VOGUE

CHRISTMAS FINDS:

FASHIONS
TO GIVE AND TO WEAR

In shops of the U.S.A.

Incorporating Vanity Fair
November 15, 1948
Price 50 Cents in U. S. and Canada
$1.00 ALL OTHER COUNTRIES

LADY IDA SITWELL, MOTHER OF
OSBERT, SACHEVERELL, AND EDITH

DUKE OF BEAUFORT,
THEIR GREAT-GRANDFATHER

HENRY MOAT (IN FANCY DRESS),
VALET TO THEIR FATHER

LADY LONDESBOROUGH,
THEIR GRANDMOTHER ON THE MATERNAL SIDE

SIR GEORGE SITWELL, THEIR FATHER

RENISHAW, FAMILY SEAT OF THE SITWELLS
SINCE 1625; SKETCHED BY JOHN PIPER

OSBERT AND SACHEVERELL SITWELL:
BEERBOHM CARICATURE

SARGENT PORTRAIT OF THE SITWELL FAMILY:
SIR GEORGE, LADY IDA, AND THE THREE CHILDREN

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING THE SITWELLS

The three Sitwells, Osbert, Edith, and Sacheverell, are the most photographed, sketched, painted, quoted, and written-about family trio in the world. Now Sir Osbert and Dr. Edith Sitwell are talking their way across the United States on their first joint lecture tour here. In 1926, Rebecca West wrote: "They are the legatees of perhaps the most glorious group that English life has ever produced, the Whig aristocracy of the eighteenth century. The society that received Voltaire embraced their ancestors and from it they have inherited their graceful intellectual carriage, a boundless curiosity concerning things of the mind, and the quality of taste." (Their father, Sir George Sitwell, one of the most magnificent eccentrics, whose imaginative flights from reality are superbly described by his son, Osbert, traced his line to the Normans in 1299; their mother, Lady Ida, a richly beautiful woman, deliciously extravagant, charmingly frivolous, was the granddaughter of Henry, 7th Duke of Beaufort, a line going back to John of Gaunt.) The children of this match have had an incisive effect on the arts of their time. When they first assaulted London in 1918, they were the fun-loving Sitwells, who mocked the serious and were profound about the trivial, their burlesques solidly effective. They have ended up as the "most remarkable trio of the same generation in one family in the history of English literature." Sacheverell's masterpiece is his *Southern Baroque Art; A Study of Painting, Architecture and Music.* Osbert's is his four-volume complex and cadenced biography of their family, *Left Hand, Right Hand!, The Scarlet Tree, Great Morning!* and the just published *Laughter in the Next Room.* Edith's glory rests on the faith, the agony of her war poems. *(Continued on following page)*

A SMALL ANTHOLOGY OF WHAT THE SITWELLS SAID ABOUT THEMSELVES AND EACH OTHER, OF WHAT ARNOLD BENNETT, H. G. WELLS, SIR EDMUND GOSSE, BEVERLEY NICHOLS, GERTRUDE STEIN, R. A. SCOTT-JAMES, FRANK SWINNERTON, REBECCA WEST, AND HENRY REED WROTE ABOUT THEM, IS ON PAGE 175.

CECIL BEATON

THE THREE SITWELLS
IN THE TWENTIES

"WE ALL HAVE THE REMOTE AIR OF A LEGEND," WROTE EDITH SITWELL

FIVE PORTRAITS OF EDITH SITWELL

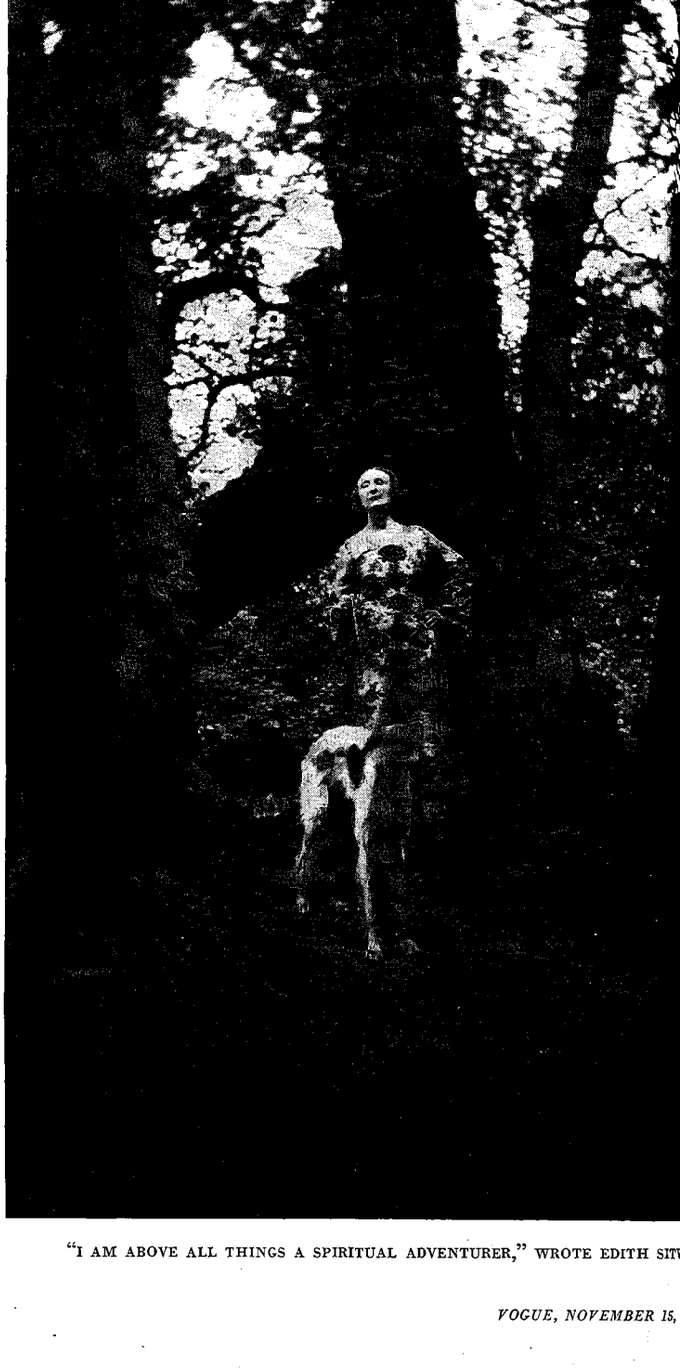
Edith Sitwell, whose poetry thirty years ago was often a weightless pattern, has now become one of the great religious poets:

"Still falls the Rain
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side . . ."

Now sixty-one years old, this six-foot woman, with grey eyes that have looked courageously for controversy, may be England's next poet laureate. No one, however, would have thought of such honour for her the June afternoon in 1923 when Osbert Sitwell presented his sister in that famous public performance of "Façade." There was an absolute balance of her voice and the music of William Walton. The reciter and the musicians hid behind a curtain with only an enormous fair-haired mask on view. With that abstract method of presenting poetry, the poet scandalized the audience—and with such experimental lines as:

"Also the hairy sky that we
Take for a coverlet comfortably."

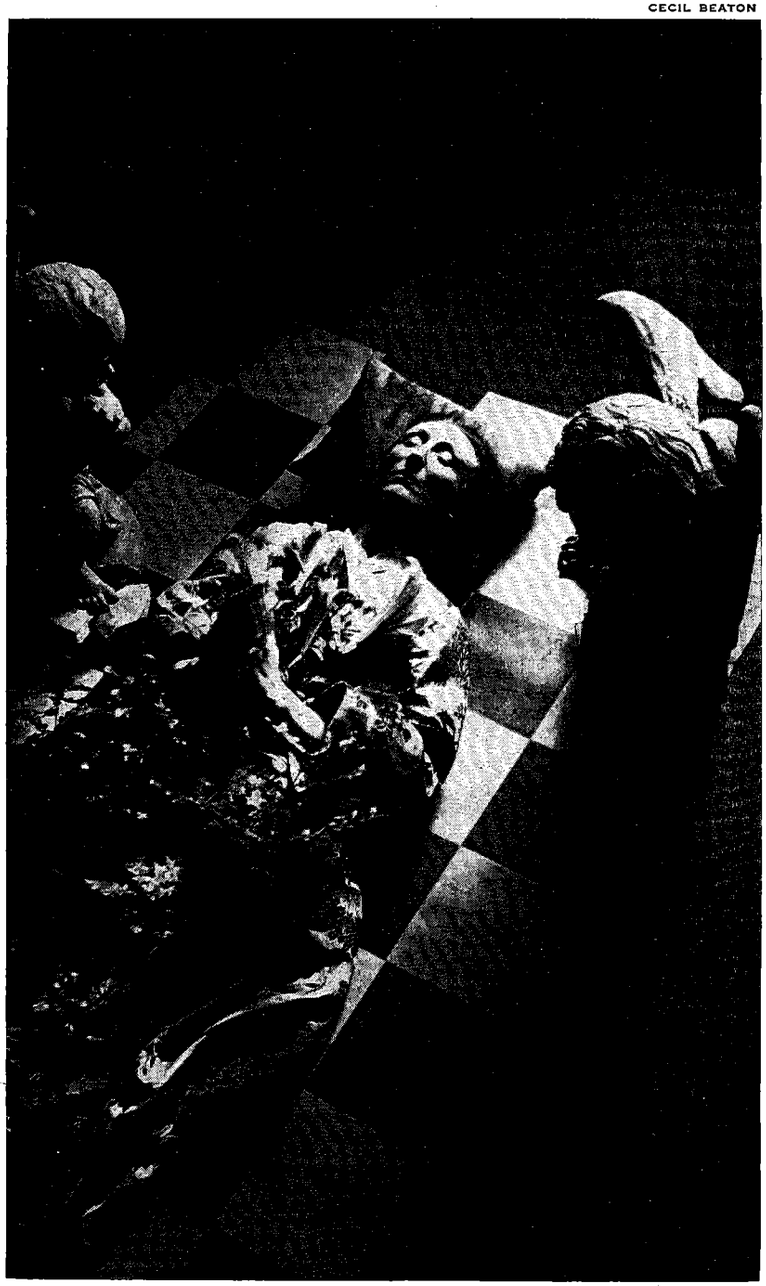
Readings from "Façade" have been heard many times; Ballet Society will present it in New York in January, with Sir Osbert and Edith Sitwell.



"I AM ABOVE ALL THINGS A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURER," WROTE EDITH SIT

"VERY CLEVER, NO DOUBT—BUT WHAT IS SHE BUT A FAÇADE!," SAID AN ENEMY

CECIL BEATON



"A CREATURE WITH AN ALIEN AND IMMORTAL SOUL," WROTE SIR OSBERT SITWELL

JAMES GILVARRY COLLECTION

EDITH SITWELL BY TCHELITCHEW

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING THE SITWELLS

What their family, their friends, their critics said about this extraordinary literary trio

Photographs on pages 130-133

ARNOLD BENNETT wrote in 1923: "The Sitwells live in a world of perceptions and sensations of their own, extraordinarily, insultingly, different from anybody else's."

LADY IDA SITWELL used to tell her children, Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell: "Never put pen to paper."

STANLEY J. KUNITZ and HOWARD HAYCRAFT, in *Twentieth Century Authors*, wrote this about Edith Sitwell: "She is, as she recognizes, a mediæval type, and so she dresses in the fashion of the Middle Ages, usually in rich brocaded silks. ... She has never married. Controversy is her life-blood, and she dearly loves a fight; on the other hand she is noted for her kindness and generosity to young poets and painters."

SIR EDMUND GOSSE, discussing Edith Sitwell, wrote: "An extraordinary mixture of sensitiveness and bravado."

SAMUEL PUTNAM, in *Paris Was Our Mistress*, wrote: "It was at her (Stella Bowen's) place one afternoon that I had the privilege of a private lecture from Edith Sitwell on the subject of Rabelais. When informed by our hostess that this was the field in which I was working, Miss Sitwell had exclaimed: 'I'm so glad to meet a scholar. I greatly prefer them to writers. I'm so tired of literary people! And now, do tell me all about Rabelais.' Whereupon, she told *me* all about him."

H. G. WELLS, in *Experiment in Autobiography*, wrote: "She (Mrs. Wells) liked delicate fantasy after the manner of Edith Sitwell, to whom I am as appreciatively indifferent as I am to the quaint patterns of old chintzes, the designs on dinner plates, or the charm of nursery rhymes."

LOUIS UNTERMEYER, in *Modern British Poetry*, wrote about Edith Sitwell: "She is Donne one moment, Lewis Carroll the next. To apply the term 'mystic' to her will surprise only those who have never cared to see through the glassy surface of her verse."

SIR GEORGE R. SITWELL used to say of his daughter: "Edith made a great mistake by not going in for lawn tennis."

EDITH SITWELL wrote about herself: "I am above all things a spiritual adventurer, never a spiritual parvenu."

EDWARD MARSH, in *A Number of People*, wrote in 1939: "When Osbert Sitwell sent me one of his earlier books, I told him I didn't think

AND

was a very good line of poetry; but perhaps it is."

ARNOLD BENNETT wrote: "The trouble with Osbert is that he has seven professions, not one, and a life devoted to each."

EDITH SITWELL said of her brother Sacheverell: "It may be said with truth that it would be impossible to find a poet who has been more foolishly underrated than Mr. Sitwell, and for reasons that have no connection whatever with poetry."

BEVERLEY NICHOLS, in *Twenty-Five*, wrote in 1926: "Among the most entertaining people in Oxford at this time (and, I may add, among the most entertaining people in Europe), were the brothers Sitwell. I suppose the Sitwell trio—Osbert, Sacheverell, and sister Edith, have been talked about as much as any literary family in England. Apart from their merits, they have had a great advantage over most writers to whom publicity is not distasteful—they possess a label. A label is tremendously important if you want to impress yourself on the British public.

"Sacheverell was 'up' at Oxford at the same time as myself, and introduced a very pleasant flavour of Bohemianism (there really is no other word) into these dingy quarters. He hung his rooms with drawings by Picasso and Matisse, which were the subject of lewd comment among the more athletic members of the college. There was one drawing by—I believe, Picasso—called 'Salome,' which represented a skinny and exceedingly revolting old lady prancing in a loathsome attitude before certain generously-paunched old men who looked like the sort of people you meet at a Turkish bath when your luck is out. One day a certain charming don (an ardent Roman Catholic) strolled into Sacheverell's rooms, saw the picture, paled slightly and then asked him what it was all about. ...

"He [Osbert] once told me, with that perfect modesty which his enemies find so disarming, that he gave his superior authorities more trouble during the War than any other officer they had ever known. I suppose it *must* have been a little trying to the colonel who came up to him and asked if he were fond of horses to be told, 'No. But I adore giraffes.' And it must have been positively exasperating to the outraged military police to find him, an officer in the Grenadiers, carrying on an intimate conversation with a very private soldier in a very public place. Even worse, when at the subsequent cross-examination, the private soldier turned out to be Epstein (whose taste in birds differs so strangely from that of the British public).

"Yes—England needs its Sitwells."

ARNOLD BENNETT wrote in his *Journals:* "I drove to the Sitwell con-

(Continued on page 176)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING THE SITWELLS

(Continued from page 175)

cert, 'Façade.' Crowds of people, snobs, hi-brows, low-brows, critics and artists and decent folk. I enjoyed this show greatly. The verses are distinguished; the music (Walton) equally so. The 'scene' (flat) by Frank Dobson was admirable.

"Tuesday, October 19th. Sachie Sitwell's book (*All Summer in a Day*) came and I read a lot of it. Superb bricks out of ghastly straw."

SIR OSBERT SITWELL wrote, in his latest book, *Laughter in the Next Room:* "My sister would be sitting on the bed. Now a person of the utmost distinction and beauty, with her long slender limbs, and long-fingered hands, and the musing but singularly sweet expression which always distinguished her, she belonged to an earlier, less hackneyed age, in which the standards of Woolworth mass production did not exist (in fact, as an American is said to have remarked in front of her portrait in the Tate Gallery, 'Lord, she's gothic, gothic enough to hang bells in!').

"My mother, who had so cruelly ill-used her, had come to love her society, her wit and perception, and it was symptomatic of Edith's fineness of character that she responded and, now that my mother was growing old and her spirits flagging, set herself, at a great waste of her own energy and time, to amuse her—and there was little else one could do for her. Edith, then, would be sitting on the bed; and on a very straight Chippendale chair, but thrown backward and supported in front by his own two long legs, Sacheverell would balance his tall frame. His appearance at that age—twenty-five or -six—his very handsome head, with hair curling at the sides, and with its cut and contours so Italian in essence, but so northern in colour, translated perfectly the strange power and intensity that have always been his, the generous warmth of his temperament, so genial and impulsive, the passion of many kinds that burns in him—passion for people, for books, for learning, for works of art, for old lamps that can be lit again at his fire—the wit, so distinguished and apt, which he so despises in himself and does nothing to cultivate, instead preferring the jokes of others which he so immensely enjoys: the flash, deep as bright, of his anger, large as the scale of his mind and frame, but never enduring, breaking down eventually into a smile, though by no means an easy smile."

GERTRUDE STEIN wrote in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:* "So then we arrived in London. Edith Sitwell gave a party for us and so did her brother Osbert. Osbert was a great comfort to Gertrude Stein. He so thoroughly understood every possible way in which one could be nervous that as he sat beside her in the hotel telling her all the kinds of ways that he and she could suffer from stage fright, she was quite soothed. She was always very fond of Osbert. She always said he was like an uncle of a king. He had that pleasant kindly irresponsible agitated calm that an uncle of an English king always must have..."

REBECCA WEST wrote in *The Strange Necessity* in 1928: "The three Sitwells, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell, are among the few illuminants England possesses which are strong enough to light up post-war England....

"Moreover, each of them is inhabited by a bland demon, as the German metaphysicians used to call that which gets into a man and makes him creative, not so forcibly that it turns them away from criticism, but valid enough to give them the right to speak with the authority of artists. They have indeed by merely moving through society very excitingly, being themselves, done as much for culture in London as anybody since Mr. Ford Madox Ford severed his connection with the *English Review.* Edith Sitwell writes poetry as gay as a flower garden; its confused joyousness half heard through jazz music, as it is in the performance she and her brothers give called 'Façade,' is to me a deal pleasanter than much of the confused passionateness one hears at the opera through the music of Wagner or Strauss, and surely just as legitimate. Osbert Sitwell gives us lovely verse and the amusing grotesqueness of *Triple Fugue* and *Before the Bombardment* and scholarly notes on his travels such as very few critics of the last generation would have been equipped to write."

BENJAMIN GILBERT BROOK in "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review,* February, 1926, wrote: "In respect of her restless experimental brain Edith Sitwell is not unlike Picasso. The different styles successively adopted by the great painter during the twenty years that he has been before the public have only the very slightest relationship one with the other; yet collectors cherish examples of his work in at least a dozen different 'periods.'"

R. L. MÉGROZ, in *The Three Sitwells,* wrote in 1926: "A part of their peculiarity as writers, which has caused them to be regarded almost as a separate school, can be explained by the biographical facts... They have a desire for leadership in their blood, and finding themselves landed in the post-war twentieth century equipped with the intelligence of poets they very naturally are among the most caustic critics of the traditions which their own ancestors helped to establish. As artists they try both to revolt and to lead. Poetry becomes an instrument of power and prestige, and probably the desire to make themselves felt as independent personalities provided their earliest and strongest stimulus to artistic development. But if they have leadership in their blood, it does not come

(Continued on page 178)

THE SITWELLS

(Continued from page 176)

out as the arrogance of the aristocrat of melodrama, but as the arrogance of the warring artist; and, since . . . their literary activity is due largely to a striving to get out of themselves, the artistic arrogance leaves room for the simplicity of nature and a generous fervour which they all possess in varying degrees."

R. A. SCOTT-JAMES wrote "Modern Accents in English Literature" for *The Bookman* (1931), from which the following is quoted: "The three Sitwells, like three Graces in classic pose, who delicately and without ever insisting too much, have been letting the world into their secret that up to now it has been taking the big things of life too seriously and been too little content with the malleable surface of things and the ripple of words. It was not for nothing that Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell, writing a book about the Middle Ages, discovered their whole character in their tapestries. Decoration, quaint lines and figures, the pale colour of pale northern women, or splashes of the brightest wine-red from the Mediterranean—here, among a host of little things, is the beauty which is the world's ceremonial offering to the trinity of the Sitwells."

REBECCA WEST wrote in *Ending in Earnest* in 1931: "Were I an American collector I would have nothing to do with the manuscripts of the last generation, particularly when there are writers of the present who are bringing the English imaginative work back to its tradition and putting into it its proper dower of wit and passion and observation and discernment: such as Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, David Garnett, Stella Benson, the Sitwells, Richard Hughes. The acquisition of manuscripts by these hands is not a gamble."

FRANK SWINNERTON, in *The Georgian Literary Scene*, wrote: "It is unfair to each member of the Sitwell family to treat them as a trinity, for while when they began they might be confused one with another, all that is now changed.

"But the Sitwells did not mind. They were not poor young men, struggling to find a public, but were children of rich parents, and were very much in the fashionable world. They were more in the fashionable world than any other writers. Osbert, with the profile of a Roman emperor or a Hanoverian sovereign, with his cold eyes and merciless tongue; Sacheverell, tall, more patently a young poet, haughtier yet, and in early days, unable to laugh without apparent physical pain; Edith like a sibyl, beautiful and highly mysterious; all three oddly kind and generous despite their diabolical skill in ridicule, they held upon their resolute way. The talent was theirs. It must be acknowledged. It must be acclaimed. Those who did not acclaim it were traitors, who must die the death.

"Now the talent of all three is admitted, but it is not in all quar-

(Continued on page 179)

THE SITWELLS

(Continued from page 178)

ters wholly approved . . . between them, the three stand as one man for their chosen cause—the suppression of pulpy humour, and the exaltation of ruthlessness of thought and speech."

HENRY MOAT, "ex-man" to Sir George Sitwell, in a letter written on September 20, 1938 (and quoted in full in *Laughter in the Next Room*), wrote: "I thoroughly enjoyed my stay at Renishaw . . . Captain Osbert looks real well, a big fine handsome gentleman, and I should say his body is too small for his big kind heart. He has made the rooms look as if he had let perpetual sunshine into them. I was pleased to see Miss Edith there too. I think that she gets more aristocratic-looking every year, and her beautiful manner, so different from these painted hussies who are filling up all over. The gardens are just beautiful."

ARNOLD BENNETT wrote in 1923: "To my mind Edith Sitwell is the most accomplished technician in verse (unless it be Robert Bridges) now writing. Her skill dazzles me, who once attempted rhyme."

HENRY REED, in mentioning Edith Sitwell in *Writers of Today*, published in 1946, wrote: "Then there came the war poems of Miss Edith Sitwell. They were unlike any other poetry of the time, and no other poetry like them has emerged . . . But they are no more than the emergence into full power of things which have been either natively implicit or consciously aimed at in her work for a couple of decades. . . .

"Her later poetry is extremely impressive. No woman poet in England, or, so far as I am aware, in any other modern language has added so largely to that body of poetry which one will wish repeatedly to turn to; and though her best work has been produced in the last five or six years, no point of dichotomy can be found between her recent work and the work which has preceded it. It is rather that at some point there have become accessible to the poet new springs of power and fertility; there is a complete liberation from the inhibitions of which the early prettiness were perhaps the outward signs."

A PARAGRAPH FROM A LETTER written in 1948 from London: "Recently I've heard here and there that Edith Sitwell is a possibility for poet laureate. Some think T. S. Eliot will be the one. Masefield is, of course, not yet dead. Meanwhile I understand that the Sitwells are after it for sister Edith, and, of course, since she is the most important English poet (ess) writing today, why shouldn't she be? Amazing about the Sitwells, how Miss Edith and Sir Osbert, she in her recent poetry and he in his family history have become the elegists of our dying culture, haven't they? Perhaps it isn't so strange—their people helped create it, they intensified and elaborated it—now they write its elegy . . . I hope that she does become poet laureate."