VITA

The Life of V. Sackville-West

Victoria Glendinning

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For Paul

> I wonder if Niggs is right in thinking Ben is eccentric. I confess I do not quite get the hang of Ben. What is the middle of his mind really like? ... I do agree about never letting him down, but at the same time I think that the tough in the Grenadiers [Nigel] needs affection quite as much. I think he is *very* fond of us both; and I think that under his assurance he is more [touching, pathetic] how than you would believe.... I wish to God Ben would marry, it would do him all the good in the world, even if it was only a Platonic sort of marriage.

She disliked and distrusted Philip Toynbee, Ben's closest friend, who she thought encouraged Ben in his 'irresponsible', bohemian, anti-establishment attitudes.

Harold had looked on his projected peerage, he told her, as 'a retirement, a consolation prize' for unfulfilled ambition. But now that it might be out of reach, 'I realize that I had come to desire the consolation prize even more than the prize itself.' Vita gave him her second piece of bad advice. In a letter of 6 January 1946, marked by her 'This is a very serious letter', she advised him to 'take the Labour whip' – in the hope of becoming a Labour-nominated peer. 'I see that you are in a jam, and the only satisfactory solution I can see is for you to do what I have suggested.' Harold was infinitely more versed in the politics of politics than she, and need not have taken her advice; but in this matter he had lost his bearings.

Harold duly told the Lord Chancellor, in April, that he might be prepared to take the Labour whip. Vita advised him to press his case, this time with the Prime Minister: 'I think – if I may say so – that you make a mistake in not mentioning Cranfield [they had decided on 'Lord Cranfield' as his future title] to Attlee now that you have the chance. It may well be that the whole suggestion has gone out of his head ... and a reminder would do no harm.'

But Harold's 'reminders' resulted only in disappointment and some loss of dignity. He did not formally join the Labour Party until spring 1947. By this time Vita was backtracking slightly – 'though not wholly hostile especially if it leads eventually to Lord Cranfield. Of course I do not really like you being associated with these bedints.'

Vita, having despatched at last her manuscript of *The Garden*, turned her attention to the real garden. She wanted to obliterate all traces of the neglect of the war years. 'Oh dear kind God, please let Vass live strong and healthy until he is eighty at least, and never let him be tempted away to anyone else's garden.' She concentrated on flowering plants; growing vegetables was part of the discarded wartime mentality, though they always grew enough to supply the needs of the house.

She dashed off a murder story, commissioned for a desirable £3,000,

with ease and pleasure. This was *Devil at Westease*, published by Doubleday in the United States (but never in Britain). Set in a tranquil West Country village, it involves a Jekyll-and-Hyde double identity on the part of the murderer; there is no motive, only the desire to commit the undetectable crime. The novel also poses a moral problem: if a great artist is guilty of a crime, should he be punished like anyone else, or should he be protected from justice for the sake of his art? It is, as Vita herself considered, an 'ingenious' story – but far-fetched and amateurish in execution.

In February 1946 she got the proofs of *The Garden* from Michael Joseph, and wrote in her diary, 'Depressed by these. It is worse than I feared, – not a patch on *The Land* though that's not saying much.' She had been anxious about it all along, writing to Harold the previous October:

> What worries me a bit, is being so out of touch with poetry as it is being written today. I get so many volumes sent to me by the *Observer* and also by would-be poets themselves, and I see that the influence of Tom Eliot and the Stephen Spender-Auden school is paramount – yet I can't get into gear with it at all. It is just something left out of my make-up. I think perhaps it has something to do with my dislike of politics ... I mean just a lack of interest in what must always be *temporary* things.

She loathed, she said, her virtuosity, 'my skill, – it's just like a pianola reeling off.... Why, then, should it make me so unbearably happy to write poetry, when I know that it is all out-of-date rubbishy words that mean simply nothing at all to Ben's generation? Will it ever mean anything to anybody's generation? I doubt it.' Her misery over the proofs provoked a return to what Harold, with an equal misery, called her 'muzzy moods'. Waiting for *The Garden* to come out, she worked frantically in her own garden – 'You see, I am prepared to devote all my energies to the garden, having abandoned literature.' The day before the poem was published, she went and hid herself in the wood 'from sheer misery'.

There was a particular reason for her despair. In March she went to a meeting of the Poetry Committee of the Society of Authors, chaired by Denys Kilham Roberts at his rooms near Harold's old apartment in King's Bench Walk. The committee – which included Edith Sitwell, Walter de la Mare, Henry Reed, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice and George Barker – was to plan a poetry reading to be held at the Wigmore Hall in the presence of the Queen. Vita made no comment in her diary at the time; only in 1950, in depression, did she write: 'I don't think I will ever write a poem again. They destroyed me for ever that day in Denys Kilham Roberts' rooms in King's Bench Walk.'

What had happened is explained in a letter she wrote to Eddy Sackville-West in 1951, consoling him for his exclusion from the National Book League's exhibition of the 100 best books by 'representative authors' since 1920. (Harold's *Some People* and Vita's *The Land* were in.) Vita told Eddy about 'something which hurt me so much that I have never told it to anyone, – not even to Harold.' It was that at the meeting Vita's name had not been put forward by any of her fellow committee members as one of the poets to read their work at the Wigmore Hall.

> Now I don't set myself up to read poetry very well; but I know that I am audible, which is more than can be said for some of them; so the only inference to be drawn is that they didn't think me worth putting up on the platform – in other words, my poetry wasn't good enough. It had the effect on me that I have never written a line of verse since then.[1]

The aspiration of Vita's life had been to be a poet – and to be known and acknowledged as a poet of lasting significance. As a young woman her work had met with acceptance and acclaim; she had never had to struggle against neglect. That is perhaps why this rejection, this loss of ratification, seemed so absolute and damning.

The sad irony is that *The Garden* is a more interesting and a finer poem than *The Land*. In *The Garden*, which is a little shorter than the earlier poem, there are many occasions when, as she wrote in it, 'Martha's garden turns to Mary's cell'; it is not a gardening treatise in verse so much as a long meditation exploring her personal metaphysic in time of war. She dedicated it to old Mrs Drummond :

> The weeds in my garden remain as green,
> And I cannot tell if I bring you pleasure,
> But the one little patch I have cleared for you
> That one small patch of my soul is clean.

In the dedication she wrote of the loss of ardour that ageing brings, of the 'deathly rest' sought

> By a heart gone weak and a spirit tired
> By the long delusion of things desired.

Yet in the poem she quotes four lines from Eliot's *The Waste Land* – 'April is the cruellest month ... ' – only to refute their pessimism with passion : 'I will believe in Spring' :

> Would that my pen like a blue bayonet
> Might skewer all such cat's-meat of defeat.

She does not offer a facile optimism in exchange :

> There is nothing to add but the fact that we had the vision
> And this was a grace in itself, the decision
> We took between hope and despond ;
> The different way that we heard and accepted the call ;
> The different way
> We tried to respond.

The 'vision' is, in part, the garden and its flowers :

> You dreamed us, and we made your dreams come true.
> We are your vision, here made manifest.
> You sowed us, and obediently we grew,
> But, sowing us, you sowed more than you knew
> And something not ourselves has done the rest.

Vita's 'something not ourselves' is not the loving God of the New Testament. Here she writes of hungry birds :

> It is not you they fear, but one another.
> Christ would have said that bird to bird was brother,
> But Christ and Nature seldom speak alike.

It is a fierce, lonely universe outside the paradise garden, the 'little perfect world' :

> For our life is terribly private in the end,
> In the last resort ;
> And if our self's a stranger, what's a friend ?
> A pretty children's game of let's pretend !

The inner landscape is as much in focus as the garden vista. A note in her manuscript headed 'General Themes' begins : 'Courage in Adversity. Determination to find pleasure and not to succumb. No sentimentality. Struggle. Weeds. Death and Loss. Success and rewards.'[2] The seasons in *The Garden* are the seasons of life as well as of the year. *The Garden* is a poem of menopause, in which the horticultural lists and litanies of species and processes are as much the occasion as the purpose of writing. The art of making a garden, she wrote here, is to 'Marry excess with an adroit repose' – a balance she vainly tried to maintain in her life, threatened not only by war from outside but by

> The rabble in the basement of our being,
> Ragged and gaunt, that seldom rush to light

MOST of the material from which this book was built was, at the time of writing, at Sissinghurst Castle: Vita's mother's diaries, letters and scrapbooks; Vita's diaries, cuttings books, notebooks and many manuscripts, published and unpublished; letters to Vita from childhood friends, from Rosamund Grosvenor, and Violet (Keppel) Trefusis; the huge correspondence between Vita and Harold Nicolson; copies of Harold Nicolson's diaries; and a mass of letters to Vita from publishers, strangers, fans, friends, family and lovers. Harold and Vita's letters to each other, Vita's early diaries and the diaries of her mother are now (1983) in the safe-keeping of the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.

To give a separate reference for every item quoted from the Sissinghurst material would encumber these pages unprofitably. Where no source reference is given, it is to be assumed that the document quoted was at Sissinghurst. Particularly important letters or diary entries are dated in the narrative; all others can be dated by month and year from the context. If a letter is quoted out of chronological context, a reference is given. References are given for letters from other sources, quotations from printed books, and for material from university or library collections. The letters from Vita to Evelyn Irons, Eardley Knollys, Alvilde Lees-Milne and James Lees-Milne were, at the time of writing, in the possession of the recipients.

PROLOGUE

1 For the facts of Vita's mother's background I am indebted to Susan Mary Alsop, *Lady Sackville*, 1978
2 VSW, *Pepita*, 1937

PART I KNOLE

CHAPTER 1

1 VSW, *The Edwardians*, 1930
2 VSW, 'Leopards at Knole', *Collected Poems*, 1933
3 VSW, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, 1922
4 idem
5 VSW, 'To Knole', *Poems of West and East*, 1917
6 VSW, *Nursery Rhymes*, 1947
7 VSW, 'Shameful Reminiscence', *Little Innocents*, ed. Alan Pryce-Jones, 1932
8 VSW, 'Autobiography of 1920', in Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 1973

PART V THE ENCLAVE AND THE TOWER

CHAPTER 30

1 Berg, 6 November 1951
2 Huntingdon Library
3 Anne Scott-James, *Sissinghurst: The Making of the Garden*

CHAPTER 31

1 To Eddy Sackville-West, 30 June 1950. Berg
2 Yale, 13 October 1948
3 Denton Welch, *Journals*, 1952

CHAPTER 32

1 Yale, 19 December 1949
2 Yale, 4 October 1949
3 Yale, 5 July 1949
4 Yale, 18 January 1950
5 *New Statesman*, 21 January 1950
6 James Pope-Hennessy, *A Lonely Business*, ed. Peter Quennell, 1981

CHAPTER 33

1 James Lees-Milne, *Harold Nicolson*, vol. II
2 Philippe Jullian and John Phillips, *Violet Trefusis*

CHAPTER 35

1 Yale, 3 September 1957
2 James Lees-Milne, *Harold Nicolson*, vol. II

CHAPTER 36

1 University of Sussex
2 *Dearest Andrew* (VSW's letters to Andrew Reiber), 1979
3 'A Dream', *Collected Poems*
4 To Hamish Hamilton, 8 May 1968
5 20 August 1957
6 25 November 1952
7 VSW, *The Garden*, 1946

BOOKS BY V. SACKVILLE-WEST