

# The Don Juan of Bloomsbury

## Laura Freeman admires an amusing and urbane biography of Clive Bell, 'civilised loafer', unlikely lothario and lively art critic

Clive Bell is to Bloomsbury as Lady Whistledown is to *Bridgerton*. In Julia Quinn's novels and in the Netflix series *Lady W* writes a scandal sheet on the doings of the ton. A Bloomsbury biographer can similarly depend on Bell's letters for infighting, intrigue and gossip. He is too good not to quote. Yet he has remained a figure on the edges. In *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism* Mark Hussey, a distinguished professor of English at Pace University in New York, makes him the belle, indeed Bell, of the ball.

This is the first biography of Bell and, like its subject, it is amusing, charming, stimulating, urbane. It is a bit on the plump side, but then so was Bell. As Hussey writes: "After the war: buttons burst, rolls of fat protruded from his collar." This book could be a roll or two slimmer, but it is a most sustaining read.

Virginia Woolf reported Bell saying that "life grows steadily more and more enchanting the fatter one gets". It is this appetite — for life, for art, for a brace of partridges and snipe — that makes Bell such happy company. "I could see in imagination," Desmond MacCarthy wrote the first time he met Bell as a young man just turned 20, "the enormous rich hunk he was about to cut from the cake of life." *Old Friends* was the title Bell gave to a collection of pen portraits of his set. He feels like one by the end of the book.

So, as they say in the box sets, "Previously on Bloomsbury..." Arthur Clive Heward Bell was born in 1881 to a huntin', shootin' and beaglin' family who had made their money in coal. The family home was decorated with sporting trophies and photos of ponies and dogs. The head of a moose

overlooked the great hall. Household reading included *The Field*, *Live Stock Journal* and *Punch*. An unpromising start for a future aesthete.

At 17 Bell was seduced by Annie Raven-Hill, a married neighbour of his parents (she was 35), who had watched him play tennis and admired his auburn curls. At 18 he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge ("Your language," thought one of his history examiners, "runs horrid riot"), where he met Thoby Stephen, Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf. At the Trinity ball he was introduced to Thoby's sisters, Vanessa and Virginia. He married Vanessa in 1907 and maintained a flirtatious antagonistic correspondence with Virginia.

Clive and Vanessa had two sons, Julian and Quentin, and Vanessa had a daughter, Angelica, with the painter Duncan Grant. Clive acknowledged Angelica as his own. Angelica went on to marry David Garnett, a former lover of Duncan. (Still with me?) Clive and Vanessa remained married, although Clive had girlfriends and lovers. Virginia shuddered when her brother-in-law crowed about being "the Don Juan of Bloomsbury". Bell's maitresse-en-titre was for many years Mary Hutchinson, wife of the barrister St John Hutchinson and mother of Jeremy "Case Histories" Hutchinson.

Bell revolted against Victorian "cant" and dated moral codes. He discovered Paris, cafés and Picasso, made hay in Montparnasse (home of the "scrag end of Impressionism") and later Montmartre, where the modern guard gathered. He became a reviewer for the *TLS* and *The Athenaeum*, and published his first book, *Art*, in 1914.

During the First World War he was a conscientious objector and worked, unconvincingly, the land around Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor. While felling trees with Aldous Huxley he sliced off the toe of his boot with an axe.

Bell quarrelled with Strachey about Bloomsbury's snobbery. "You are painfully alive to the fact that I was trained outside the mystic circle of metropolitan culture wherein alone a young man may hope to acquire the distinguished manner. My manners you find florid and vulgar, over empathic and underbred, whence you infer — wrongly as I think — that my appreciations are more or less blunt and that I am deficient in sensitiveness to the finer shades of thought and feeling."

Yet it is precisely Bell's "Cliviness" (Strachey's word) that makes him such an unstuffy and rousing critic. Hussey describes Bell's approach as a mixture of "iconoclasm and insouciance".

Bell is gleefully readable. He attacks the rich collectors who want only "pretty things for the boudoir, handsome ones for the hall, and something jolly for the smoking-room". The Royal Academy is an "almshouse destined to become a cemetery". He writes of the plight of the sensitive young man compelled to live "a truculent, shame-faced misfit, with *John Bull* under his nose and *Punch* round the corner, till, at some public school, a course of compulsory games and the Arnold tradition either breaks his spirit or makes him a rebel for life." If you fancy a pleasurable few hours order a second-hand copy of Bell's *Civilization*. "Critics," Bell insisted, "exist not for artists but for the public."

Bell was no looker (Henry James called

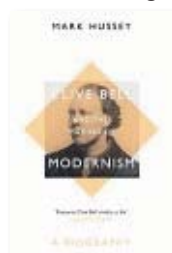


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him a “quite dreadful-looking little stoop-shouldered, long-haired, third-rate” man), but he was a marvellous talker. A marvellous lover too, by the sound of it. “One would not say Clive was handsome,” wrote Bertha Penrose, who had an affair with him when she was 28 and he was 44, “nor classically proportioned, but his physical ways with one were thrilling. He knew exactly how and when to kiss me, when and how to stroke, to coax, to light one’s cigarette, to tumble or ruffle one.” Gosh.

In *Who’s Who* Bell gave his profession as “highly civilised loafer”. He was the model for Bacchus in the National Gallery’s mosaic. At 63 he was still dancing at the Gargoyle Club, sharing the floor with Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, somewhat the odd one out in his winged collar and black tie. He died aged 83 in 1964 and minded the post-Second World War “loss of elegance... the suppressing of the first rate”. “Do you realise,” he railed, “that we live at best by BBC standards?”

In the Fifties the New York art critic Aline Louchheim took Bell to the Whitney Museum to see what he would make of contemporary American painting. “Some people,” she wrote, “skirt the edges of galleries, examining each work cautiously, with the attentive air of a furniture buyer in a merchandise showroom.” Bell swooped on paintings he admired “with the decisiveness of a seagull”, certain of his catch. It makes you long to be taken round a gallery by Bell. This book is the next best thing.



**Clive Bell and  
the Making of  
Modernism**

**Δ Biography  
by Mark Hussey**

**Bloomsbury,  
592pp; £30**

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**THE CHOP** Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant and another look on as Vanessa Bell cuts Lytton Strachey's hair. Below: a portrait of Bell by Fry