



Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans
History Month

Every February since 2005

Kate Marsden F.R.G.S. (1859-1931) was eighth and youngest child of a London solicitor, one of only three who survived tuberculosis. Kate trained as a nurse and in 1877 volunteered as a Red Cross nurse for the Russo-Turkish war in Bulgaria. She gained a good reputation, and was granted an award by the Russian Empress.

In 1884 she went to New Zealand to look after her dying sister. There she suffered a concussion, causing "a most trying mental illness". At this time, Kate "took many backward steps and turned away from Christ". It seems possible she was struggling with and exploring her sexuality.

In Bulgaria Kate encountered victims of leprosy and determined to find a way to help sufferers. She planned an expedition to find a mythical Siberian plant reputed to help lepers. She received backing from the Princess of Wales and the Empress of Russia. From Moscow Kate travelled to Siberia with fifteen men and thirty horses; dressing and riding like a man. She broke with convention and was punished for the rest of her life. Kate did not find the cure for leprosy, although Siberian shamen were aware of herbs with healing properties, but did establish a hospital in Siberia and drew attention to their plight.

Kate published 'On sledge and horseback to the outcast Siberian lepers' in 1893 and was nominated as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, becoming one of their first female fellows. Later Kate was accused of falsifying her account of the expedition and misusing its funds. One of her detractors wrote "That terrible fraud, Kate Marsden, the lady who makes such a comfortable living out of the leper rescue business..." The attacks were mostly about financial management but seem to have been motivated by misogyny and homophobia.

The Royal Geographical Society praised the accuracy of her first book and in 1916 had made her a Free Life Fellow. In 1921, Kate published 'My Mission to Siberia: A vindication' to clear her name.

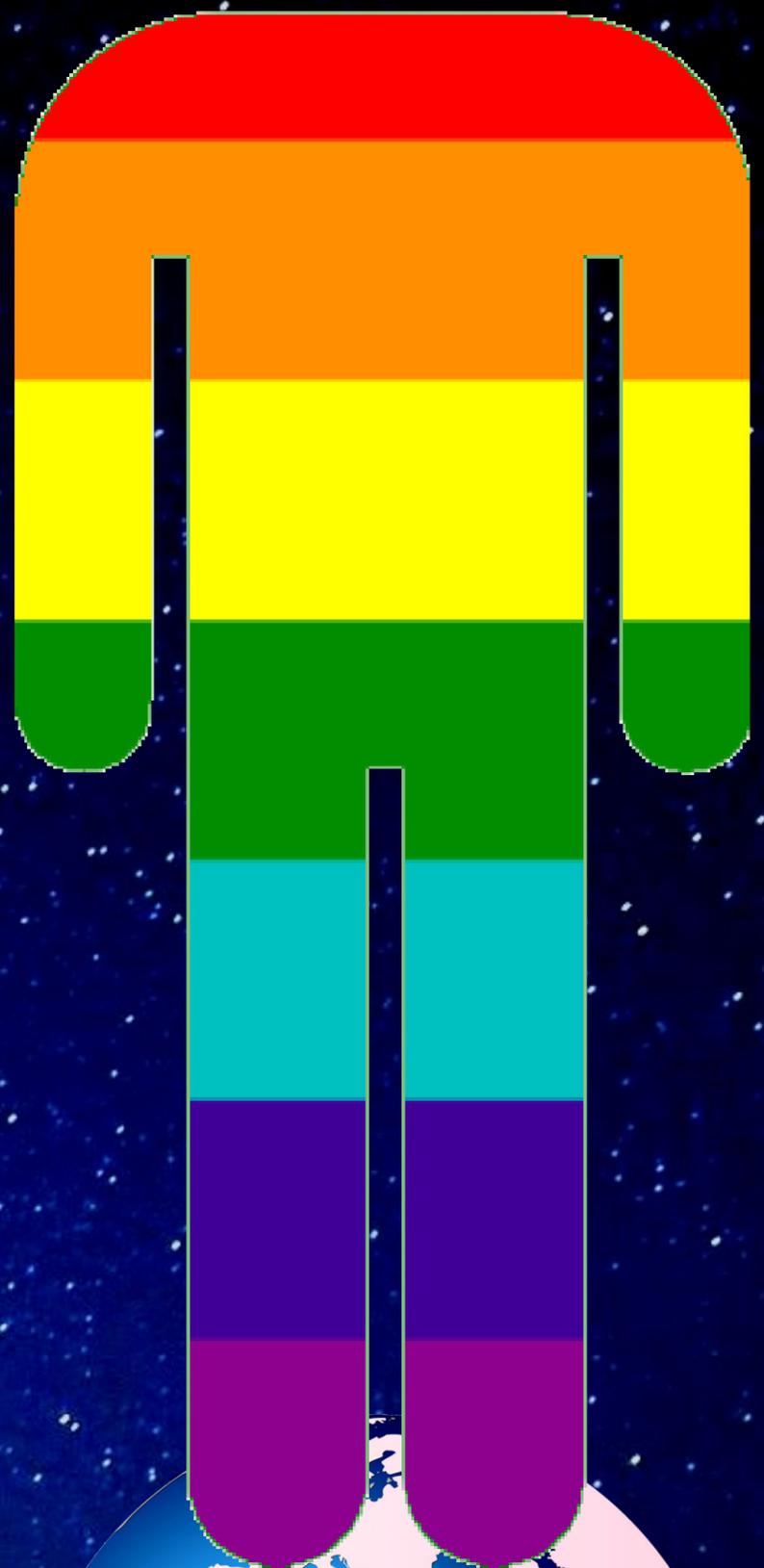
Kate moved to Bexhill and in 1912 to gather support to establish a museum. The Reverend J. C. Thompson, the first honorary curator, was also involved. She became the first woman to address the Bexhill Commercial Association. The museum's first documentation was made up in her name. Despite her hard work, Kate felt obliged to resign before the museum opened. The Mayor had brought to the committee's attention the scandal of twenty years earlier. Kate lived with the Norris sisters in Bexhill. After Kate's death Emily Norris, a talented artist, presented a photographic portrait of her to the Museum but it was ungraciously sent back. It has now been reinstated.

We cannot prove Kate was a lesbian, and the term would not have been used then, but her love for women was used against her and her pioneering work besmirched. The Times had her investigated by the same detective hired to gather evidence for Oscar Wilde's trial. Kate illustrates clearly, how patriarchy can attack pioneering women who step out of line."

mapping our world

2018

Geography



Kate Marsden