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among the bohemians

« EXPERIMENTS IN LIVING 1900–1939 »

VIRGINIA NICHOLSON

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They ate garlic and didn't always bathe; they listened to Wagner and worshiped Diaghilev; they sent their children to coeducational schools, explored homosexuality and free love, vegetarianism and Post-impressionism. They were often drunk and broke, sometimes hungry, but they were of a rebellious spirit. Inhabiting the same England with Philistines and Puritans, this parallel minority of moral pioneers lived in a world of faulty fireplaces, bounced checks, blocked drains, whooping cough, and incontinent cats.

They were the bohemians.

Virginia Nicholson -- the granddaughter of painter Vanessa Bell and the great-niece of Virginia Woolf -- explores the subversive, eccentric, and flamboyant artistic community of the early twentieth century in this "wonderfully researched and colorful composite portrait of an enigmatic world whose members, because they lived by no rules, are difficult to characterize" (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939 Details

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Tim says

Interesting rather than riveting. This book about British bohemia in the first half of the 20th century is divided into sections – the choice of hardship over material comforts, the push for sexual freedom, new approaches to child rearing, rebellion through dress, revolutionising eating habits, changing the nature of domesticity. The book is largely made up of anecdotes, snapshots of the lives of many artists and writers, most of whom not so well known. It's the kind of book that helps inform you who you would like to read about in more detail – in my case, Augustus John and Dylan Thomas. The research that must have gone into it is very impressive and it's well written. However I'm not sure I learned much that isn't essentially common knowledge. I actually bought this on a misapprehension that it was about Vanessa Bell and how her house Charleston was managed. Teach me to read the blurb of a book more closely before hitting the buy now button.

Sara says

My idea of a great bedside book. One wild anecdote after another, organized by topic rather than chronology, in good clear friendly prose.

I see some reviewers found it dull. It's probably not best to read it all at once, I think the effect would be very choppy, and if you're looking for a reasoned in-depth discussion or a more traditional history book, you will be disappointed. I would dip in and read a few pages before sleep, finding one great story after another.

It's true, there is nothing new under the sun in experimental rebellious living. And it was all much more of a bold leap in the 1920s and 30s when mainstream society was so deeply traditional and conservative, and there was no social safety net or modern medicine to rescue the starving artist from disease, addiction, and actual starvation.

Nicholson also shows how it takes an extreme revolution by a brave few to change society in the long run, how what is extreme and shocking behavior for one generation becomes ordinary life for their descendants. Social freedom for women, all our modern array of choices in dress, food, domestic life, relationships... thank the Bohemians.

Merilee says

I've just begun this on my Kindle, written by Vanessa Bell's (Virginia Woolf's sister) grand-daughter. Nicholson is her married name and does not seem to come from the Harold Nicholsons, which would have made things really interesting!

Not as interesting as it sounds. It kind of drones on and on about the somewhat obvious differences between the Bohemians and their Victorian predecessors. One of the few things that surprised me was that the Victorians found blue dinner plates absolutely horrifying. I wish I could find a version of the appendix to print because it has a cast of characters (real) with a paragraph about each. There were so many marriages and menages-a-trois and even -quatres, that this would help one keep track. Despite all this scandalous behavior, it was very ho-hum. Oh, Augustus John had tons and tons of love-children...

Malin says

I truly enjoyed reading this book - but perhaps my interest was fuelled partly by the fact that my husbands mother was mentioned several times in it. I liked the way it was written, it feels like there has been massive research behind it. The 1920's were interesting times in many ways, and the insights into how the "bohemians" lived and thought at this time are in some ways similar to the 60's when I grew up. I was spellbound reading it!

Orna Ross says

A wonderful book, full of humane tolerance and understanding, and a profound insight into what it was like to be a writer or artist at a time when to make that choice often meant poverty and social ostracism. A must-read for every creative and creativist

Sara Giacalone says

Fascinating read about the nitty gritty details about bohemian life and how groundbreaking it was. Makes the 1960s look like a bunch of rehashed poseurs.

Amy says

I'm wavering between two and three stars. This was not what I expected, but really it's my mistake since Virginia Nicholson is upfront about the fact that she is primarily interested in social history on a micro level: What did the bohemians eat for lunch? What sort of clothes did they wear? How did they decorate their apartments? How did they take baths? Did they go on trips and if so, how did they travel? She organizes the book thematically, rather than chronologically, so that you don't get good sense of who did what, and when. If you are looking for an account of the major personalities or artistic accomplishments of the time, this is probably not the book you are looking for. The book covers a large time period -- 1900 through 1939 -- and other than asides about Victorians or Edwardians, there is really no sense of a time period. World War I is almost entirely glossed over, except to point out how the bohemians partied for days after the armistice. But this left me with even more questions: Why weren't the men required to enlist? Were they all conscientious objectors? Did they all know each other before or was this crazy party the first time they met? And, for example, the chapter on child-rearing: She briefly describes childhood for the Victorian or Edwardian child and then skips ahead to the public schools of the 1920s and 30s, interspersing some of the interesting educational schemes of the Bohemians. Personalities are randomly brought in and out to make a point, rather

than provide a narrative. She mentions a few frequently -- Vanessa Bell (she is the author's grandmother), Augustus John and his long suffering wives/companions, Ida and then Dorelia, Carrington, Mark Gerstler, Lytton Strachey, Robert Graves, and a few others. There are a ton of people mentioned, some only once or twice, and almost always without context other than "This person, too, wore a beard!" or something along those lines.

This all sounds very negative, but I did find it interesting and learned a lot of Victorian/Edwardian era trivia. It's interesting to note that, for the most part, women ended up getting a raw deal. Though bohemianism could be liberating, especially for some upper-class women, most ended up sacrificing their art and careers once they were married. Though bohemians were more lax on housekeeping, the cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing still had to be done and traditional gender roles were still strongly enforced. Even the artistic clubs with the enlightened bohemian men banned women from becoming members. And while both men and women were frowned upon for bending the rules, it seems like the consequences were much harsher for women. I can't think of any examples at the moment to back that up, but it seems true. Also, I have a suspicion that some people maybe used the idea of bohemianism as an excuse to act like jerks, and if called out, would say something like "I CAST OFF THE BONDS OF SOCIETY. MY ART IS WHAT MATTERS. Not this beleaguered woman I've impregnated for the fifth time, or my starving feral children, or the conventional losers that I scoff at yet sponge off of, or just being a genuinely nice person because BAH. SOCIETY." Which MAY be true, based on some of the anecdotes in this book. And that's my major issue, I think -- as much as the author wants us to give props to the bohemians for breaking down class barriers, giving women independence, promoting tolerance for other cultures (namely, gypsies), it's a bit of a tough sell. I don't doubt that it contributed and certain people were probably more helpful in others, but eating garlicky foods and refusing to wear white tie to dinner does not mean that the bohemians were more enlightened or less classist or racist than their conventional counterparts.

Sigrid Ellis says

There is nothing new under the sun.

Let me just repeat that:

There is nothing new under the sun. Your generation, whatever generation you may be, did not invent sex, drugs, nor rock-'n'-roll. Your generation didn't invent pornography, nor polyamory, nor dining without paying the check. Your generation did not invent living honestly, or following your heart, or being oppressed by your parents.

One of the foremost joys I get from reading history is that people are always, always people. This, I think, is what is truly meant by the chestnut that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. If the hippies knew how the lives of the bohemians came out, would they have still lived the lives they did? If the grunge kids had paid attention to the beats, would they have made different choices? Likely not, actually. But the outcomes of all those movements is bloody obvious to those of us who have read history.

Bohemia began, lived, and died, as all the rest did. In response to social pressures it was born. It lived brilliantly and squalidly, life of the mind exalted and life of the body mortified. Some people thrived and others wilted into death. Bohemia died when it caught on, when it became trendy, and when the Great War caught everyone's attention. In the middle some great works of art, music, and literature were made. Some of

the works, and the names attached to them, are even remembered today.

Jan-Maat says

Picked this up off the shelf, the presence of a bookmark suggested to me that a prior reader (tentatively identified as my mother) had abandoned this book at page 22, by page 25 I could see why. A few pages on the author tracks down Kathleen Hale in the basement of an old people's home in Bristol "*Though rather deaf, she was vigorous & somewhat formidable. Her springy iron-grey hair was cropped short, & she wore a blue caftan top with a silver necklace. She talked about the past, but also the present, & her relationships with the other 'greyheads' in the home, who to her surprise had turned out to be fascinating individuals. Halfway through our interview she mischievously produced an illicit bottle of gin which we drank from plastic cups. Encouraged, I said I thought that despite the extreme hardships of her early life, I was under the impression that she had enjoyed it*" (p.30) no doubt I'm soft in the head but gin grannies do enliven a text for me. So I continued. The next chapter about the sexual relations of the Bohemians was however mostly even more tedious than the first 29 pages. It reminded me very much of The Children's book except without the better bits. A catalogue of menages a trois and menages a quatre, mingling gender and class and race I found as entertaining as any catalogue, soon I thought, 'what no menage a cinq, or huit how bourgeois'.

Anyway after about sixty or seventy pages I found it mildly entertaining, then the last fifty or so pages less so. If in truth the quality of the book went up or down or those of the reader I can not say.

But here I am three paragraphs in and I've said nothing about the book, perhaps you are wandering if it is a volume about the Czech community in Britain or some such?

So these Bohemians were British people inspired by the fantasy of being poor and French and working on a masterpiece of some kind in a garret, glugging red wine from the bottle and when one had money, living with extravagance and colour. Nicholson considers that these people were important in breaking up the fustiness, xenophobia and general narrow mindedness of Victorian England, she cites Mrs Beaton (of the cookbook fame) as saying that garlic and fresh vegetables were to be avoided (view spoiler), so she discusses in her book the activities of a smallish group of mostly middle and upper class Arty people in rebellion against the society they grew up in. And the extent to which they standout as interesting or remarkable depends very much on your picture of Victorian Britain.

It is not a group biography, the Bloomsbury set, Augustus John, Dylan Thomas, Peter Warlock and others I'm even less familiar with do crop up but as examples. The book is divided into chapters, each of which takes up a number of questions, for example, Chapter six "Feast and famine" goes: *Must one eat English food? - Are table manners important? - Must one eat meat? - What are the alternatives if one can't cook? - Are creativity and cookery compatible? - Where do Bohemians dine out? - Is it possible to eat on an artist's income? - Why must women prepare meals?* It's a clever enough way to loosely structure a very disparate book, it does mean that you are always moving backwards and forwards in time and from one person to another.

The impression of the earlier chapters was strikingly miserable many of these artistic types seem to have ended up putting their heads in their own gas ovens, so much so, that Sylvia Plath looked like the last of an unpleasant trend rather than a unique occurrence. And Eric Gill's incest with his three daughters cast a shadow over the text for me - his wife apparently still idolised him as a great Artist.

I spent some time wondering about the ideal reader of this book and my thoughts turned again to Byatt's *The Children's book* - if you found that interesting and would like a non-fiction version of it with less politics then this is the book for you. Or if you fancy reading about Katherine Mansfield's tears as she tried to clear up after a mutton feast with no hot water and no soap powder, or indeed about Dylan Thomas twice managing to charge drinks and food to Augustus John's account.

Otherwise I felt it was a bit on the margins, it touches on the edges of various artistic movements in England like modernism but doesn't discuss them directly, it touches on the edges of different groupings like the Bloomsbury group but again doesn't confront them, it is a bee of a book passing from flower to flower indiscriminately. I think you could use it for Bibliomancy - flicking to a random page and paragraph for advice or amusement: become vegetarian! Laugh at rich people unable to cope without servants!

Your standard love triangle was a bit dull, the Bohemians preferred to liven it up a little, for example the painter Carrington was in love with [author Lytton Strachey] he though was only sexually interested in her husband, her husband, perversely ,was only sexually interested in his own wife who was obliged to lower herself to him occasionally to prevent him from wandering off and so breaking Strachey's heart. Eventually Strachey died, so after a week or so Carrington killed herself. I think their love web was actually more complex than that, I probably have forgotten some of the passing players, but on the whole until it ended they all seem to have been happy enough.

I would have like to have seen more Rebecca West, but I guess despite her affair with H.G. Wells maybe she wasn't Bohemian enough? And Edith Nesbit features only once - wearing trousers in order to use a bicycle, the horror of it! Though I hasten to assure you there is no such female trouser wearing in *The Railway Children*, nor even in *The enchanted Castle*. Curiously about this time there were actual bands of Romney gypsies crossing the channel and entering England and turning up in *Sherlock Holmes* (*The Speckled Band* I think) and E. Nesbit stories.

Naturally if the Bohemians were in revolt against their Fathers, some of their children revolted against Bohemianism, one of Augustus John's sons (one of either nine or ninety-nine children depending on who you trust to have counted all of them) screwed up all his courage to ask permission to become a Royal Navy cadet, and eventually with some disapproval he was allowed.

I don't find it in me to push this book with both hands on to any one, though perhaps if your interests run to that era it may more than tickle your funny bone.

Jerome Peterson says

I've always wanted to read a book like this with wells of history about experiments in living. *Walden Two* by B.F Skinner is another great read; though it is a tab more modern. I do believe bohemianism started a vast free thinking movement that overlapped into the beatniks and of course the hippie generation. The book was well written with drops of wit and humor. I enjoyed the parts about how they raised their children, what they ate, and how they chose to live. I highly recommend this to anyone who is not interested in living within the boundaries of what is popular and what is not. There is no question in my mind whether or not I would have been a bohemian. Is there such a thing as a mid-western bohemian?

Val says

Some books which tell history in a thematic context, rather than chronologically, can have been well researched and contain snippets of fascinating information, but still be incoherent and jumbled. Virginia Nicholson has done her research, selected her information and arranged it logically around the different strands of her theme of the experimental bohemian lifestyle. She has created a coherent, co-ordinated narrative and written it well.

Her central theme is that the artists, writers, poets, etc. who inhabited 'Bohemia' were trying to find new ways of living, loving and raising their children. They were taking part in a social experiment or making a lifestyle choice. Sometimes the experiments were disastrous, sometimes the choices were very limited and sometimes the bohemians were a lot more sure about what they were rejecting than what they wanted to put in its place. Virginia Nicholson puts their case and hers compellingly but not blindly.

Many of the artistic embracers of 'La Vie Boheme' came from traditional Victorian middle class backgrounds and could be seen as self-indulgent and unrealistic: poverty was not romantic for the many millions suffering from the low wages and unemployment of the depression. The artists however went hungry and suffered the diseases of poverty in the same way as those who had never been given a choice, they really did suffer for their art.

If respectability is not a consideration what advantage is there to a woman in getting married? The mistresses did not seem to fare much better however. (The main advantages of marriage for a man seem to be that he gets his brushes and clothes washed and has a better idea which children are his.)

Children can learn through play and this is certainly better than trying to beat knowledge into them, but there is a fine line between giving children freedom and neglecting them which some of the bohemian parents crossed.

I found the chapters on interior design, clothing, dining and entertaining less interesting, but all the chapters go together to give an overall picture of these people and their lives, which was fascinating. (I will just observe that nobody should have let Dylan Thomas or Duncan Grant anywhere near a kitchen; Ford Madox Ford, on the other hand, would be welcome to visit mine anytime.)

Beth (bibliobeth) says

One of the things I really enjoyed about this book was the style the author adopts. Rather than sequencing events chronologically, she decides to split it into various sections i.e. love, food, money, education. Before she begins the section she will ask a number of questions which she then proceeds to answer in the chapter. I found this a very effective way of organizing and presenting the information, and it made it more interesting as a reader. A lot of the Bohemian ideals were a sort of escapism and breaking free against the previous Victorian infringements on society. And the Victorians were incredibly "proper" about things, especially regarding what women should and shouldn't do. No unmarried woman was to go anywhere without a chaperone, no drinking, no smoking, and the clothes! From the layers upon layers of underclothes and petticoats, it was no wonder that in some marriages, the couple had never seen each other naked!

Please see my full review at <http://www.bibliobeth.wordpress.com>

Rebecca says

It's totally fascinating and I love it! It's insightful and enjoyably written, about those artists and hang-arounds

and wannabes that you could find in London (mostly) in the first four decades of the 20th century. The author has also quite an insight in matters from her own family background - being the daughter of Quentin Bell, the son of Vanessa Bell - and though not an academic she treats the subject very well.

The book is written with chapters on different themes, a choice made by the author as she (as she states herself) thought that would work better than having a chronological description of these people. Since the book is more about a style of life than aiming to be a biography of all the people who lived it, I think she made a right decision. Still, I think it would have helped with ONE chapter on the historical development - it's 40 years of history, from the Edwardian era up to the Second world war, passing through the Great war and the roaring twenties. A lot of stuff happened in that time and it would have been interesting to see if the bohemians continued to differentiate from 'ordinary' people in the same ways, or if there was a change. And I wouldn't have minded a little bit more on the subjects of religion and politics (which could be quite interesting, I think).

(I even enjoyed reading her Notes on sources - which is quite a feat!)

Wendy says

I really wish that when high school and college teachers of "literature" assign "great works" for their students, they would also assign sections like this book. Any literary movement is going to be reflective of the time and place from which it springs, and without context many works just sort of float in the minds of readers without being moored to anything. In many ways, knowing more about the people who created now-famous works of art, or even those whose talent has not stood the test of time, is to me more interesting than the art itself.

As someone who was born in the mid-1960s, I was struck by how similar these people were to the Hippies that I was more familiar with. Long before the 'swinging 60s', there was "a circle of people who lived in squares and loved in triangles", setting aside the assumptions of their usually middle-class upbringings in a quest to live for art, for truth, and for beauty.

This is a chatty, conversational book - drawn from memoirs, interviews, and lots of gossip. There is a certain assumption that you will be familiar with institutions of British art (like what a 'Slade girl' is) which can be a bit opaque to the American reader. Parts of it go by very fast, and it can be easy to lose track of who was living with whom while having an affair with whomever. Don't try. Just let it all wash by - you can always sort it out later.

Dfordoom says

In *Among the Bohemians* Virginia Nicholson focuses not on the art produced by the English bohemian subculture of the period from 1900 to 1939, but on the way these people lived. Not so much their love affairs, although she certainly deals with such things, but the nitty-gritty of their daily lives, the struggle to feed themselves, to raise their children, to maintain their unconventional households often in the face of horrifying poverty and near-starvation. These were people who paid a heavy price for turning their backs on conventional society, but despite their sufferings most felt that the price was worthwhile. Some had private

means and were able to live in moderate comfort, while for others the struggle for existence was desperate indeed.

She tells us about the lives not just of those who eventually achieved fame and success, but also of those whose strivings to achieve artistic recognition ultimately failed. There's also a strong emphasis on the lives of the bohemian women, and what fascinating women they were! Women like Carrington, and Nina Hamnett, and Betty May, many now just footnotes in the history of art but truly extraordinary women. Artistic success was elusive for women, but for those who had children it was almost impossible, particularly when (as was usually the case) their men were completely indifferent to the destruction of their hopes by the twin burdens of housework and child-rearing. Nicholson (the grand-daughter of Vanessa Bell) approaches her subject thematically rather than chronologically, with chapters on food, parties, sex, the cult of the gypsy, the lure of exotic (and cheap) foreign places, and child-raising. You really couldn't write a dull book about people such as these, and Virginia Nicholson's book, is anything but dull. A must for anyone with an interest in social or cultural history, or a fascination for sub-cultures and outsiders. Highly entertaining.
