

Biography | *Book Review*

Giddy times at Gordon Square

When old Bloomsbury met young Bloomsbury

By **Vanessa Curtis**



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Jimmy Duggart, Frances Marshall (later Partridge), Alec Penrose, Lytton Strachey, Frances Penrose and Dora Carrington at Ham Spray, Wiltshire

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IN THIS REVIEW

YOUNG BLOOMSBURY

The generation that reimagined love, freedom and self-expression
352pp. John Murray. £25.

Nino Strachey

In this colourful book about some of the younger acquaintances of the Bloomsbury artists and writers, Nino Strachey sets out to explore the influence that these new and unorthodox figures had on the original members of the group and vice versa. Related to Lytton Strachey - and hence a member of a family who “nurtured creativity and individualism rather than conformity” - the author of *Young Bloomsbury* was the last of them to grow up

at Sutton Court, the ancient Strachey ancestral home in Somerset. With access to unpublished family papers, she is well placed to offer a new angle on the oft-told story of the Bloomsbury Group and their circle.

Strachey sets the scene by devoting her first chapters to the formative years of the group, describing the famous meetings at Gordon Square where Bells, Grants and Stracheys came together over buns and whisky to converse in fascinated tones about subjects that were mostly taboo in Edwardian London. She fondly brings to life her ancestor, Lytton, with his “long dark hair, flowing red beard and distinctive drooping demeanour”, and traces in some depth the first years of his complex but workable “polyamorous throuple” with Ralph Partridge and Dora Carrington.

Much of the information in those initial chapters will already be known to avid readers of previous Bloomsbury biographies, but Strachey’s book steps up a few gears with the second section, “Bloomsbury Meets the Bright Young Things”. Here she introduces a host of artistic ex-Oxford graduates who were ripe for expressing themselves and their sexuality in a non-hostile environment. The author reacquaints us with Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell as they entered their forties, referring to them as “modernist bower-birds” who supported the “queer creativity among their friendship group”. Keen to be accepted by these two eminent women were new young friends such as Eddy Sackville-West, Dadie Rylands and Stephen Tomlin. When “Old Bloomsbury” met “Young Bloomsbury”, things would never be quite the same again.

Strachey reveals how, at first, this generation of fresh talent had a revitalizing effect on the careers of the older members, encouraging them to embrace the “new approach”. Woolf swallowed her artistic pride and agreed to accept large

sums of money for commissions in *Vogue*. She and Duncan Grant signed up to the avant-garde Gargoyle Club in Soho, where dancing and self-expression were the order of the day. Clive Bell moved comfortably between the old world and the new: “one minute he would be at home writing pieces on Proust or Picasso for a worthy journal; the next he would be squeezing into his bathing suit and heading to a late-night Bath and Bottle Party for poolside dancing and bathwater cocktails”.

But as time went on, things changed for the original members of the group. The premature, shocking deaths of Lytton Strachey and Carrington left them bereft. The media began to portray them as “privileged self-promoters” and the art of Grant and Bell, once so daring and modern, was “dismissed as decorative and whimsical”. Woolf was the only one of the group, Strachey reminds us, to continue to gain respect “both for her own work, and her encouragement of new writing through the Hogarth Press”. Throughout Strachey’s book Woolf’s voice is clearly heard providing an acerbic commentary composed of quotations from her letters and diaries. Her fond but waspish observations on the various new recruits to the group give us an insight into how easy it must have been for these younger figures to be both enamoured with and intimidated by her. In a letter sent to Jacques Raverat, Woolf referred to Eddy Sackville-West as having “a voice like a girl’s and a face like a Persian cat’s, all white and serious, with large violet eyes and fluffy cheeks”.

Strachey’s account has a theatrical feel to it, helped by the list of “Dramatis Personae” included at the beginning. Given its lively descriptions of outrageous parties and the inclusion of Cecil Beaton’s photographs of the Bright Young Things, reading this book feels a little like having an enjoyable rummage

through a dressing-up box. But the pale powdered faces, haughty expressions and white-stockinged poses of the men and women captured in Beaton's photos take on a new poignancy when viewed alongside the serious message that lurks at the heart of Strachey's book. As she states in her introduction, the first two decades of the twentieth century were "still riven by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia", and in her chapter "Bloomsbury Parties" she reveals how these gatherings offered "safe spaces for sexual expression" because "gender non-conformity was to be expected and age was never seen as a barrier". The members of "Young Bloomsbury" found to their relief and delight that they could relax and express themselves without fear of judgement when they went to see Lytton at Ham Spray or visited Ottoline Morrell at Garsington to frolic under the indulgent gaze of Virginia and Vanessa. Even so, it was a tough time to be queer. Some of the young men who preened and pouted their way across the lawns of country estates also felt duty-bound to subject themselves to the controversial practice of conversion therapy. Eddy Sackville-West - the heir to Knole who was the star of every party, and who Strachey draws sensitively, with reference to his less well-known talent as a classical pianist - was sent to a German clinic for a series of torturous injections. The strikingly beautiful but famously idle artist Stephen Tennant was kept in isolation for a year in a psychiatric hospital. Predictably, these treatments failed to work.

A vein of tragedy opens up further as Strachey's book progresses, revealing that many of the young men and women who seemed to have such shining futures ahead of them ended up ill, isolated or in an early grave. Stephen Tomlin, whose previous claim to fame is mainly that he sculpted the head of Virginia Woolf in bronze, and she disliked it intensely, is given a more well-rounded portrait in Strachey's book. She explores his failed marriage to Julia

Strachey and reveals how “Tommy”, while much loved by all members of the Bloomsbury group, died at only thirty-five, destroyed by drug and alcohol addiction. There were others associated with the group who fell quickly from grace. Elizabeth Ponsonby, descended from the Earls of Bessborough, was an “It Girl” of her time whose glittering life was cut short by alcoholism at forty. Stephen Tennant lived into old age, but spent years at the mercy of tuberculosis, ending up depressed, isolated and reluctant to leave his house. Lytton Strachey’s cousin John surprised everyone both by admitting a liking for the opposite sex (a rare thing among the new generation of Bloomsbury men), then developing a career as a Labour politician - but a disastrous association with Oswald Mosley’s New Party, combined with the loss of his money in the Wall Street Crash and the end of his marriage to a wealthy heiress, meant that he ended up in psychoanalysis.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is that with such a sizeable cast of characters, the action tends to jump back and forth from one to another; the chapters gallop at considerable pace through a dizzying wealth of information. But overall the book is enjoyably intimate and assured in tone, and *Young Bloomsbury* packs far more of an emotional punch than its title might suggest. Nino Strachey’s strength as a biographer is to draw sensitive and non-judgemental portraits of people whose private agonies seemed at odds with their outwardly confident appearance. She also evokes a strong sense of place and period, managing to convey the sounds, sights and smells of the various social gatherings described in this book. The reader can almost hear corks popping and fancy that they may have caught the strangely high-pitched voice of a male Strachey wafting through from some Bloomsbury painted room. Having finished the book, one comes away slightly breathless, with a sense of having left a rather hectic party. An excellent party, full of wit and intrigue, and

with plenty to eat and drink - but one where, if you'd glanced away from the crowd, you might just have seen someone weeping softly by the window.

Vanessa Curtis is the author of two biographies of Virginia Woolf and a number of award-winning novels for children

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Virginia Woolf

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