, but her partner Lady Troubridge was a distinguished literary translator from French, and a very sophisticated reader, and the two women worked closely together on the books that came out under Hall's name: "once the first draft of a section was completed, [Hall] would have [Troubridge] read it back to her … after this stage, the draft would be dictated to the typist … the typed script would go back to Una for a further reading … this painstaking process might be repeated several times" (Baker, 121-2). The structure of *The Well of Loneliness* suggests very strongly that Hall had either come across Bloy's work, or had independently evolved a similar theology, which applied Bloy's perception to sexual nonconformists: again, she could well have discussed this with her partner, since they were both converts. She may also, though Lady Troubridge, have been aware of Jacques Maritain, who developed a specific sense of a mission to homosexuals: writing to the novelist Julien Green in 1927, "God has led me to understand that I *must* help souls like yours to work out the problems in which they find themselves involved. What good am I if I do not carry out this service? (Schloesser, 202)

Essential to Hall's thinking is that homosexuality, or intersexuality, is not a choice. She arrived at this conclusion from a study of the sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, and on the basis of their work, she firmly believed that science had pronounced that there was such a thing as a congenital invert. Therefore, it followed from her religious perspective that God had chosen to make women like her for his own purposes, and consequently, her existence and her desires could be neither a mistake nor a sin. The purpose which Hall divined for herself was to use the public recognition which she had won as a novelist in order bear witness to her gay brothers and sisters, accepting that the result would be a kind of martyrdom, as indeed it was. Another book which may have influenced her thinking is Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, first published in 1920, which promoted the idea of the artist as a chivalrous knight, serving a cause larger than himself, a vision the chivalry-struck Hall would have found potent (Schloesser, 159). Joan of Arc was among her heroes.

In *The Well of Loneliness*, the protagonist, Stephen Gordon, was born on Christmas Eve and named after the protomartyr. Her author gives her a strong instinct for self-sacrifice: even as a

little child of six, she is shown praying for weeks that she would be permitted to suffer an adored housemaid's sore knees in the place of the woman who had acquired them through her work. Like Hall, Stephen perceives herself as a man in a woman's body. She longs to serve and to use her capacities on other's behalf, a desire which is finally gratified when she goes to France as an ambulance driver, a development which draws on Toupie Lowther's actual career, but which allows Hall to combine the male chivalric ideal of knighthood as the service of the weak by the strong with feminine ideals of nurture and protection.

The *Well of Loneliness* effectively portrays a lesbian messiah, and unites sexological and religious perceptions. Stephen, after a lifetime of suffering, sees herself as, in some way, called to proclaim the existence of her people, and to sacrifice herself (Emily S. Hill addresses this). The whole implication of the narrative is that, like Hall, she will use her public platform to present the argument for homosexuals as the children of God. Her sexual life suggests her exemplary status. Her single relationship does not break down for lack of love on either side. It is entered on by virgin women, utterly committed to each other, but, because Stephen comes to believe that Mary will fundamentally be happier if she doesn't have to live her life as an outcast, she selflessly pushes Mary into the arms of a man by pretending to have an affair. Stephen's renunciation of Mary is necessary to Hall's narrative as a parallel to Christ's abandonment by his disciples at Calvary. It has to occur, so that the full devastation of the Passion can be experienced, since only then will recuperation be possible. Once Mary has gone, Stephen in her lonely agony finds herself gradually possessed by legions of inverts from throughout time: living, dead and unborn. They beg her to speak with God for them, and then they possess her. She speaks for queer people from the past, present and future as she gives passionate voice to their collective prayer:

> "God," she gasped, "We believe; we have told You we believe…We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!" (Hall (3), 491).

It is only in this moment of prophetic frenzy that Stephen becomes a whole human being, since she suddenly experiences the femininity she has always attempted to deny. Her epiphany is experienced in terms of giving birth: she experiences her mighty striving for a better world as a kind of physical labor. We are rather indirectly told in *The Well of Loneliness* that Stephen is disgusted by menstruation; her female peers have cozy, euphemistic ways of discussing the issue, from which she remains aloof, like a brother (Hall

(3), 85). This may be another strong indication of transsexuality rather than lesbianism in the author of the book. What Stephen Gordon is embracing is the idea of becoming the conduit of a better future, and thus, as in her days as an ambulance driver, she is simultaneously heroic knight and nurturing mother.

As Laura Doan has observed, the contemporary reception of *The Well of Loneliness* was surprisingly positive, given what happened next. The book received a large number of respectful reviews, mostly congratulating the author on her courage, though some critics gently censured her for prolixity, diffuseness and passages of slack writing. Interestingly, the only contemporary critic who is identifiably Catholic (the Irish journalist Con O'Leary) is also the only one to notice the theological argument underpinning Hall's project: "the whole thesis is that there is a particular nature from birth that is, in the inscrutable design of God, set apart from the recognized divisions of mankind, and that the censures of society are therefore unjust" (Doan and Prosser, 61). Opposition then came in the form of a furious assault on the book by the journalist James Douglas in the *Sunday Express*, followed up by a trial for obscenity, both of which, unlike the critical establishment, reacted to Hall's claims for inclusion. Douglas, himself a sincere Anglican of the "muscular" movement associated with the English public schools and writers such as Charles Kingsley, did observe Hall's theology, but he rejected it utterly: "this terrible doctrine may commend itself to certain schools of pseudo-scientific thought, but it cannot be reconciled with the Christian religion or the Christian doctrine of free will" (Doan and Prosser, 38: D.E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity*, is a study of this strand in Anglican thought). Sir Henry Chartres Biron, summing up the case for regarding the book as an obscene publication, was clearly repelled by this aspect of Hall's writing, and uncomprehending: he writes, "I confess the way the Deity is introduced into this book seems to me singularly inappropriate and disgusting" (Doan, 48). These reactions might help to explain why so many early twentieth century English homosexuals who were religiously minded found themselves more drawn to Catholicism than Anglicanism.

As we have seen, there was a strain in contemporary Catholic thinking in France which was engaging seriously with the issue of sexual nonconformity But while Anglicans had their own forms of concern for the common good, witnessed by institutions such as slum missions and Magdalen houses for repentant prostitutes, the Church of England remained a highly conservative institution, and the discourse of leading churchmen discussing homosexuality was that of "vice" and "perversion" (Hilliard). Hall was courageous enough to challenge this

directly, and in public. She has seemed a mass of contradictions to later generations of readers; avant-garde in some respects, yet highly conservative in others, using middlebrow fiction to address topics normally the province of experimental "advanced" writers. This of course is one of the reasons why she was considered a danger to the public: part of the animus against her work derives from its readability: if it was "put in the hands of a healthy boy or girl", he or she would understand its sexual narrative, which would not be the case if, for example, Ronald Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, or Woolf's *Orlando*, which also have sexual identity as a principal theme, was similarly presented. In the 1920s, the "sex question" in an English context was an entirely secular concern, associated particularly with the Bloomsbury coteries and with D.H. Lawrence, so much so, that the religious aspect of Hall's writing was almost unobserved at the time, or subsequently. Joanne Glasgow's "What's a nice Lesbian like you doing in the church of Torquemada?" sets the tone for much subsequent discussion of Hall and her novel. But Hall's Christian sensibility is continental and Catholic, and has therefore gone largely unrecognized as such. Humorless, stubborn and naïve, she saw herself as a crusader against injustice, making the elementary point that it is unfair to stigmatize people for a trait it is not in their power to change. History has on the whole been on her side, but the nature of her argument, and the conceptual tools with which she approached the problem, were not understood at the time, and have rarely been acknowledged since.

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