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**Ten Characters in Search of a Group: A Sketch of Bloomsbury\***

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**Abstract**

This paper offers a sketch of ten of the most essential figures in the Bloomsbury Group. Among the ten Bloomsburries, there are two critics: Clive Bell in painting, Desmond MacCarthy in letters. Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster, the two great novelists, and Lytton Strachey, the biographer, are the three literary figures. There are three painters: Roger Fry, who was also an art theorist and critic, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant. And then there are John Maynard Keynes, an economist and political theorist, and Leonard Woolf, a writer and influential publisher. The paper also describes the origin of the group and some of the interactions among these influential figures.

**Keywords**

Bloomsbury Group, Clive Bell, Desmond MacCarthy, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, , Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, John Maynard Keynes, Leonard Woolf

**1. INTRODUCTION: What is Bloomsbury?**

When editing a collection of memoirs, commentaries, and criticisms written by and about the members of the Bloomsbury Group, Rosenbaum (1975) acknowledged that he was doing so based on two assumptions.<sup>1</sup> First, the Bloomsbury Group existed, and, second, the Group was worthy of endeavors of serious study. Both of these two assumptions have indeed been questioned. Surely it would be peculiar to do any serious study on the Bloomsbury Group if even its sheer existence is in doubt. Fortunately, the second assumption in fact logically entails the first one, and the multitudinous volumes of Bloomsbury biographies, letters, memoirs, diaries, and critical writings that have kept appearing in recent decades prove to be more than adequate support for the second assumption. Authorities of the English language, for instance, do not seem to have any difficulty in fully recognizing the existence of the group.

A 20th-century literary and artistic group living for the most part in Bloomsbury, displaying a tendency to exalt classicism in the arts. (The Webster's New International Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

Cultivating or displaying literary and artistic interests flourishing among an informal group of intellectuals associated with the residential district of Bloomsbury. (The Webster's, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)

Noting a group of artistic and literary intellectuals who flourished in the early decades of the 20th century and were associated with the Bloomsbury section of London. (The Random House Dictionary)

A school of writers and aesthetes living in or associated with Bloomsbury, that flourished in the early twentieth century; a member of this school. (Oxford English Dictionary, 1972 supplement)

A group it was indeed, in my view, but Bloomsbury was never a school, contra the authoritative English dictionary, the OED, not in any formal sense of the word anyway. France Partridge (1981: 76), who was personally acquainted with most of the important Bloomsbury figures, in his autobiography *Love in Bloomsbury*, was quite emphatic that 'they were not a group' and went on to say that they were merely 'a number of very different individuals, who shared certain attitudes to life, and happened to be friends or lovers'. David Gadd (1981: 1), in the book *The Loving Friends*, shared this sentiment: 'The circle of writer, artists, and intellectuals to whom the name is attached was an informal group of close friends, and it was nothing more'. Leonard Woolf (1964: 2), husband of Virginia Woolf, probably summed it up the best in one of the five volumes of his autobiography, *Beginning Again*:

What came to be called 'Bloomsbury' by the outside world never existed in the form given to it by the outside world. For 'Bloomsbury' was and is currently used as a term—usually of abuse—applied to a largely imaginary group of persons with largely imaginary objects and characteristics'.

Bloomsbury was never a school, because it never had a dogma, be it literary, aesthetic, political, or intellectual, and it did not have a code of conduct or a body of doctrine. It most certainly had no masters or leaders. Some might even argue further for France Partridge's view that Bloomsbury was never even a coherent group because there was never a shared identity among the people associated with it. Most commentators agree that what made these individuals close friends was a shared attitude toward rationalism, integrity, and originality.

Furthermore, the terms 'writers' and 'aesthetes' are hardly adequate in characterizing the key Bloomsbury figures. The spirit of Bloomsbury also goes far beyond 'cultivating or displaying literary and artistic interests' or 'displaying a tendency to exalt classicism in the arts'. Furthermore, there is nothing in these definitions that describes an economist or a political theorist. The inadequacy and inaccuracy revealed in these definitions illustrate the difficulty in giving Bloomsbury a precise definition.

What is Bloomsbury then? Having somewhat criticized these dictionary definitions, I must also admit that the question will remain unresolved. Quentin Bell (1968: 14), one of the last surviving members of the Bloomsbury circle and son of Clive and Vanessa Bell, conceded that a satisfactory answer was not possible:

Those who, by my definition, stood at the center of Bloomsbury differ among themselves. Clive Bell doubts even whether it ever existed. Under the circumstances, commentators who stood outside the group may be pardoned for being a little vague.

Indeed, no two authors have offered an identical list of names as to who was and who was not Bloomsbury. Each had a different answer to Clive Bell's question: 'Once more I cry aloud: Who were the members of Bloomsbury?' which he brought up at the end of his 1954 essay on Bloomsbury. While Moody did not mention Roger Fry or Duncan Grant, Johnston made no mention of Maynard Keynes. Even Leonard Woolf's list of names does not match that of Quentin Bell's.

This paper is not yet another attempt to answer Clive Bell's question, nor is it an attempt to be comprehensive in sketching all the likely or important Bloomsbury figures, nor would I attempt to give another list of names. What I will do is to select the ten most important figures in my view, who had the most meaningful contributions to the significance of the group, and whose standing in the group I believe most, if not all, commentators would accept. My ten characters are: Clive and Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Desmond MacCarthy, Duncan Grant, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, and John Maynard Keynes. Thoby Stephen of course was very important in playing the role of bringing these individuals together, especially for Clive and Leonard and his two sisters, Vanessa and Virginia; however, he died very young in 1906. I also do not consider Lady Ottoline Mortell as one of group, along with other rather peripheral friends such as D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and Bertrand Russell (Edel 1978: 12). However, when Leon Edel offered *A House of Lions* as his answer to Clive Bell's question: 'What was Bloomsbury?' his nine lions excluded E. M. Forster. I do not agree. Although, as Edel pointed out, Forster's life was not intertwined with the other members, and, as Quentin Bell points out, Forster would probably have thought that while he was very close to the Group he was not exactly in it. He had interacted with the essential members of the Group ever since 1902 and was one of the original members of the Memoir Club, which, formed in 1920, provides one of the strongest

guides of the 'Bloomsburries', a nickname for these close friends coined in 1910 or 1911 by Molly MacCarthy, who, along with my ten characters, were the original members of the Memoir Club.

Disagreements and arguments, some of which are trifling, will go on as long as interest in the group lasts, and last it surely will. Therefore, it is best for me to begin with what is certain and set out to do what I planned to do. Among the ten Bloomsburries, there are two critics: Clive Bell in painting, Desmond MacCarthy in letters. Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster, two great novelists, and Lytton Strachey, the biographer, are the three literary figures. There are three painters: Roger Fry, who was also an art theorist and critic, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant. And then there are John Maynard Keynes, an economist and political theorist, and Leonard Woolf, a writer and influential publisher.

## 2. The Stephen Sisters: Virginia and Vanessa

Almost all these ten Bloomsburries had been at Trinity or King's College, Cambridge, where we can find the very origin of the group. Most of them had belonged to the 'Society', a select, semi-secret club for the discussion of serious questions, founded at Cambridge in the late 1820's. Its members were called 'apostles'. When Leslie Stephen, a former apostle and a distinguished Victorian man of letters, died in 1904, he left behind two daughters, Virginia and Vanessa, and two sons, Thoby and Adrian. At this time, Thoby had been a contemporary at Trinity and close friend of Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, and Lytton Strachey. Through Thoby they all got to know the beautiful Stephen sisters. The informal meetings of discussion of these young people had started in the previous year, shortly after G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was published. Upon the death of their father, the four Stephen children, all in their twenties, decided to sell the family house and moved to 46 Gordon Square, where these young people continued to meet, and Virginia and Vanessa acted as hostesses. Leonard Woolf left almost at once for Ceylon for a seven-year stay. Clive soon found himself hopelessly in love with Vanessa. In 1906, John Maynard Keynes came down from King's College and became a close friend of Lytton's. It was Lytton who introduced Maynard and Duncan, an artist and a cousin of Lytton, to the Stephen sisters. Thoby died tragically in 1906. The next year when Clive and Vanessa married, Virginia and Adrian moved to 29 Fitzroy Square, leaving 46 Gordon Square to the Bells.

Yet, the true foundations of Bloomsbury were not laid until 1911 when Leonard Woolf returned to Cambridge to be welcomed back so very warmly by his old friends. Virginia and Adrian had now moved to 38 Brunswick Square (still in Bloomsbury). There they shared the house with Duncan, Maynard and Leonard. In the following year, Leonard and Virginia married. With this marriage the nucleus of Bloomsbury was now solidified. However, according to Leonard Woolf, Bloomsbury did not come into existence until almost ten years later when they formed the Memoir Club. At that time almost all the members were living in Bloomsbury within a few minutes' walk of one another (Woolf 1964: 22-23). The Group flourished until the death of Lytton in 1932 and it continued beyond World War II through its younger members.

## 3. Moore, Fry, and Bell

If there was a person whose thinking had the most tremendous influence upon the Bloomsbury Group, it would be George Moore, who was often associated with this group but never a member of it. Of all these ten persons, only Clive, Duncan, Virginia, and Vanessa did not belong to the Society where Moore and his *Principia Ethica* had great influence. And through the six apostles and the book, the four others were also deeply affected. In *My Early Beliefs*, Keynes describes how Moore's thinking converted them to a limited, yet pure, religion of truth, beauty, and love. This description has been taken as the definitive account of the origin of the Group. Keynes' conclusion has also been justified by other members, such as Desmond MacCarthy, who was closer to Moore than anyone else in the Group, and Leonard Woolf, who wrote 'Moore's influence upon us was lifelong' in his autobiographies (Woolf 1964:24).

Among the ten Bloomsburries, Roger Fry was the oldest member, even older than Moore by seven years. He did not meet the Bells and Duncan Grant, who were not apostles, until his first Post-Impressionist Exhibition, which was so important for Bloomsbury and English art. This was the most famous event in the early history of Bloomsbury. When Vanessa Bell referred to this she said 'Yet one more was to come, perhaps the most important of all—Roger Fry.' The Bloomsbury friends, brought joy and delight into his life at this time when his wife had a serious mental illness and he was effectively a widower, unemployed and with two children. In turn, he contributed his zest and originality. The success of the first exhibition soon required the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1912.

This second time could be called a 'Bloomsbury Show' with Fry, Vanessa, Duncan, and Leonard together preparing for it. Cezanne, Picasso, and Matisse showed their works. So, too, did Duncan, Vanessa and Fry himself.

By now, Fry had assumed a leading place in Bloomsbury by his personality and qualities of mind, and for Clive, Duncan, and Vanessa, by his profound and enthusiastic understanding of art. Moreover, the two Post-Impressionist Exhibitions had projected Fry and his Bloomsbury friends into the center of the artistic stage. Later in 1912, soon after the exhibition, Fry opened the Omega Workshops in Fitzroy Square. Here artists worked anonymously. All art was Omega's domain. This was partly because some of the artists resented the idea of strict anonymity and partly due to the impact of war, the Workshop was not quite the success that Fry hoped it would be and it was closed in 1920. However, Fry's idea that useful things could be made beautiful by artists was gradually understood and had its influence.

Fry already had his power before Bloomsbury, and he continued to be the center of power of British art because he painted and wrote always. Nonetheless, Bloomsbury gave him a circle to be appreciated and understood, and among the artists there were reciprocal influences. In turn, he helped the friends have a center and a focus in art and he contributed distinctly to the emergence of the Bloomsbury, which would have been a much less significant group without him.

The other art critic in Bloomsbury was Clive Bell, who, together with Roger Fry, helped to bring about a decisive change in the history of art. French paintings of the period of 1880-1914 have been recognized as one of the greatest art movements ever. However, Clive was never a painter. As a graduate from Cambridge in 1904, he was not sure about his future. His imagination and literary taste had been aroused by his Cambridge friends. However, it was not until his visits to Paris he found his future career. His marriage with Vanessa also meant that his home was a painters' household. In 1910, he started a most important friendship, with Roger Fry, who gave him the confidence to launch himself into art criticism. In the book titled *Art*, Clive first brought out the theory of 'significant form' which was also applied by Fry to carry his sense of the importance of design from the domain of fine arts into the decorative arts of everyday world. He had influence in his day, as an art critic as well as a theoretician. He outlived Fry by thirty years, but each found in Bloomsbury both friendship and the indulgence which their faults demanded and made his contribution. By upbringing and temperament, Clive had inherited many of the tastes and qualities of an eighteenth century countryman. He, therefore, provided an essential element in the formation of Bloomsbury. David Garnett, who was very close to Bloomsbury around 1913 and has been considered as a Bloomsbury by several authors, once wrote this about Clive: 'He saved Bloomsbury from being another Clapham Sect, devoted, in the same cold unworldly way, to aesthetics and the pursuit of abstract truth instead of to evangelical religion.'

Clive and Vanessa's marriage no doubt played a very important role in Bloomsbury. Their house at 46 Gordon Square was probably the most important place for the Bloomsbury meetings and parties. With Clive's temperament and Vanessa's warmth, the coldness, dullness, and heaviness of the English climate was impossible in their house and their company. Bloomsbury was occasionally described as a matriarchal society despite the brilliance of the courtiers. Vanessa and Virginia were clearly the mother-goddesses. However, Vanessa, as the eldest child of the Stephen family, and the first to have children, was certainly the most maternal figure at the center of Bloomsbury. The slightly mysterious atmosphere surrounding her may be intensified by the fact that she painted rather than wrote, though her feelings, as well as Duncan's, might often have been expressed through Clive. It was also her sensibility and stability, revealed by Virginia in the forward of the catalogue of Vanessa's 1930 exhibition of paintings, on which Bloomsbury in general, and Virginia in particular, depended.

The meeting with Roger Fry in 1910 was as important to Clive as to Vanessa. Fry was excited by the work that Vanessa and Duncan were doing. They helped Fry enthusiastically with his first Post-Impressionist Exhibition. After a trip to Turkey in 1911, Fry and Vanessa were in love, mostly because she needed a passion to respond to, and mask her distress over, Virginia and Clive's flirtation. However, the affection between Clive and Vanessa remained. According to their son, Quentin Bell, through this experience their marriage became to take its permanent form of a union of friendship. After three joyful years of the clandestine affair with Fry, Vanessa turned to Duncan to give him her lifelong love, and a daughter. Clive, Duncan and Vanessa were reunited in 1939 and lived together under one roof. Quentin thus grew up in a multi-parent family. Fry also maintained friendship with Vanessa and Duncan, and later wrote an appreciative book on Duncan's paintings.

#### 4. Duncan, Lytton, and Desmond

Duncan Grant, with a bewitching personality and good looks, probably had more artistic temperament than any of the Bloomsburries. David Garnett said that he was 'a pure artist and nothing else.' Duncan indeed was a good artist. Born in 1885, he spent his early years in India. In 1902, he attended the Westminster School of Art to pursue his childhood dream of painting. Duncan was introduced to Bloomsbury through Lytton Strachey. Here the passionate interest in art and lack of respect for conventions gave Duncan a unique environment that other young painters could only dream of. Being the youngest in Bloomsbury, he was soon to make his contribution to the already varied flavors. From these friends, he also was soon to receive their affectionate friendship as well as caustic criticism. The Post-Impressionism led by Fry was a revelation for Duncan. He was at this time at the right age and had well-prepared himself for the movement. In 1920, he had his one-man show and since then he had increasingly painted realistically. In 1923 the Hogarth Press published *Living Painters: Duncan Grant*. This is a pure Bloomsbury production: introduction by Fry, paintings by Duncan, and the publication by Leonard. This volume, to Bloomsbury's enemies, may have been an indication of the power of a mutual admiration society. However, it also displays the variety of the Group's talents.

The homosexual affection among Lytton, Duncan, and Maynard had no doubt aroused some criticism and gossip. This also reflects the unconventional and liberal aspect of Bloomsbury. There was no fear in its opinions and conducts as long as they could be logically justified as promoting friendship and beauty. Lytton was frank about his homosexuality as well as his heterosexual affairs, with his Bloomsbury friends. His sexual rebellion was a generation in advance in history. As a reviewer he had his influence, but it was the *Eminent Victorians* that brought him the success and triumph he had long deserved, despite the controversy that followed since its publication in 1918. Never again would biography writing be the same as before. All the great figures of our time would now be subject to close and disenchanting examination. As a member of Bloomsbury, Lytton had his considerable influence. From the very beginning of Bloomsbury's formation he was an active participant. However, after the Bells and Woolfs settled themselves in Sussex and Lytton moved to Berkshire in 1924, there was inevitably less interaction between Lytton and other Bloomsburries.

Lytton's world of passion was probably more tangled than any of his characters. His later loss of Duncan's love to Maynard was painful for him. Though the three remained as close friends still, the element of passionate intimacy was lost. John Maynard Keynes was introduced to Bloomsbury through Lytton. Born in Cambridge, Keynes followed the customary educational route for the upper class child. A gifted young man, he entered King's College in 1902, where he developed a serious interest in economics and politics and became the only don in Bloomsbury. He was the most influential figure of the Group in the greater world. Although his important work in the government often took him away from his friends, he maintained very close contact with them, even after his marriage in 1925. He profited constantly from their stimulus, affection, and patronage of the arts, and they gained much from his abundant resources of knowledge and worldly contact. The publication of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* in 1919 served as the foundation of his fame. His thinking was to change the life of millions of human beings. Bloomsbury would have been much poorer if it had not had Keynes.

Among these ten Bloomsburries, Desmond MacCarthy, described by Leonard Woolf as having 'brilliant promise' and by Virginia as being 'the most gifted of us all', however, probably had the least achievements. Though Desmond never fully identified himself as a Bloomsbury, his friends, such as the Woolfs and Forster, considered him as one of the Group, and in fact it was his wife, Molly, who coined the nickname 'Bloomsburries', which first gave the expression to the idea that the Group existed. Desmond was well-respected in the Society, but instead of becoming a great novelist, which his friends expected, he became a literary journalist. His association with Bloomsbury also began with his friendship with Lytton. Lytton owed him much. Desmond saw more clearly than anyone else the literary character of Lytton's gifts when Lytton was thinking about an academic career rather than that of a writer. Before Lytton became famous for his *Eminent Victorians*, he was a frequent contributor of reviews to the journal *New Quarterly*, of which Desmond was the editor. He also helped Fry with his first Post-Impressionist Exhibition. He was the secretary and man of business. He also selected some of the paintings for exhibition in Paris and wrote an introduction to the catalogue. He was the only one in Bloomsbury who saw the war. He volunteered for the service in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver. Although his achievements might have seemed rather disappointing to his friends, one must acknowledge his influence as a literary critic in his days. In his humanistic and warm critiques of

literature, he had a large public following. He, along with Clive, displayed another kind of power that Bloomsbury wielded.

## 5. Leonard the Pillar and Forster the Visitor

With the five volumes of autobiography, Leonard Woolf (1960, 1961, 1964, 1967, and 1970) gave the most detailed and clearest account of his own life as well as the development and flourishing of Bloomsbury. According to what he said at the end of his discussion of Cambridge in *Sowing*, before 1904 when he left for Ceylon, he had already interacted with most of the original Bloomsburries and it was at that time the foundations of Bloomsbury were laid. In his recollection of the Memoir Club in *Downhill All the Way*, he brought about the idea that the original members of this club were identical with the original members of Old Bloomsbury. This no doubt can give us a strong clue of deciding the 'membership' of Bloomsbury, for in this club they wrote and read their memoirs to other members. Absolute frankness and intimate friendship must have been shared. In Bloomsbury, Leonard and Keynes were the two who had engaged their lives in politics. Though he was never a notable political philosopher, he did write several books of politics and showed his strength on imperialism and colonial affairs. If Noel Annan was right that in Leonard's life Virginia came first and politics came second (Annan 1970: 41), then publishing must have come third. In 1917 Leonard and Virginia founded the Hogarth Press in London. This is a very important event of Bloomsbury's history. Most of Leonard's and almost all of Virginia's books and works of many of their Bloomsbury friends were published by the Press. Its influence also goes beyond Bloomsbury. For instance, the Press published several of T. S. Eliot's books, including *The Waste Land*. Through Eliot they obtained the manuscript of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but, according to Leonard's explanation in *Beginning Again*, they decided not to print it on the advice of other printers. In hindsight, this was certainly unfortunate.

The founding of the Press was Leonard's idea to provide Virginia with some relief from her tension of creation. It was Leonard who saw the extraordinary genius and creativity in her, guarded her, and kept her mental sickness at bay. The history of English literature would otherwise have had a great loss without the most productive Virginia Woolf. Numerous volumes have been written about Virginia as a writer and her work, and hardly anything more can be added here. Interesting enough however, the only person who taught her how to write well, according to Virginia herself, was Clive Bell, the art critic. It happened when she was writing her first novel, *The Voyage Out*. As a member of Bloomsbury, Virginia no doubt had been one of the most important centers. However, she saw little of these friends since the late 1920's, and after the death of Lytton in 1932 Bloomsbury was never to exist in its original form, and the spirit of the Memoir Club had been lost. One year after Virginia's death in 1941, E. M. Forster gave a lecture in King's College on Virginia, which was an excellent introduction to her work and personality, though some of her writings were still to be published in the following decades.

Between Forster and Virginia, the two giant literary figures in Bloomsbury as well as in English literature, there was a mutual admiration and respect. Even though E. M. Forster, like Desmond MacCarthy, did not explicitly identify himself as a Bloomsbury, he was as qualified as anyone else of Bloomsbury. He gained from the Bloomsbury audience and also made his contribution. He enjoyed close friendship with them, especially with Virginia, Leonard, Lytton, and Roger. Virginia respected his criticism and opinions more than those of anyone else. And, it was Leonard who recognized the unfinished manuscript of *A Passage to India* as a great work and encouraged him to complete it. The Hogarth Press published several of Forster's books. He started interacting with other Bloomsbury apostles at Cambridge and was one of the 'Old Bloomsbury', by which Leonard meant the group of friends who, between 1911 and 1914, lived in or around Bloomsbury. He was one of the Memoir Club's members and lived in Bloomsbury at the time. Quentin Bell, though listing him as one of Bloomsbury, mentioned little about him in his books on Bloomsbury. This is probably because, instead of keeping a more constant contact with the Group like other members, Forster often came in and out the life of Bloomsbury due to his frequent travels.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have attempted to describe generally the origin of Bloomsbury and, no doubt selectively, what I perceive as its core ingredients. Specifically I selected ten of its original members and gave a sketch of their life background, important achievements, and their interaction with their friends in the Group before 1930. Each one of them had his/her own unique achievements. Nevertheless, if we could consider Bloomsbury as an organic, dynamic whole, then the sum of its individuals' value and influence are far beyond the whole. This is an idea put forth in Moore's *Principia Ethica*, which had

tremendous influence on the Group. The difference is that Moore was illustrating the value of the state of consciousness of a beautiful object. Considering the whole value of Bloomsbury, I contend that what David Gadd (1974: xi) proclaimed at the beginning of his book still holds true today when the Bloomsbury century already ended and a new millennium has begun: 'Not everyone will feel the need to study Bloomsbury in depth, but nobody interested in the culture of our century can afford to ignore it.'

### Notes

\* I gratefully acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers' comments, which led to improvements of the paper. However, I alone am responsible for the content of the paper.

1. The book is a collection of descriptions of Bloomsbury's lives and works. Rosenbaum (1995) is a revised edition that includes considerable new material and an updated chronology.

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