

GAY AMERICAN HISTORY Lesbians and Gay Men in
The U.S.A., A Documentary by Jonathan Katz

Thomas Y. Crowell Company. 1976. 690 pp. \$9.95.

Reading the accounts of lesbians in *Gay American History* is like taking the Rorschach, for they are lesbian lives or pieces of lives, often recorded in intimate detail, that beg our personal response. The book is tremendously exciting since it is impossible to read it without confronting oneself. Katz gives no comprehensive theoretical view, only the documents, selected and arranged to reveal six aspects of gay American history. All material relating to lesbians is conveniently identified, making a focus on this material easy.

"Trouble" begins early for the lesbian and continues late: in 1636, the Rev. John Cotton of Massachusetts proposed legislation which identified lesbianism as an "unnatural filthiness, to be punished by death," and in 1966, Louisiana determined lesbianism to be a "crime against nature," punishable by imprisonment. This is only legal "trouble"; "trouble" with family is revealed dramatically in the life story of Alice Mitchell who in 1892 murdered her lover when prevented from living with her. "Trouble" in women's prisons and reform schools, with their highly ritualized lesbian practices, seems more nearly a problem for the authorities than for the inmates who managed fairly well. Significant historically is the documentation that "The Captive," was responsible for the 1927 New York City statute which outlawed any treatment of homosexuality on the stage, and which remained on the books until 1967.

As with "Trouble," the "Treatment" section shows little progress from a document of 1893, in which a Dr. Daniel calls for the "asexualization" (removal of ovaries) of women with lesbian tendencies, to its last document of 1970 which reports the use of aversion therapy for treatment of lesbianism. Included also are a Kinsey source, Dr. Potter, who in 1933 identified the cause of lesbianism as psychological and hormonal disturbances, and a 1967 report which asserted that lesbianism was not a "conscious volitional preference" but a "massive adaptational response to a crippling inhibition of normal heterosexual development," hence justifying

attempts to "cure."

The documents in the "Passing Women" section, dating from 1782-1920, are the most intriguing in the book, partly for their detail but more importantly for the questions of motivation which they raise. Passing as men, these women were soldiers, hunters, politicians, doctors, artists, and railroad employees, often escaping detection until their death. Some explain their reasons for cross-dressing as feminist: Cora Anderson in 1914 asks rhetorically, "do you blame me for wanting to be a man—free to live as a man in a man-made world?" And Dr. Mary Walker cross-dressed in defense of the feminist dress reform movement of the early 1850's.

However, all of the passing women except Walker lived with women, most often legally married to them, thus suggesting other motives for cross-dressing. At one extreme are Mary East and her lover who in 1731 drew lots to decide which one would pass as a man, thereafter living together for 34 years. At the other extreme are Anna Mattersteig (1908), who "felt herself wholly a man" and Nicholas de Raylan (1906), whose wives both *believed* she was a man, aided no doubt by the fact that she wore an artificial penis. The most compelling of these accounts of passing women is that of Alberta Hart, born in 1892; as Katz says, her story reads like fiction, and, I would add, like lesbian life, capturing both struggle and joy. Its utter honesty should encourage lesbian readers to write their own life stories.

Accounts of lesbians in the "Native Americans/Gay Americans" section begin with a *Confessional* of 1593 which assumes the existence of lesbianism among Native Americans. Two accounts here are particularly interesting: one describes Sahaykwisa (c. 1850-c. 1895) of the Mohave tribe, who "professed to be a man," and married several times; each wife left her after being teased by the men or by her jealous former wives. The other describes a Crow woman chief (1855), a famous hunter and warrior, who for 20 years "had fame, standing, honor, riches, and as much influence over the band as anyone except two or three leading chiefs." Although this woman did not cross-dress, she did "cross-act" to the extent of having four wives who "added to her dignity as a chief." Note-worthy and shocking here are the tribal legends which depict the "offspring" of lesbian couples to be unnatural, one like a soft-shelled turtle, another like a football.

The "Resistance" section, though identifying lesbian materials from 1895, suggests that lesbians have been fairly quiet in their own defense. Of significance is material surrounding the publication of Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* in 1929, and a 1974 interview with Barbara Gittings which provides a valuable perspective on the beginnings of a lesbian movement in the 1950's.

The final section, "Love," with documents from 1823-1933, contains absolutely tantalizing stuff. Here, the sources are mostly the women themselves, speaking a language of love for women in diaries or letters, although their public lives for the most part are heterosexual. By definition these are women whose lives are of sufficient public significance to justify memoirs. Margaret Fuller recalls her first crush at age 13 for an older woman whose "whole impression, which, though too young to understand, I was able to feel." Almeda Sperry's excited letters to Emma Goldman reveal her jealousy of Goldman's devotion to a cause, but also her consolation that she has had "proof that the human side responds." Dorothy Thompson's diary exposes her ambiguous feelings about lesbianism: her words convey the intensity of a woman trying to get in touch with feelings she tries to deny by calling them perverse.

Thus ends the Rorschach. It seems to me that more than anything, more than their significance in documenting a lesbian history, these accounts enable us to better see ourselves—our denials, our struggles, and our affirmations.