



The women of SCWU have felt justly proud of the first Lesbian Rights Award Dinner and the impact it had on our own members, on the lesbian and gay communities, and on the general public. It was the first time that lesbians took the responsibility and the joy of honoring our own. Part of that responsibility is making sure we all know who our own are, so they don't get shuffled to the back pages of history where their lives and works are inaccessible to us.

Druid Heights, in northern California, is a collection of dwellings in a mountain valley facing Mount Tamalpais; it is within Muir Woods State Park. The access road is a couple of miles of deeply rutted, sharply twisting, untamed beauty. Dusty foliage hides precipitous drops into lush canyons. One has the feeling of mystery, adventure, the unexpected. It is a superb and fitting setting for meeting Elsa Gidlow—poet, writer, philosopher.

On February 14, 1981, SCWU's Lesbian Rights Award will be presented to this remarkable woman in celebration of her life and works. Her friend (and editor) Abigail Hemstreet says, "Elsa lives her poetry. Like a flawless mirror, her words reflect the feminist principles by which she lives each day. Both Elsa's life and her writing are 'original works'; the two cannot be separated. Taken together they reveal that mystical place where art and reality meet." (*SOJOURNER*, August 1980)

Elsa walked out to meet us, moving with agile, gentle grace. She wore a warm green sweater, blue jeans, and sandals showing beautiful feet, feet accustomed to freedom and stance. Her smile was welcoming, but reserved, almost tentative. She had not heard of SCWU before being asked to accept our award— who were we? Why should she, an ordinary woman, be honored? Why indeed? Who IS Elsa Gidlow?

*"You say I am mysterious.
Let me explain myself:
In a land of oranges
I am faithful to apples."*

(*MAKINGS FOR MEDITATION*,
1973 Druid Heights Books)

Elsa says she is a human being first; then, of course, a woman — and finally, a lesbian. For her, the Lesbian Rights Movement is more than political activism: it's an issue of responsibility. A lesbian is "... willing to take full responsibility for herself. I've always thought my basic commitments — other than those to women — are to my work, to writing and poetry, to doing what is in me to do as a creative person."

Probably the first lesbian poetry published in the United States appeared in her *On A Grey Thread* (Will Ransorn, Chicago, 1923). Although Elsa knew what the social attitudes were, it never occurred to her that she hadn't a right (or that it might be dangerous) to permit these poems to be published. They were, after all, part of her work.

She has lived a complete, satisfying, productive lesbian life. Here is a woman who,

Elsa Gidlow To Be Honored February 14



Abigail Hemstreet and Elsa Gidlow read Elsa's *Sapphic Songs*.

without any of the support systems available to us now (from unemployment insurance to groups like SCWU) managed to find the inner resources not just to survive, but to PREVAIL for almost 82 years—in spite of poverty, lack of education, lack of an artistic community, social constraints against lesbians, and lack of opportunities for women.

"The right to our full humanity, the right to sing our own song, that certainly has been difficult for women relegated to the household world, once amply encompassing community with its needs and works, now no more than a prison. Seeing early and repudiating it for the body-and-soul crushing trap it is (never regretting the choice), I ventured into the world 'out there' and found that equally crushing. It is a world created in man's own image of power and dominance, inimical to every female need and value, leaving us not only alien and homeless, but also discouraged and prevented from giving our best gifts. Yet we, as women, must dare it, know it, and proclaim its evil as well as the good we dream. Our poetry of horror at what is and our poetry of hope of what may be, can effect change. We must battle not with men's weapons of bombs or whatever, but with the strength of our women's consciousness." (*Footprints in the Sands of the Sacred*, FRONTIERS, Vol. IV, #3, 1979)

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Elsa Gidlow

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Elsa has been a feminist since the age of fourteen. Yes—that was in 1912! She read in the Canadian newspapers about the struggles of the Pankhursts and other suffragists in Great Britain during that period, and she observed first hand the tragic lives of the women "in household worlds" around her.

Yet Elsa is not a separatist. Sheer impracticality aside, she sees separatism as counter productive; and on a personal basis, thinks that excluding anyone on the basis of sex is an unnecessary denial of some of life's rich experiences.

One of these "rich experiences" was her close friendship with Alan Watts, writer and lecturer on philosophy (particularly Zen), who dedicated his autobiography to her. He describes his first meeting with her: "Superficially, she suggested that she was a very respectable and demure maiden lady, but someone had put raven's blood in her mother's milk. She wore a cloak and a soft velvet beret, and had a knowing smile . . ." (*In My Own Way*, 1972, Pantheon Books, N.Y.). Although he was 16 years her junior, he had the idea of a romantic affair with Elsa, but found soon enough that this was not to be.

In her community of Druid Heights, Elsa's "support group," she is the only lesbian. Although she does not hide, she wears no placards and seldom offers personal information. She considers it unkind, even arrogant, to thrust one's self unasked on people unless some clear purpose is to be served.

Elsa did not have a "coming out" in the sense of a revelation or a rite of passage. She was born a lesbian and has always been a lesbian: it was just a question of the gradual unfolding, from awareness to consummation, of an integral part of her being. "What needs to be understood is that erotic love between women is not a deviation from some presumed 'normal.' The lesbian, to use a designation with an honorable history, is not a spoiled, failed or diverted so-called heterosexual woman. Neither is she a pseudo-male frustrated within female flesh and bones—the few who feel so are frustrated by society's ignorance and persecution. She is from birth and perhaps pre-natally an essentially different being with dif-

ferent needs and desires. She is constituted as she is because Nature has made her so. After lifelong meditation on the matter (I am 74 years old as this is written), after observation and discussion with others who do not fit the crude male-female categories, plus wide reading, I will go a step further and say, Nature needs the lesbian as she is. She needs me as I am. (*Ask No Man Fardon*, The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian, 1975, Druid Heights Books)

Elsa formed the habit early, from necessity, of independent thought. No educational system told her what to be or how to be — she was required to figure it all out for herself. Her foremost feeling of difference was as a creative person; her foremost difficulty was finding ways to support herself, and others at times, as an unskilled woman. The "problem" of being a lesbian did not present itself as such to her; on the contrary, she always found it liberating.

Since Elsa has always found her own way, she is uncomfortable discussing issues framed in today's "movement" language—she resists being fitted into clichés and catch phrases. Too firm adherence to ANY ideas seems limiting to her, and she is no more willing to accept limits now, at 81, than she was as a young woman. For example, she bristles at being called a lesbian poet. Why a LESBIAN poet? As for aging, she's been "aging" since the day she was born, has she not?

" . . . I do not find the years to be a burden. In some ways one can say, the worst is over. Existence is a surprise package, each unwrapping reveals something fresh to wonder at. It is well worthwhile having had the successive and altering perspectives the years and decades made possible. So much mellows out. You find yourself almost without effort loving without grasping, enjoying without attachment." (*Women*, Vol. IV, #4, Aging, 1976)

Women have now been "discovered." Lesbians have been "discovered." Elsa gets many requests to speak to groups, to make appearances, most recently for the Phil Donahue TV show (refused). She accepts very few invitations, jealously guarding her remaining time so that she may continue her work — which, after all, only she can do. She feels a deep sense of commitment to younger women,

however, and although she never intended to write about her life, their persistent questions have led her to write her autobiography.

"How had I survived? What could I say to make it real? To build a bridge from my experience to theirs? It was then I began to realize that to write about my life might be a sort of obligation; to provide perhaps the encouragement that was not given to me. The giving of bare facts did not answer their hungers." (*Sojourner*, 8/80, *Living the Poetic Life*)

One chapter, including the introduction, has been published in the abovementioned *Sojourner*. Another two chapters appeared recently in Issue #6 of FEMINIST STUDIES, U. of Maryland. The first volume (to age 21) is ready for publication and Elsa is working on the 2nd volume with her editor, Abigail Hemstreet. (Abigail, a delightful young woman in her 30s, will accompany Elsa to Los Angeles for the Award Dinner.)

From Elsa's introduction (*Sojourner*): "I am the fish darting through weedy water. Can you be sure it is a fish? Can I be sure that what I write is true? Or does it matter? If the name of the fish is Elsa, then this book which is the water through which she swims must be Elsa as well. The past is an unsupported assumption. What I see now is the "the past" does not exist. I cannot present to you a child, a girl, a woman maturing and aging; I cannot give you an Elsa through her struggles, attainments, despairs, ecstasies, and pretend she is the actuality of how it was. I cannot dig back and bring you the truth of a life. I can only invite you into my *now*. If I am skillful enough and you have the interest to come along, I may share with you what lingers in this *now* of what appears to have taken place *then*. For the infant fumbling for a nipple birthed the woman, now 80, who writes these words. It is only from her here and now that we may be able to explore the way. I offer it to you, not as a role model, but merely as a story of another way of swimming. May it encourage you to dive. Come into my house and garden, and let us begin."

Elsa's works have been around a long time — she was not born yesterday. Trouble is, most of us were, in a sense. Plan to come to the Award Dinner (it isn't to be missed!) and to events planned during that week. Tell your friends. Elsa Gidlow is a woman you'll want to know.