

Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939

By Virginia Nicholson

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Subversive, eccentric and flamboyant, the artistic community in England in the first half of the twentieth century was engaged in the bold experiment of refashioning not just their art, but their daily lives. They reinvented the home, challenging and rejecting the smug certainties of the Victorian bourgeoisie, in what amounted to a domestic revolution.

From Roy Campbell's recipe for bouillabaisse to Iris Tree cutting off her braid and leaving it behind on a train, creativity entered every aspect of these people's lives. Bohemians ate garlic and didn't always bathe; they listened to Wagner and worshipped Diaghilev; they sent their children to coeducational schools, explored homosexuality and free love, vegetarianism and Postimpressionism. They were often drunk and broke, sometimes hungry, but they were of a rebellious spirit. Inhabiting the same England with Philistines and Puritans was a parallel minority of moral pioneers, traveling third class and coping with faulty fireplaces.

This is a book about a search for truth and beauty in small things; it is also about sacrifice, liberty, class conflict and the generation war. In many cases, Bohemia's headlong idealism collided disastrously with the demands of everyday life. Accompanying the victories in this rebellion was an anarchic clutter of bounced checks, blocked drains, whooping cough, and incontinent cats. Sometimes artists felt lost amid the turmoil of new freedoms. Contempt for convention led all too often to poverty, divorce, addiction and even death.

Many of the heroes and heroines of this transitional time are half-forgotten, neglected characters from the footnotes of history who achieved little of artistic durability. Their voices have seldom been heard, but their valiant approach to the art of living deserves to be celebrated. For where they led, we have followed. Gradually, imperceptibly, Bohemia changed society. *Among the Bohemians* testifies to that quiet revolution.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nicholson, granddaughter of painter Vanessa Bell and great-niece of Virginia Woolf, is uniquely qualified to write about the experimental lifestyle of her grandparents' generation. The early 20th-century British bohemians-Bloomsbury and their extended circles, and lesser-known rebels like Roy Campbell and Jacob Epstein-rejected bourgeois Victorian values and embraced life as art, open marriage, Rousseau-influenced education and even poverty. Perhaps because she is an insider (despite having been born well after its heyday), Nicholson is able to communicate the ideals and desires of this generation without romanticizing it. The exhilaration of the bohemians' freedom and the hardships of the poverty in which many chose to live are equally portrayed. Their children place a golden haze on their youth but also blame their parents for not providing a rigorous education and a few rules to guide their way. The reader could also easily get impatient with how these talented individuals seemed determined to destroy themselves (the epilogue in particular reads like a catalogue of lives left ravaged by passions), but Nicholson effectively argues that theirs was the energy of true rebellion and implies that the excess was necessary to break with the constricting bonds of the past-and that the circle of bohemia ultimately changed how we all live. Although this account is written in a neutral, almost dry style as Nicholson examines the bohemians' daily lives thematically (sexual freedom, child-rearing, styles in clothing and interior decoration, etc.), the intimate conversations and salacious details related still titillate like gossip. Readers interested in the art, literature and personalities of this era will not be disappointed. B&w photos, illus.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In a vibrant catalogue of anecdotes and tragicomic episodes, Nicholson pays homage to British writers and artists who challenged convention before the Second World War. Living for art could exact a price—Robert Graves, hoping to subsidize his writing, made a disastrous foray into shopkeeping, while a destitute Dylan Thomas used his books as furniture. For Nicholson, such recklessly hand-to-mouth living is downright heroic. Although the eccentric domestic arrangements of the Bloomsbury group are a familiar topic, she casts her net wide to include lesser-known figures like Nina Hamnett, a fixture at London's Café Royal, and Betty May—the cocaine addicted model of the sculptor Jacob Epstein—whose signature dish was grilled mouse on toast.

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From [Booklist](#)

Nicholson comes by her gift for impeccable prose, psychological and social insight, delight in gossip, and sympathy for the bohemian way of life naturally as the granddaughter of one of Britain's most celebrated bohemians, painter Vanessa Bell, and the grandniece of the literary genius Virginia Woolf. Animating a large, colorful, eccentric, and irresistible dramatis personae of such creative, eccentric, and nervy fugitives from conventionality as Augustus John, Lytton Strachey, Dora Carrington, Nina Hamnett, Arthur Ransome, and Dylan Thomas, and drawing on an impressive cache of well-chosen and judiciously used sources, from novels to letters, memoirs, and sociological data, Nicholson paints a lively and revelatory panorama of British bohemia as it flourished just after the death of Queen Victoria on up to the outbreak of World War II. By brilliantly analyzing key aspects of life in bohemia—from its harshest reality, poverty, to love and sex, friendship and rivalry, artistic ambition and lack thereof, gender roles, raising children, and even such prosaic but essential details as clothing, housework, and cuisine—Nicholson greatly deepens our perception of this much romanticized, yet not well understood, era and way of life. Intriguing, discerning, and juicy,

Nicholson's unique history also offers a fresh and significant assessment of bohemia's phenomenal impact on society. *Donna Seaman*

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