

FRANCES SPALDING

Aesthete of Gordon Square

Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism

By Mark Hussey
(Bloomsbury 600pp £30)



Tangled lives: Bell (second left) looks on as Vanessa cuts Lytton Strachey's hair

The Bloomsbury industry is not as hectic as it once was, but it continues every now and then to deliver a really interesting book. This one offers a missing piece in the familiar Bloomsbury jigsaw. Today it can be assumed that readers do not need to be told that Vanessa Bell was Virginia Woolf's sister or that Duncan Grant was a painter and the cousin of Lytton Strachey. But with another member of this group, Clive Bell, many may still feel a little uncertain as to who he was and what he did. Before this biography appeared, there was very little readily available information on his life or work. Yet this was the man who occupied a uniquely privileged position within the Bloomsbury Group, having the guts and determination to marry one of the two famous sisters and to flirt outrageously with the other, while also offering her tutorials on how to write a novel.

Bell's central position within the Bloomsbury Group is additionally surprising given how much, as a young man, he aroused distaste. The young Leonard Woolf,

while writing a *roman à clef*, based a character on Bell: he tosses around his 'fat, round little body and his little, round, fat mind'. Strachey, a gifted hyperbolist, described him at one point as a 'corpse puffed up with worms and gases', while Henry James loathed him at first sight. James had a deep love of Vanessa and Virginia's parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen, especially the latter, and kept in touch with their offspring after their deaths. He paid a visit to Vanessa on the eve of her marriage to Bell to give her an antique silver box. Immediately afterwards, he wrote a letter to a friend referring to Bell as a 'quite dreadful-looking little stoop-shouldered, long-haired, third-rate' man. He compared him unfavourably with Vanessa's younger brother, 'poor, dear, clear, tall, shy, superior Thoby', who had recently died of typhoid. James intended to maintain contact with Vanessa, but he found Clive's presence at 46 Gordon Square, where the Bells began married life, intolerable.

Yet Bell charmed many with his warmth, interest in life and depth of feeling.

Desmond MacCarthy, meeting him by chance on a train to Cambridge in 1901, was impressed by the 'careless opulence' with which he wore, 'flung open', a dark fur coat with a deep astrakhan collar. (The coat, like much else in his life, was made possible by coalmines in South Wales, his father being a director of a firm that owned a string of them.) After only ten minutes of Bell's ebullient talk, MacCarthy's gloom was lifted and he experienced, as did many others, a heightened sense of the pleasures of life. 'I could see in imagination the enormous rich hunk he was about to cut from the cake of life,' MacCarthy recalled. Bell also went every day to Thoby's sickroom during his final days. Having been Thoby's closest friend at Cambridge, this, ultimately, was Clive's passport into Bloomsbury.

Mark Hussey is a professor of English at Pace University in New York, with a distinguished track record for his contribution to Virginia Woolf studies. He moves around the complex history of the Bloomsbury Group with near-faultless command. He is also a suave and sophisticated historian, able to link Bell's life very effectively with the historical moment, though he quotes a little too much in the early part of this book from the extensive archives available to Bloomsbury scholars, throwing the reader back and forth between the views of various individuals, partly in order to convey their fierce criticism of each other.

The publication of *Art* in 1914 made Bell's reputation. Owing to his friendship with Roger Fry, he had been caught up in the furore aroused by Fry's two post-impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912. Fry developed a set of ideas to justify the shift in aesthetic appreciation required by this art. Bell took up Fry's ideas and reformulated them in more polemical terms. His book was widely read and made fashionable the term 'significant form', meaning that which gives rise to aesthetic experience. After the First World War, Bell regularly visited Paris, where he enjoyed a frantic life and revelled in the recognition given him by

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its art world. Here, Hussey deals as confidently and wittily with the art world as he does with Bell's love life. Less familiar is Bell's later career as an art writer, to which Hussey draws our attention. Although most of his books and essays for exhibition catalogues affirm his love of French art, he also wrote on pacifism and on civilisation, as well as the first monograph published in this country on Proust. His writing gained him a wide circle of friends and connections and earned him a place on the arts advisory committee of the British Council, membership of the Légion d'honneur and an invitation to undertake lecture tours in America. He was not, he insisted, a scholar but more accurately a 'sciolist'.

A sacred part of each day was dedicated to reading. Even though his marriage with Vanessa had segued into a mutually affectionate friendship, he continued to enjoy life at Charleston, the Sussex farmhouse to which Vanessa attracted a shifting set of family and friends. Allowances for the children from Bell's parents helped fund this arrangement. He also proved to be a good father to his two sons, Julian and Quentin, and he extended without fuss his paternal role to Vanessa's third child, Angelica, even though Grant was her father. Bell found that Charleston was the best place to write, and after the onset of the Second World War grounded him there, he occupied four of the best rooms in the house, having not only a large study but also his own personal library.

His first introduction to Proust, in 1919, had come through Mary Hutchinson, the wife of a barrister. She dressed elegantly, in a modern style, had literary interests and was a friend of T S Eliot. At first Vanessa assumed Mary would merely be another of Clive's amorous adventures. He had a knack for making women feel alive and cherished. But his affair with Mary, secret at first, developed into a long-term relationship – that is until Mary tired of the romantic sentimentality that accompanied Clive's sexual prowess. Many of his later affairs were a form of distraction from the loss of Mary, who remained the love of his life, even when she offered only friendship in return. The photographs in this book hint at the loneliness that hung over him, however much he continued to lunch at the Ivy or with Picasso in the south of France.