

# VIRGINIA AND DIANA

Clara Jones, who used to work at Persephone Books and is now a lecturer at King's College, London, has just published *Virginia Woolf: Ambivalent Activist* focusing on the details of VW's involvement with, for example, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Rodmell WI. This spanned the years from 1910 when she asked a friend, 'would it be any use if I spent an afternoon or two weekly in addressing envelopes for the Adult Suffragists?' to 1940 when she wrote in her diary, 'Aren't I on the Committee of the WI – don't I go to a meeting on Monday?' That she joined the latter was partly at the instigation of her friend and Rodmell neighbour Diana Gardner (author of PB No. 64 *The Woman Novelist and Other Stories*). In *The Rodmell Papers: Reminiscences of Virginia and Leonard Woolf by a Sussex Neighbour* (Cecil Woolf 2008) DG described how 'as part of [her] war work' she acted as secretary to the Rodmell WI under the presidency of the 'very determined, socially-minded Mrs Chavasse' who, having moved to Sussex from a comfortable life in the Midlands, 'decided to give the village and the WI her generous time.' It is unclear whether DG means this drily or not or how ironic is the following passage: 'Naturally, the members, in that rather sad, draughty village hall, painted dark green and brown and approached quite

often through nettles, were impressed and many were grateful, for the majority were the wives of farm labourers; only a few were not and these were the wives of farm bailiffs, of the blacksmith, the daughter of the man who had been the miller and one or two "educated" women, but not many.'

Clara sees a homage here to *Three Guineas* since this was written as 'an educated man's daughter'; and explains that Mrs Chavasse and the women of the village had their differences. So when DG asked VW to join the Rodmell branch 'VW at first demurred; she was not entirely in sympathy with the WI; it was run always by middle-class women and not by the village women themselves.' Her criticism of the class formation of the WI is consistent with her view expressed in *Three Guineas* that for working-class women to obtain political determination they must organise themselves. She wrote in April 1940, 'Oh dear how full of doings villages are – and of violent quarrels and of incessant intrigues... We're thought red hot revolutionaries because the Labour party meets in our dining room.' But she agreed to give a talk about the Dread-nought Hoax, a 1910 escapade starring her younger self, Virginia Stephen, when she became an activist for one day. Her biographer Hermione Lee reads the hoax as both a joke

and a political act, in its 'ridicule of empire, infiltration of the nation's defences, mockery of bureaucratic procedures, cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity.' In her talk, however, VW 'deliberately presented the hoax as more of a lark than as action against authority' as she described how she and her friends darkened their skin, put on turbans and false beards, and dressed up as an Emperor and his Princes from Abyssinia (now Ethiopia).

Audience members remembered the occasion for its hilarity. Mrs Decur referred to Virginia's 'never to be forgotten talk' and that 'it really was one of the most amusing talks we have ever had in our WI. We were very nearly helpless with laughter': a fitting reminder, 75 years after VW's death, that she could make an audience laugh so much.



DG's thatched cottage, Rodmell 1936