



Lehmann, John (1907-1987)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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John Lehmann was one of the most distinguished and discerning British men of letters of the mid-twentieth century. Renowned as a poet, novelist, critic, memoirist, and biographer, he wrote more than twenty-five books.

However, it is as an editor and publisher that Lehmann is perhaps most highly esteemed, beginning with *New Writing* (and its associated titles), a pioneering biannual periodical that he edited from 1936 to 1946, and which featured works from such notable writers as Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender, among many others. Lehmann also edited the popular *Penguin New Writing* series of paperbacks from 1946 to 1950.

He was also the managing director of Leonard and Virginia Woolf's legendary Hogarth Press, and founded his own publishing house, John Lehmann, Ltd. He re-launched the venerable publication *The London Magazine* in 1954, aimed at a "public interested in serious literature," where he remained as editor until 1961.

While his three volumes of memoirs, published between 1955 and 1966, are mostly reticent about his sexuality, Lehmann's 1976 book, *In the Purely Pagan Sense*, provides a revealing and valuable portrait of gay life in England and pre-war Germany, written in the form of a novel.

Lehmann also published several volumes of his own poetry, as well as acclaimed biographies of Virginia Woolf, Edward Lear, and Rupert Brooke.

As a gay man, Lehmann once observed that he was "always looking for the friend who will give me the direct, warm and natural, entirely loyal relationship that I dream about."

He was never entirely successful, however, in finding such a relationship.

He experienced intimate, although unrequited, friendships with both Isherwood and Spender, a youthfully ardent, although short-lived, relationship with the actor Michael Redgrave, and a long-lasting, although essentially chaste, companionship with the ballet dancer Alexis Rassine. He was also befriended by such notable glbtq cultural figures as Lytton Strachey and E.M. Forster.

Tall and handsome, Lehmann's physical stature, as the literary critic A.T. Tolley observed, "seems always to have made a lasting impact. . . . His naturalness, grace and ease of manner were equally admirable characteristics that penetrated the consciousness of those he met."

Strachey once remarked that Lehmann, "with quite a slight adjustment of his features might have been a great beauty," while Virginia Woolf, upon first meeting him, described Lehmann in her diary as "[a] tight aquiline boy, pink, with the adorable curls of youth; yes, but persistent, sharp."

Although his editing and publishing achievements overshadowed much of his own writing during his

lifetime, Lehmann remained at the center of British literary life for over five decades.

Born Rudolph John Frederick Lehmann on June 2, 1907, in Bourne End, Buckinghamshire, he was the fourth child and only son of Rudolph Chambers Lehmann, a Liberal M.P., as well as a celebrated sportsman and editor, and his wife Alice Davis, of Boston, Massachusetts.

One of his sisters, Rosamond Lehmann (1901-1990), became a novelist, while another sister, Beatrix Lehmann (1903-1979), became an actress.

The Lehmann family lived in lavish, high-Edwardian style in a majestic house on the river Thames, and the children were brought up principally by nannies, governesses, and tutors.

John Lehmann began his formal education at Summer Fields, a boys' preparatory school in Summertown, Oxford, which he left with a scholarship for Eton in 1921. He was a despondent student, and later in his life characterized Eton as "a philosophic darkness that swallowed me up."

After Eton, Lehmann studied English at Trinity College, Cambridge. George "Dadie" Rylands, a friend and fellow-student, once described Lehmann during this period as "a romantic old ninny, who loved to suffer."

Mainly, Lehmann suffered through a passionate infatuation with the future actor Michael Redgrave, who was also studying at Cambridge. While evidence suggests that feelings were reciprocated, the relationship ended unhappily, nonetheless.

In 1931, after leaving Cambridge, Lehmann served an apprenticeship at Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, which they had established some fourteen years earlier. It was mainly his close friendship with Julian Bell (who was Virginia Woolf's nephew) that brought Lehmann to the Woolfs' attention. Lehmann later described his relationship with Bell as "the most intimate, intellectual friendship of my Cambridge years."

"Dadie" Rylands, who had briefly worked at the Press, also recommended Lehmann to the Woolfs and persuaded them to publish Lehmann's first book of poetry, *A Garden Revisited and Other Poems*, which they did that same year as part of the Hogarth Living Poets series.

Lehmann worked long office hours at the Press in basement rooms that were "cold and draughty and ramshackle"; his own office, as he described it in his memoir *The Whispering Gallery*, "was a small back room that had once been a pantry and cupboard room."

Although he was only an apprentice manager, Lehmann had ambitions for the Press, and for himself as well. Consequently, he often clashed with the Woolfs over publishing decisions. As Virginia Woolf noted in her diary: "[Lehmann] craves influence and authority, to publish the books of his friends."

Lehmann, on the other hand, believed that "both of the Woolfs, but in particular Leonard, had an emotional attitude toward the Press; as if it were the child their marriage had never produced."

He was successful, however, in persuading the Woolfs to publish Christopher Isherwood's second novel, *The Memorial*, in 1932, as well as the influential collection *New Signatures* that same year, with contributions by W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Julian Bell, and Lehmann himself.

Yet, antagonisms continued to grow between Lehmann and Leonard Woolf, and two years after joining the Press Lehmann resigned.

He spent the next several years traveling through the capitals of Central Europe. According to a recent biographer, it was during this period that Lehmann enjoyed liaisons with several male prostitutes to whom Isherwood introduced him in the bars of Berlin.

Lehmann eventually returned to England, and in 1936 established the groundbreaking periodical *New Writing*, the first issue of which contained a "Manifesto" that stated in part that the publication would be "devoted to imaginative writing, mainly of young writers," and that it would aim at "providing an outlet for those prose [and poetry] writers . . . whose work is too unorthodox in length or style to be suitable for the established monthly and quarterly magazines."

New Writing, which Lehmann edited from 1936 to 1946, featured works from several of the *New Signatures* contributors, as well as from acquaintances such as George Orwell, V.S. Pritchett, and E.M. Forster, and international writers including Boris Pasternak, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Several issues featured self-contained sections that would eventually comprise parts of Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin*.

In the autumn of 1938 Lehmann reconciled with the Woolfs. He agreed to buy out Virginia Woolf's share of the Hogarth Press, which he rejoined as managing director and a full partner.

However, in 1946, following increasingly caustic disagreements and an unsuccessful bid to buy Leonard Woolf's half of the Hogarth Press, Lehmann again left and founded his own publishing house, John Lehmann, Ltd. He published poetry, plays, and novels by authors previously featured in his periodicals, as well as new discoveries such as the poets Thom Gunn and Laurence "Laurie" Lee, and the American writers Saul Bellow, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, and Paul Bowles.

In 1946 Lehmann also embarked on a long-lasting although largely-platonic relationship with the Lithuania-born ballet dancer Alexis Rassiné (1919-1992). The two men lived together until Lehmann's death in 1987.

Lehmann also began editing the monthly *Penguin New Writing* series in 1946, with a mission similar to his previous periodical, of publishing fresh, original voices in poetry and prose. It was enormously popular among the British general public and one of the few successful wartime literary periodicals.

He continued as editor of the series of paperbacks until the publication closed, with its fiftieth issue, in 1950.

His own publishing achievements came to an abrupt end in 1952 when Purnell & Sons, the large printing company that John Lehmann, Ltd. worked with, and which was "used to quick success and big profits," according to Lehmann, terminated their agreement.

With the demise of his publishing house, Lehmann next turned to re-launching the esteemed publication *The London Magazine* in 1954. Welcoming the publication under Lehmann's editorship, the poet T.S. Eliot declared it "the magazine which will boldly assume the existence of a public interested in serious literature."

Lehmann's astonishingly productive and successful career as an editor and publisher effectively ended when he left *The London Magazine* in 1961. He gave an account of those earlier days in three volumes of memoirs: *The Whispering Gallery* (1955); *I Am My Brother* (1960); and *The Ample Proposition* (1966). As the critic A.T. Tolley notes: "They are among the outstanding literary autobiographies of the century, evoking and recording in intimate detail British literary life from 1930 to 1960."

In the late-1960s and early-1970s, Lehmann served as a Visiting Professor of English at the University of

Texas (Austin) and San Diego State University.

He also produced several volumes of poetry, as well as a large number of works of biography and literary criticism, including *A Nest of Tigers: The Sitwells in Their Times* (1968); *Virginia Woolf and Her World* (1975); *Edward Lear and His World* (1977); *Thrown to the Wolves: Leonard and Virginia Woolf and the Hogarth Press* (1978); *Rupert Brooke: His Life and His Legend* (1980); *Three Literary Friendships: Byron & Shelley, Rimbaud & Verlaine, Robert Frost & Edward Thomas* (1984); and *Christopher Isherwood: A Personal Memoir* (1987).

It is often forgotten that Lehmann also wrote two novels, *Evil Was Abroad* (1938) and *In the Purely Pagan Sense* (1976), which was later republished in 1985 as a "Gay Modern Classic."

As Robert K. Martin observes in his essay on Lehmann's novels, while the first book is "discreet," and only "hints about the role of homosexual relationships," the second "has a much greater frankness about sexuality . . . this new openness means that *In the Purely Pagan Sense* is a fascinating guide to sexual mores from the 1920s through the 1950s."

Both novels, Martin asserts, "offer a serious exploration of the significance of sexuality and of the ways in which a recognition of homosexuality may offer a means to an altered perception of all one's responses to life."

Lehmann died in London on April 7, 1987, a few weeks short of his eightieth birthday.

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Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.