

The Front Page

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Remembering Black Mountain College

by Allen Young

Black Mountain is the name of a place in North Carolina's mountainous west that has become known nationally and internationally. The reason for this is a small avant-garde school called Black Mountain College (1933-56), one of the most important cultural institutions of 20th century America.

What is less well known is the school's little gay secrets — secrets which provide insights into the place of gay people in so-called avant-garde institutions. How historians look at Black Mountain college will depend in large measure on their ability to deal with and include what has been called "gay history."

Gay history is not merely the history of gay people, but has to do with the place of gay people and of homophobia in the greater course of human events. *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Anchor Books, 1973, 578 pages) is a chronicle painstakingly prepared by an eminent historian. Martin Duberman melded his professional coming-out-of-the-closet with the publication of this book. The result of Duberman's approach in *Black Mountain*, however embryonic, is an indication of the way that an up-front gay historian can enrich the process of recording history.

Duberman's personal approach to his story-telling, his sharing of his feelings and experiences with the reader, is doubtless related to his gay consciousness as much as are the discussions of homosexuality.

Black Mountain College was a quiet community of artists and intellectuals nestled in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. It was founded in 1933 as an antidote to the authoritarian, rigid, overstructures of contemporary college education. Until its demise in 1956, Black Mountain served as home, laboratory and studio for hundreds of creative souls, some of them famous names in modern cultural history.

Among the gay cultural figures who taught or studied at Black Mountain were Paul Goodman, Eric Bentley, Lou Harrison and Robert Duncan — and doubtless many more whose gayness is not known to me or mentioned by the author. The communal process and the educational process, co-existing side by side, made for a number of dramatic encounters between ideas and between people. The result was often painful and chaotic, but beyond the pain and chaos is a sense of creativity, growth and commitment which is truly beautiful and inspiring.



The site of Black Mountain College.

In the gay world, there is a tendency — at least I observe it frequently — to believe that the creative arts are dominated by gay people. However, in fact, we can be almost certain that even among creative artists, gay people are in a distinct minority. At Black Mountain, this was certainly the case. But Duberman (unlike, I would guess, a straight historian) makes sure that the gay people at Black Mountain are not invisible to the readers of his chronicle. In fact, he offers us some details of a few dramatic moments in the history of the college when the "homosexual question" was a major concern indeed.

Duberman exposes us to the almost incredible up-tight Puritanism of much of the supposedly avant-garde element that made up Black Mountain College. Especially in its earlier years, the atmosphere was often that of a monastery, hardly the Bohemian haven one would expect. Of course, in such an atmosphere, homosexuality was frowned upon. A former student told Duberman that one of the founders of the college, John Andrew Rice, permitted him to stay at the school only on the tacit agreement that the student's homosexuality would not be practiced there.

In 1945, Bob Wunsch, then chief administrator (rector) of the school, was arrested outside of nearby Asheville, while parked in his roadster with a Marine. Duberman's account of Wunsch's immediate resignation from Black Mountain —

complete with a silent discreet departure in the dead of night — is sad and shocking. Wunsch literally disappeared, a man ruined perhaps not so much by the homophobia of North Carolina's "crime against nature" statutes (a sympathetic judge let him off) as by the homophobia of this "alternative" institution. Duberman's response to the incident is indicative of his outlook on such matters:

"It's hard to think well of a place that could cooperate as fully as Black Mountain did in an individual's self-destruction — indeed to have assumed it as foreclosed. But perhaps I exaggerate — a function of my own indignation as a homosexual, a potential victim. It may well be that Wunsch would have had it no other way. And it may well be that communities, no less than individuals, are entitled to their aberrations."

The "so-called homosexual summer of 1950" was another crisis at Black Mountain. Paul Goodman was the "explosive ingredient," not only because of his very public way of dealing with his bi-sexuality, but because of his sexual interest in his students. Goodman was denied his wish to stay on at Black Mountain as a permanent faculty member, and it is quite clear that his homosexuality played a major part in the refusal. Duberman points out, however, that in this case the issue of sexual freedom was to a certain extent muted by what one Goodman supporter called his "sexual aggressiveness." Duberman's book was published in the

early 1970s, and most of this research predates his own involvement in the gay liberation movement — which has been considerable in the past decade. It is only natural, considering these time factors, that the book leaves some questions unanswered. It was not possible, at that time, for Duberman to delve into the gay aspects as much as we might desire upon reading the book now. It was quite an accomplishment for a respected historian to come out of closet and open up the closet door as wide as Duberman did in this landmark book.

At least two up-front homosexuals — Eric Bentley and Robert Duncan — are mentioned without reference to their experience at Black Mountain College as gay people. Bentley, in fact, was involved in a major philosophical dispute with Wunsch. This dispute offers a gay person an opportunity to make some comments about the elusiveness or perhaps the fallacy of "gay brotherhood" — why gay people in institutions are often enemies rather than friends, and about the peculiar nature of the closet-queen-as-bureaucrat (a possible view of Wunsch).

Today's reader would welcome some general comments not so much about the tolerance of homosexuals in such a "progressive" community, but about the role of gay people in the arts. Most of the teachers and students who came to Black Mountain were interested in painting, sculpture, weaving, dance, music and literature. Certain questions come to mind. Is there a connection between homosexuality and the creative process? Is there a homosexual cabal in the arts? Are closeted gay people more creative than up-front "liberated" gay people? These are some questions that are worthy of discussion in the context of the experience and the personalities of Black Mountain College.

These criticisms by no means undermine my overwhelming feeling of warmth for this book and for its author. Duberman, who is Distinguished Service Professor of History at Lehman College of City University of New York, is well known as both a historian and a playwright (*In White America*). A resident of Greenwich Village and a member of the Gay Academic Union, he has had numerous plays produced and published and writes a gay history column for the *New York Native*.

(Editor's note: The preceding article by Allen Young is based on Young's review of *Black Mountain*, published in *The Advocate* in 1975.

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