

REVIEW

***In and Out of Bloomsbury: Biographical Essays on Twentieth-Century Writers and Artists*, by Martin Ferguson Smith, Manchester University Press, Manchester (ISBN 978 1 5261 5744 7), 2021, £80**

In and Out of Bloomsbury is a handsomely produced volume published in hardback which aims to present original material about certain British writers and artists whose lives and works have, in many cases, been so exhaustively researched one would think nothing new could be discovered or written about them: ‘The “Bloomsberries” have been riding high, and Virginia Woolf especially continues to receive attention on an almost industrial scale’ (8). Some of the forty-six illustrations in the book—photographs and drawings and paintings—have never been exhibited or published before, including Roger Fry’s portrait of a beautiful, youthful Vanessa Bell in a colourful headscarf, an apple clasped in one hand, which graces the cover. Martin Ferguson Smith includes a fascinating account of this painting’s provenance. Fry had bequeathed it to his daughter Pamela Diamand, who sold it in the late 1970s to Lawrence B. Salander, a New York art dealer, who gave it to his daughter Ivana, who eventually sold it to the B & B Rare Books company of New York in June 2014, with Smith purchasing it a few months later, in October (26).

The book consists of eleven chapters. The first six concern members of the Bloomsbury Group, concentrating on four figures—Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell and Virginia Woolf. The remaining five are devoted to contemporaries: the writers Rose Macaulay, Katharine Tynan and Dorothy L. Sayers, the artist Tristram Hillier, and Richard Williams Reynolds, a schoolmaster who numbered J. R. R. Tolkien among his pupils at King Edward’s School in Birmingham. Much of the material in *In and Out of Bloomsbury* has appeared in earlier incarnations.

Smith has revised and amplified these essays, and it is good to have them assembled in a single volume, for it soon becomes apparent that the reader is not only in safe hands but also in for a treat. Smith brings a depth of knowledge and a level of meticulous scholarship to these biographical essays about important literary, artistic and historical figures of the early twentieth century that would be difficult to equal, let alone surpass.

It is only relatively recently that Smith has ventured from classical to modern literary studies. A poignant element of the personal apparently inspired this change of direction. With Smith’s own father a first cousin of Rose Macaulay, the project of editing more than a hundred previously unknown letters sent to another first cousin, the poet Jean Smith, must have

seemed an enticing prospect. The resulting book, entitled *Dearest Jean: Rose Macaulay's Letters to a Cousin*, was published in 2011.

Smith describes in the preface how all the eleven essays included in *In and Out of Bloomsbury* were written when he was in his seventies: 'After many years of research and writing as a classical scholar, I decided to devote some of my time and energy to a variety of more recent things that interested me'. He claims that his priority, however, has remained the same: 'to make known new material rather than recycle old' (ix).

Smith, laudably, believes in the merits of original and detailed research. He seeks out obscure manuscripts, consults unpublished diaries and journals and letters, scrutinises old photographs and such documents as census records, and then uses the information he has scrupulously gathered to fact-check academic essays and biographies. In the first half of his book, he wishes to correct errors, to supplant or at least supplement theorising with fact, to provide us with a fuller, richer understanding of figures from the Bloomsbury Group by providing references to the people with whom they consorted and the context of events in which they participated.

The second half of the book has a slightly different focus. Here Smith seeks to restore five historic figures, once well-known and celebrated, to public awareness and to make a bid for a renewed recognition and appreciation of their achievements. A kind of mournfulness pervades this section of the book. These are individuals who have been largely forgotten and whose works he considers unjustly and undeservedly neglected. This quest seems to have a significant parallel with the classical studies for which Smith is renowned, especially for his work in recovering and deciphering fragments of the second century AD exposition of Epicurean philosophy inscribed by Diogenes of Oinoanda on a wall of the ancient Greek city of Lycia (in southwest Turkey). It is estimated that he has managed to triple the number of discovered fragments of what has been called one of the most remarkable documents to have survived from the ancient world.

In the opening chapter of *In and Out of Bloomsbury* we are introduced to two 'new' portraits by Roger Fry: 'One is a drawing of his wife, Helen, on the day of their wedding in December 1896, the other the portrait of Vanessa Bell executed during the love affair they began in the spring of 1911' mentioned earlier (1). According to Smith, he acquired them from separate sources in the United States and neither 'has been exhibited or published before' (9).

Smith's acquisition of Fry's unattributed drawing of his wife is a gripping tale and testifies to his enterprise and ingenuity as a scholar in dealing with material which, failing his efforts, might never have been unearthed or identified. He describes how he immediately recognised an unsigned drawing up for sale entitled *Pencil Portrait of an Unidentified Woman* as a picture of

Helen Fry. Smith went on to consult Richard Neave, Artist in Medicine and Life Sciences at the University of Manchester, an expert in facial reconstruction technique, sending him, for purposes of comparison, a scan of the *Portrait* and two photographs of Helen, one taken in 1896 and the other probably in 1897, as well as a drawing of Helen by her husband held in King's College Cambridge Archive Centre. Neave found no significant differences between the images and the drawing, and numerous similarities. Smith includes two split images combining the head of the sitter in the *Portrait* with the head of Helen Fry in the 1896 engagement photograph which seem dramatically to confirm his hunch. This chapter also offers information about Helen Fry's life, personality, and artistic career which is a tantalising taste of the biography of this tragic figure—afflicted, soon after her marriage, by paranoid schizophrenia—that Smith is currently preparing for publication (x).

Smith's other new find described in this chapter is the picture of Vanessa, 'executed in pencil and gouache on paper' that appears on the cover of this book (18). Its attribution is not in doubt. 'V. Bell by REF' is written on the back, as well as an inscription by Pamela Diamand identifying it as a portrait of Vanessa done by her father (20). Smith describes his attempt accurately to date the portrait, concluding it was painted between the summer of 1911 and the autumn of 1912, a time of 'lively and significant change for the artist, for the sitter, and for art in the western world' (26). With the deterioration in Helen Fry's mental health, she had been committed to an asylum in York, and Roger Fry had embarked on a love affair with Vanessa. He had recently staged the first Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, introducing the British public to a new sort of art, and was about to mount a second. Smith points out what he describes as 'significant indicators of the painting having been executed while the affair was flourishing', including Bell's 'voluptuous red lips and the red apple' (23).

Smith goes on to include more 'new' images in his second chapter: a sequence of never-before-seen photographs of Vanessa and Clive Bell and Roger Fry posing in the nude by the sea at Studland in Dorset, held in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature in the New York Public Library. Smith concludes, by a process of elimination—through establishing the movements of the individuals pictured and consulting Vanessa's letters to Roger Fry and Fry's appointments diary—that these black-and-white pictures must have been taken in early September 1911, when the Bells were in Studland for nearly the whole month and Roger visited at various times. This dating lends the photographs a particular poignancy. Vanessa and Roger had fallen in love in April 1911 during a visit to Turkey when, as she recounts in 'Memories of Roger Fry' (Bell 117–47), Fry selflessly nursed her after she suffered a miscarriage. But Clive still knew

nothing of their affair.

Lest any reader of Smith's book be inclined to censoriousness, the third chapter, which introduces and includes Clive Bell's memoir of his affair with Annie Raven-Hill, reminds us of the inappropriateness of such a reaction:

In view of Clive's infidelities, he was in no position to complain if Vanessa looked elsewhere for love and sexual satisfaction. But, although the two were no longer in love, they were still good and affectionate friends; she knew that he was not in love with Annie, and ... she did not want him to know just how close she and Roger were. (45)

Clive's account of his long-running relationship with Annie, wife of the *Punch* cartoonist Leonard Raven-Hill, whose house was a short distance from Bell's childhood home, Cleeve House in the Wiltshire village of Seend, was delivered as a second instalment of reminiscences of his early life at a meeting of the Bloomsbury Memoir Club in February 1921. (The first instalment, delivered in July 1920, is now lost.) Although it has been mentioned and quoted from, the memoir, preserved as a fifteen-page typescript copy among Bell's papers in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, has never previously been published.

Smith not only publishes Bell's memoir for the first time but also fleshes out the context of its delivery. He provides a brief introduction to the Memoir Club as well as a description of the presentation and reception of Bell's story, including an excerpt from Virginia Woolf's diary, in which she expresses her preference for Maynard Keynes's contribution that evening, and one from Morgan Forster's diary, who admits to feeling repulsion at Clive's frank exposition of his lovemaking with Annie. Also present on that occasion were Vanessa Bell, Mary Hutchinson, Sydney Waterlow, Leonard Woolf and, probably, Roger Fry and Molly and Desmond MacCarthy, with Smith wryly observing: 'If all these were present, it is notable that all four women who heard Clive give a detailed account of his first lover and his sexual relations with her had been sexually and/or emotionally involved with him at one time' (51).

This information is followed by a 'selective chronology' of Bell's life and a short biography of his first lover, including excerpts from letters written by Clive and Vanessa that refer to the Raven-Hills. It is unsurprising Vanessa came to know of Clive's affair with Annie. It lasted, off and on, from 1899 until 1914. Clive and Vanessa also were acquainted with and took an interest in Annie's daughter Sylvia, who attended some of their social gatherings.

The fourth chapter of the book takes as its subject the trip Leonard and Virginia Woolf took to Greece in the spring of 1932 in the company of Roger Fry and his sister Margery. The holiday Virginia Woolf would enthuse about as the 'best ... these many years' (D4 95) originated in grim circumstances.

Lytton Strachey had died of stomach cancer on 21 January 1932, with Dora Carrington committing suicide soon afterwards, on 11 March. Woolf noted in her diary on 17 March that she and Leonard were thinking of visiting Greece with the Frys, being 'both in the mood for ventures after this morbid time; so much talk of death; & there death is of course' (D4 83–4).¹

It was a first visit to that country for Leonard and the Frys, while for Woolf, who had just turned fifty, it was a return to a place which held painful memories. She had been there twenty-six years earlier, in the autumn of 1906, and, shortly after their return to England, Thoby died of typhoid. Woolf reminisced in her diary that she was reminded of her first visit on seeing the Parthenon again and feeling it was where 'my own ghost met me, the girl of 23, with all her life to come' (D4 90).²

In the fifth chapter Smith draws interesting parallels between the psychological illnesses suffered by Woolf and Helen Fry, arguing that genetic or hereditary factors probably played a part, coupled with the fact that both were fiercely independent women loath to relinquish their autonomy on marrying. A significant difference between the two is that while Woolf believed she 'was able to make much creative use' of her periods of 'madness' in her writing, for Helen Fry 'illness was purely an obstacle: it ruined her career as an artist, and there is no evidence that it ever provided any inspiration for any of her work' (131–2). Given Helen Fry's own history of mental illness, it is unsurprising that Vanessa sought Roger Fry's advice on appropriate mental treatment for Virginia in the summer of 1913, when she had a serious nervous breakdown followed by a nearly successful attempt at suicide.

Smith quotes from unpublished correspondence exchanged between Fry and Bedford Pierce, Medical Superintendent of The Retreat, a Quaker mental hospital in York to which Helen Fry had been admitted in 1910—and where she was to spend the last twenty-seven years of her life. Following Vanessa's plea for assistance, Fry approached Pierce in his search for a 'nurse companion' for Woolf, sequestered at Asheham House following her suicide bid, offering enticement for such employment by concluding his letter: 'It

¹Maggie Humm observes that the '1930s for Woolf were ... a period of self-reflection, particularly about her past and about death. Woolf's diaries and letters for 1931–1934 contain detailed thoughts about the contemporary deaths of fourteen people, all of whom, apart from the king of Belgium, were personally known to Woolf, including her intimate friends Lytton Strachey, Dora Carrington, and Roger Fry, her half brother George Duckworth, and Leonard's sister Clara' (Humm 30).

²Smith observes that Woolf made a similar comment in a letter to Vita Sackville-West: 'There was my own ghost coming down from the Acropolis, aged 23: and how I pitied her!' (L5 62, 8 May [1932]). He adds that, 'For the record, Virginia was actually aged twenty-four and not far off twenty-five in the autumn of 1906' (99 fn).

would be I think pleasant and easy work in a very beautiful country place near Lewes' (133). In the event, Vanessa managed to find a nurse for Virginia, but the letters exchanged between Fry and Pierce are valuable for the light they throw on medical treatment of the mentally ill in the early twentieth century. Pierce was a keen amateur artist, and he and Fry agreed that attention to the provision of soothing colours and tasteful décor in institutions like The Retreat could exercise a 'possible therapeutic effect' on their inmates (134).

Roger Fry also figures largely in the sixth chapter. Woolf's biography of Roger Fry, published on 25 July 1940, attracted mostly favourable attention, with the rare exception, as Smith observes, taking the form of criticisms directed at 'Roger rather than his biographer' (145). One individual who took issue with the work was Mary Louisa Gordon, who, in a letter to Woolf of 4 November 1940, expressed strong hostility to Fry and sympathy for his wife:

I have just been reading your biography of Roger Fry—the 'Apostle of Modern Ugliness'—His life aim and work make no appeal to me—a man so little aware of himself could not be aware of a great deal else. Your book brings back to me the most painful memories—for from my early twenties I was a very great friend of Helen Coombe.

In your book she is only the pitiful nebulous ghost she had to be, but there was another Helen who does not appear at all—it is as though all trace of her had been lost. (157)

In addition to citing Gordon's criticism, Smith fleshes out an individual who was certainly, he says, 'a very unusual person, but equally certainly she was no crank' (152). Mary Gordon was among the first to benefit from Elizabeth Garrett's struggle to open the medical profession to women. After qualifying in 1890 as a physician, surgeon and general practitioner, Gordon interested herself in social medicine and, in 1908, was appointed Britain's first female inspector of prisons.

Gordon was a woman of many talents and interests and a seminal feminist. Besides training as a medical doctor and serving as a prison inspector, she provided support to the suffragettes and wrote novels. She was already known to Woolf before sending her the letter quoted above, as the Hogarth Press had published, in May 1936, her historical novel *Chase of the Wild Goose: The Story of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, Known as the Ladies of Llangollen* (see Newman).

Woolf did not, however, much care for Gordon or for her work, referring to her in letters to their mutual friend, Ethel Smyth, as a 'Hermaphrodite', a term Smith partly attributes to Gordon's 'unfeminine appearance, her interest in the Ladies of Llangollen, who were widely believed to have dressed in a masculine way, and her assumed abstinence from any sexual relationship' (148). But then Smith discovered in the Hogarth Press Archives a letter of February 1937 from Gordon to Leonard, which provides a more compelling

reason for the appellation. In this letter Gordon talks of being halfway through composing a novel ‘on a very imaginative theme—the hero being a son of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando and a spiritual son of Hermaphrodites’ (149).

The following five essays in *In and Out of Bloomsbury* lack the homogeneous focus of the first six. Smith continues to base his research on primary source material and observes that ‘their variety gives a richer and more balanced picture of the cultural scene in the first half of the twentieth century’ (4). We are treated to thirteen previously unpublished letters that Rose Macaulay sent to the Irish poet and novelist Katharine Tynan; we learn that Dorothy L. Sayers’s first serious literary efforts were inspired by her participation in a local historical pageant when she had just turned fifteen; we are introduced to the life and times of Richard Williams Reynolds, who taught Tolkien in Birmingham and then moved to Capri with his family in a vain bid to cure his wife’s tuberculosis. After her death, he ‘suffered further family losses on a Greek-tragic scale, losing in quick time two of his daughters and his second wife’ (7). In the final chapter we are returned to Bloomsbury in Smith’s description of the artist Tristram Hillier, who met Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant as a young man and was to acquire fame for his paintings of Portugal. Hillier described the Iberian Peninsula as ‘neither European nor Asiatic in character, a land set apart from all others, but one pre-eminently to inspire a painter’ (272).

While Smith is generous to the many who have assisted him in his research activities in his self-imposed isolation on remote Foula in Shetland, including a detailed list of acknowledgements at the conclusion of each chapter, he can be critical of scholars who do not achieve his level of perfection. These individuals include the authors of biographies and critical works on Bloomsbury as well as the editors of Woolf’s diaries and letters. Throughout *In and Out of Bloomsbury*, Smith is keen to dispel error and to establish fact. He adopts a tone of mild reproach towards those who have fallen short of his standards of exacting scholarship, professing disappointment or surprise or puzzlement when other writers fail to attribute correct dates or locations to photographs, when they neglect to consult original documents, when they misread words in handwritten letters, and when they seem to prefer resorting to theory than to establishing facts.

Humility is an invaluable asset in a scholar. We should be willing to acknowledge and rectify our mistakes. Our goal must be to establish facts. Martin Ferguson Smith not only admonishes: he enlarges our understanding of his chosen topics in simple but eloquent language that conveys his passion for accuracy.

Wendy Jones Nakanishi

Works Cited

- Bell, Vanessa. *Sketches in Pen and Ink: A Bloomsbury Notebook*. Ed. Lia Giachero. London: Hogarth Press, 1997.
- Gordon, Mary Louisa. *Chase of the Wild Goose: The Story of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, Known as the Ladies of Llangollen*. London: Hogarth Press, 1937.
- Humm, Maggie. *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: The Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. London: Tate Publishing, 2006.
- Newman, Hilary. 'Re-Viewing Books Published by the Hogarth Press: *Chase of the Wild Goose*, by Mary Gordon. *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, No. 53 (September 2016): 51–9.
- Smith, Martin Ferguson. *Dearest Jean: Rose Macaulay's Letters to a Cousin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011 (paperback 2017).
- Woolf, Virginia. *D4*.
———. *L5*.