REVIEWS

Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel, by Mark Hussey, Manchester University Press, Manchester (ISBN 9781526176813), 2025, £18.99

There are two stories of *Mrs Dalloway*. The first is contained in the novel itself: that day in June 1923 when Clarissa Dalloway held a party, and Septimus Warren Smith killed himself. The second recounts the life of the novel, from initial jottings in Virginia's Woolf's notebooks in 1922 to its publication and reception in 1925, and its myriad afterlives in the hands and minds of its readers. During the past century, the critical reputation and commercial sales of *Mrs Dalloway* have waxed, waned and waxed again, fluctuating with the estimation of Bloomsbury in general, and of Woolf in particular. The first edition sold about 3,000 copies in four years; profitable enough to pay for a water closet in Monk's House. A cheaper 'Uniform Edition' published in 1929 sold roughly twice as fast; a reflection both of price and of Woolf's increased fame after the publication of *Orlando* in 1928. In the United States of America, the inexpensive Modern Library edition published in 1928 (with an introduction by Woolf) sold 61,000 copies over the next twenty years (92). Following a postwar slump in reading Woolf (at least in Britain), renewed interest in her life and work, fuelled by the publication of her diaries and the growth of feminist studies on campus, stimulated fresh appreciation of her work (134–9). In April 2025, 2,070 editions of *Mrs Dalloway* were listed worldwide (goodreads.com/work/editions/841320-mrs-dalloway).

This second story of *Mrs Dalloway*, as text and cultural artefact, is the subject of Mark Hussey's new book *Mrs Dalloway: Biography of a Novel.* Combining life writing, literary criticism, reception studies, publication history and cultural sociology, Hussey follows Woolf's novel as it travels from her pen to the Hogarth Press and across the world, its cultural footprint expanding via new editions, numerous translations, literary borrowings and adaptations on stage and screen. Today, he observes, *Mrs Dalloway* is ubiquitous. Woolf's famous opening sentence has become an internet meme whenever flowers (or anything else) are being bought. 'Mrs Dalloway is afloat as a brand, an icon, in that ocean of cultural markers in which we all swim' (174).

The biography of a book, from conception to circulation and consumption, involves multiple perspectives, and Hussey is adept at interweaving the literary, social and economic afterlives of *Mrs Dalloway*. Any published novel enters the world as a commodity in a bookshop, as well as a candidate for evaluation and interpretation within a cultural economy of

readers, reviewers, taste makers and teachers. Hussey opens with a memory of the Penguin Classics edition of *Mrs Dalloway* that he bought as a teenager in the 1970s. Now well read and well worn, that modest paperback became part of his identity as a reader, a scholar and a Woolfian. He reminds us that biographies of writers and readers are imbricated and, as this book shows, they can be mutually generative.

Hussey situates the writing and publication of *Mrs Dalloway* at a critical juncture in Woolf's career, placing the work in dialogue with other novels, short stories and essays that came before and after it. He notes that Woolf was already a protagonist in the gathering debate about the purpose and form of contemporary fiction. Having finished writing *Jacob's Room* (1922), she began to plan the novel that would become *Mrs Dalloway* at the same time as interrogating her craft in a collection of essays that she would publish as the first volume of *The Common Reader* (1925). In both works, Hussey argues that 'Woolf was consciously positioning herself as a modernist writer with a particular relation to her readers' (17). In her essay 'Modern Fiction' (published in *The Common Reader*) Woolf contrasted the approach of a previous generation of writers, such as H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett, with that of her peers, notably James Joyce.[1] Unlike the Edwardian 'materialists' whose plausible worlds were fashioned from solid descriptions of reality, Woolf argued that the novelist should rather aim to convey the felt sensation of modern life (15). Here Hussey is locating *Mrs Dalloway* within Woolf's development as a writer, and also framing its publication and reception within the literary landscape of the 1920s.

The first two chapters of Hussey's biography are largely concerned with Woolf's writing process, and with the structure and themes of *Mrs Dalloway*. This material may be more familiar to Woolfians than the subsequent history of the novel in the world, but it is an important starting point. Hussey needs to set the scene for the critical conversations that will begin as soon as the book is published. He guides us deftly through the circumstances of Woolf's writing, including the continuing trauma of war, her personal experience of mental illness, and the shared exhaustion of those who had lived through the influenza pandemic of 1918–20. Similarly, he lays out three key themes in the novel: London, Politics and Clothes. This is not intended as groundbreaking literary analysis; Hussey's aim is to contextualise the diverse responses of both critics and admirers that will follow.

[1] *E*4 157–65. An earlier version was published as 'Modern Novels' in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1919; see *E*3 30–7.

The publication and initial reception of *Mrs Dalloway* demonstrates Woolf's practice as an experienced writer and her status as a cultural insider. As her own publisher, she was able to control the process of amending and correcting the text up to the moment of printing. The novel was published simultaneously by the Hogarth Press in London and by Harcourt Brace in the United States, and Woolf corrected the proofs of each edition separately, resulting in slight differences between them. Such details, scarcely noticeable to the common reader, would become textual fodder for the scholar and the book historian. As was customary, Leonard was *Mrs Dalloway*'s first reader; he told her it was her best book yet. Unusually Woolf also sent a corrected proof copy to her dying friend Jacques Raverat, whose positive response came as an 'exquisite' relief (77). Other friends and critics had to wait for the published book.

Among the earliest readers, E. M. Forster and Vita Sackville-West were enthusiastic; Lytton Strachey was ambivalent about Clarissa Dalloway; and Philip Morrell believed that he must be the model for the 'dullest characters', namely Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway (85). Hussey records Woolf's amazement, as he was neither (85). Other friends—including Janet Case, Gerald Brenan and C. P. Sanger—expressed reservations; each missed the point as far as Woolf was concerned. Press reviews were mixed, which was not surprising given the book's innovative style and structure. Hussey identifies one of the most perceptive early assessments, written by Richard Hughes for the New York-based *Saturday Review of Literature*, which compared Woolf's experiment with the form of the novel to Cézanne's manipulations of form in painting (87). It was an insight that would surely have pleased Woolf and her friends.

The juxtaposition of *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*, arising from the proximity of their publication and their surface similarities, was immediate and lasting. The comparison, often to the detriment of Woolf, coupled the two novels together in a seemingly endless critical duel. Hussey argues that the Woolf vs Joyce argument was wide of the mark, and that a more productive literary rapport existed between Woolf and Marcel Proust, whose novels had accompanied her throughout the writing of *Mrs Dalloway*. The congruence between their ideas about subjectivity, the difficulty of knowing another person and the challenge of rendering complex emotions on the page makes *Mrs Dalloway* 'by far a more Proustian than Joycean novel' (71).

Inevitably, a negative review could wound, while an enthusiastic letter from an unknown reader might restore the author's equanimity. The day after publication, a young man wrote to Woolf from Earl's Court, saying: 'This time you have done it—you have caught life and put it in a book' (88). Few readers can have been as devoted to the novel as one who wrote from

Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, in 1932 to say that she used *Mrs Dalloway* to evaluate potential friends: only two of ten people to whom she had lent the book 'caught you', thereby securing their place in her life as 'intimates' rather than 'strangers' (89).

Brisk sales of *Mrs Dalloway* in America suggests a constituency of readers willing to tackle a novel that had abandoned the familiar apparatus of realist fiction. According to *The New Yorker*, it was not a 'hammock book' but it was 'worth any effort' to get to grips with Woolf's writing (94–5). Hussey points out that *The Dial* magazine, which advertised itself as 'A Gift of Distinction for People of Discrimination' and had a circulation of about 18,000, had helped to prepare the ground for the reception of *Mrs Dalloway* in America. The July 1923 issue included Woolf's story 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' as well as a favourable review of *Jacob's Room* by David Garnett. Another friendly piece appeared in December 1924: a long survey article on Woolf's writing by Clive Bell. Of course, we cannot know whether people who bought a copy of *Mrs Dalloway* finished it, let alone enjoyed it. However, help was at hand for intrepid readers willing to make the effort. Hussey has tracked down reading programmes and study notes relating to *Mrs Dalloway* that were circulated to library discussion groups and book groups in readers' homes across the United States. Such aids supported a democracy of readers, unburdened by preconceptions of Bloomsbury elitism.

Familiar criticisms continued to colour responses to *Mrs Dalloway*: the comparison with *Ulysses*, and the image of Woolf as eccentric and snobbish. Sometimes the two lines of attack were connected. In 1925, Joseph Wood Krutch, the theatre critic for *The Nation*, called Woolf 'a decorous James Joyce' (105). The comparison with Joyce was frequently accompanied by the disparagement of 'feminine' themes such as parties and clothes. Woolf herself neatly skewered the prejudice in *A Room of One's Own*: 'A scene in a battle-field is more significant than a scene in a shop' (101). Hussey argues that antagonism to Woolf, then as now, was inflected by attitudes to class and gender. It was also fuelled by academic fashions. In Cambridge, the prominent literary theorist F. R. Leavis habitually attacked the dilettante elitism that, he claimed, characterised Bloomsbury. According to his biographer, Ian MacKillop: 'to be Leavisian was to be against Bloomsbury' (quoted 127). Similar criticism came from a different social and cultural quarter when the Birmingham-born author Walter Allen wrote about Woolf in his influential book *The English Novel* (1954): 'At present the reaction against her work is probably at its greatest, and I must admit to sharing it' (quoted 105).

Overseas, the response to Woolf was less entangled with attitudes to Bloomsbury. In western Europe, Latin America and even behind the Iron Curtain, she was subject to serious evaluation as a modernist writer whose work was increasingly available in translation. Meanwhile, in Britain, Quentin Bell wrote in 1967 that Bloomsbury remained 'dead and stinking' (134). Hussey argues that this view only gave way under the pressure of feminist readings of Woolf, combined with new insights into her practice and method. An article by Edward A. Hungerford in *Modern Fiction Studies* (1957) had drawn attention to Woolf's own metaphor of 'tunnelling' to describe her writing process. Tunnelling was the attempt to reach behind 'the facade of objective appearance' (106); a way of evoking the consciousness of a character and capturing the sensation of a moment. Then, in the 1970s, the work of American scholars such as Ellen Hawkes Rogat, Elizabeth Abel and Elaine Showalter positioned Woolf at the centre of feminist literary criticism within their universities and among the wider reading public. They were as interested in Woolf as in her writing. Showalter described how women from across the world gathered at the New York Public Library to study the manuscript volumes of Woolf's diary in the Berg Collection (137).

The final part of Hussey's biography is devoted to the legacies of *Mrs Dalloway* in fiction, film, opera, ballet and popular culture. He suggests that 'influence' is 'a treacherous word, too limiting, too blunt', to capture the diverse echoes and traces, explicit and implied, of *Mrs Dalloway* in the contemporary world (143). The novel has been evoked, reflected, refracted and reworked by numerous authors and artists; sometimes the allusion is fleeting and unacknowledged, sometimes it is 'a fully realised homage' (144). Robin Lippincott's *Mr Dalloway* (1999) is set on a June day in 1927 when Richard Dalloway's queer lover Robbie appears, uninvited, at an excursion that Richard has arranged to celebrate the Dalloways' wedding anniversary. The premise is that Clarissa 'understands' Richard who, of course, buys the flowers himself. Hussey guides us carefully through other novels that enclose their events within a single day, are strongly framed within a city streetscape and/or involve planning a party against a backdrop of shared trauma. He is alert to affinities and allusions, both structural and thematic, as Woolf's novel 'continues to be recycled in new idioms, new contexts' (149).

Among *Mrs Dalloway*'s many descendants, Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (1998) has eclipsed all others in terms of cultural and commercial reach. Cunningham said that he wanted to write a book 'about reading a book. About how a book could matter to someone as much as a love affair' (155). *The Hours* is both a paean to Woolf and, as Hussey

observes, 'a very different dish' than that served by her (156). In 2023, the BBC Culture website described it as 'the book that changed how we see Virginia Woolf' (151). The effect was amplified by the release of an Oscar-winning film of *The Hours* in 2002. The impact on sales of both novels was dramatic: *Mrs Dalloway* was marketed as the book on which *The Hours* was based. In the US in 2002, 53,000 copies of *Mrs Dalloway* were sold; in January 2003 alone, that number rose to 56,000. Meanwhile, the complex relationships between Woolf's life, her novel, Cunningham's bestselling book and the Oscar-winning movie provided catnip to cultural commentators and an irritant to Woolf scholars sensitive to her portrayal in the film as, in the words of the *New York Times*, 'a frail, snobbish madwoman' (161). Even as the film skewed the image of Woolf among people unfamiliar with her work or biography, it also spawned a new cohort of her readers and spurred others on to return to a book laid aside years ago. The route to, or back to, *Mrs Dalloway* via *The Hours* might be circuitous, but Cunningham's inventive novel and the star power of the film affirmed the capacity of Woolf's writing to generate new readings and to speak to new readers.

This engaging and clever book by Hussey now joins what he calls the 'sprawling conversation' between the critics and readers of *Mrs Dalloway* (118). As an avowed Woolfian, he writes with warmth and empathy, but never at the expense of grappling with tricky issues, such as Woolf's depiction of Miss Kilman. Nor does he overstate his case: where evidence is slight or debatable, he says so. As a result, he achieves that rare thing: scholarship unburdened by academic obscurity. In his hands, the story of *Mrs Dalloway* over the past century is a compelling tale of literary reputations and cultural players. Most of all, Hussey brings Woolf's many thousands of common readers back into the picture. Their responses to *Mrs Dalloway* are, in most cases, unrecorded, but their presence is keenly felt as the novel travels among them. As Woolf herself wrote in the Modern Library introduction to *Mrs Dalloway* 'books belong to their readers' (118).

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Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *E*3, *E*4.
——. *MD.*