



Portrait of Clive Bell by Roger Fry, c. 1924

Apostle of modernism

Tom Williams

Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism

by Mark Hussey
Bloomsbury, £30, pp. 608

Clive Bell is the perennial supporting character in the biographies of the Bloomsbury group. The husband of Vanessa Bell, brother-in-law of Virginia Woolf and friend of Maynard Keynes and Lytton Strachey, he is often depicted as a witness to historical events rather than a participant in them, a sort of modernist Forrest Gump. At best he is a dilettante with good taste who didn't quite belong with the intellectuals of Bloomsbury; at worst he is a womaniser with Nazi sympathies who took advantage of Virginia Woolf. In this useful book Mark Hussey lets him take centre stage and delivers a far more nuanced portrait.

Bell liked to play up to his bad reputation — describing himself as 'made for... nimble sallies, champagne-drinking' — and throughout his open marriage to Vanessa he conducted numerous affairs. Intellectually, though, he could more than hold his own with the Bloomsbury group and, as Hussey tells us more than once, even if he was not invited to join Strachey and Leonard Woolf in the Apostles, he left Cambridge with a better degree. It was Strachey who went around announcing to whoever would listen that Bell was 'stupid', but this may have had more to do with his

independence. Strachey told a friend that the problem with Clive was that he was 'not under our control'.

Bell's relationship with Virginia was more complicated. Shortly after the birth of Julian, Vanessa and Clive's first son, he and Virginia were drawn together as they each competed for Vanessa's attention. What followed was a chaste, emotionally intense relationship that Virginia described as 'her affair with Clive and Nessa'. This was a particularly delicate time for Virginia, whose mental health was under great strain, but, as Hussey explains: 'Clive rarely took seriously the fragility of Virginia's psyche, encouraging her flights into mania with dangerous results and relishing the attention she gave him.' Still, Bell was an important, supportive early critic, providing useful insight. Though Virginia would later record that she thought him someone who used words with the 'desire to hurt but at the same time escape detection', she also came to miss him when they grew distant. Hussey's patient tracing of the ebbs and flows of their relationship is one of the most rewarding elements of this book.

Today, Bell's contribution to modernism is considered to be his 1914 book *Art*, which introduced the theory of 'significant form'. Hussey is surely right to argue that Bell was more instrumental than this. After all, he helped Roger Fry bring the 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' exhibition to London in 1910. Paintings by Manet, Cézanne and Van Gogh were seen by 25,000 visitors, and the tweedy British were exposed for the first time to the revolutionary art that had created such a stir in Paris a few years earlier. Virginia Woolf would later claim that this event changed human character, though it's not clear how serious she was being.

After the Great War (which, as a conscientious objector, he spent farming), Bell built on his fame as the author of *Art*, continued to bring news of European modernism, produced one of the earliest books on Proust and contributed articles to *Vanity Fair*. His ability to write about art as if it were 'as good fun as cricket', as one critic put it, brought him a wide audience, and his tastes helped define what art was and was not. That was Bell's major contribution to the 'making of modernism' — not as a creator but as an interpreter and populariser of the work of others.

This biography is a thorough assessment of Bell and, as such, devotes a fair

amount of space to the works that have, with some justification, tarnished his reputation. His 1928 book *Civilization* argues that a 'civilised' society requires a slave class to operate, and Hussey doesn't shy away from the argument's faulty logic:

He rested his enquiry upon that error from which so many of western master discourses have sprung, of excluding from the 'universal' anything that does not fit a preconceived notion of what belongs.

Hussey explains that Bell's 1938 essay 'Warmongers', which argued for peace and suggested there could be 'plenty of happiness in a Nazi world', was a logical extension of his first world war pacifism.

Throughout the book there are examples of people who didn't like Bell (Henry James thought him a 'third-rate man'), but it is clear that Hussey is not among them. This workmanlike biography may be a little old-fashioned, but it is generous to its subject, refuting accusations of dilettantism whilst admitting his flaws and reminding us how much Bell contributed to British modernism.

Wolves in sheep's clothing

Mika Ross-Southall

Chauvo-Feminism: On Sex, Power and #MeToo

by Sam Mills
Indigo Press, £7.99, pp. 144

Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent

by Katherine Angel
Verso, £10.99, pp. 160

The #MeToo movement isn't all it seems. More than three years after countless sexual abuse allegations shook the world, the relationship between men and women has mutated into something 'subtle and insidious', writes Sam Mills. Her new book — an intriguing blend of feminist theory, memoir, psychological sleuthing and self-help — investigates the rise of what she calls 'chauvo-feminists': men who champion women's rights in public to appear woke while in private their 'shadowy doppelgänger' is misogynistic. 'If sexual harassment is not just about desire but about power,' Mills says, then 'the means will no longer be a hand on a knee as a way of implying threat'.

Threaded throughout the essay is Mills's own encounter with a chauvo-feminist named 'R', a highly regarded British academic. She meets him at a party and they flirt every day over email for a month. During their first date, R shows her the online profile of the previous woman he was seeing and says he broke it off because she want-