



Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939

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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