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'Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism' Review: Bloomsbury's Forgotten Man

The art critic, pacifist and brother-in-law of Virginia Woolf has been neglected in favor of his contemporaries.



Painting of Clive Bell and Duncan Grant by Vanessa Bell (undated).

PHOTO: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES; ESTATE OF VANESSA BELL 2022 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / DACS, LONDON

By Donna Rifkind

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The British writer Clive Bell (1881-1964) was nobody's idea of a leading man. Henry James described him as a "quite dreadful-looking little stoop-shouldered, long-haired, third-rate" person. Bell's own brother-in-law, Leonard Woolf, portrayed him in a 1914 novel as having a "little, round, fat mind," while Lytton Strachey raised an eyebrow at the "layer of stupidity" in Bell's character, "which runs transversely through all the other layers."

The keenly sociable Bell sought acceptance in many circles, only to drift awkwardly between or outside them. He was an Englishman in the Parisian art world of the early 20th century, where he became an interpreter of Post-Impressionist painting for scandalized British museumgoers. He was an original member of the loose affiliation of London writers and artists that came to be known as Bloomsbury, only to rank consistently below its more famous figures, among them John Maynard Keynes and E.M. Forster. He was a part-time guest in his own marriage, and a chronic knocker on the doors of such celebrities as Pablo Picasso and Jean Cocteau. In the ever-growing heaps of books about the Bloomsbury group, he's dismissed as an embarrassment: blustery, sybaritic and vain.

Does Bell deserve this shabby treatment? Mark Hussey, a professor of English at Pace University, has written a scrupulous new biography that reassesses Bell's character and achievements. Bell wrote many books, including an appreciation of Proust, several volumes of poetry, and a number of influential appraisals of modern art. He wrote lots of lively art criticism for British and American magazines, spoke perfectly idiomatic French and invented rhyming footnotes for the text of his full-length Byronic poem, "The Legend of Monte Della Sibilla." As embarrassing as his swagger may have seemed, Bell's accomplishments were real.

From an early age Clive Bell was at odds with his father, who had amassed a fortune in coal mines and kept himself busy impersonating a country squire in an overwrought Wiltshire mansion hung with hunting trophies. Bell's parents and three siblings placed

little value on the life of the mind, whereas he was an aesthete by the time he went to public school in 1895, with as much fondness for poetry as he had for horses. “No beings were ever so completely pleased with themselves,” he once wrote to a friend about his family. “They feel that they have the run of God’s cupboard, and they help themselves judiciously to all that’s not worth having.”

When Bell went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1899, he fell in with a crowd of self-perceived radical thinkers who were just as eager as he was to discard the Victorian complacencies of their parents; among them were Strachey, Keynes, Thoby Stephen and Leonard Woolf. Yet Bell maintained his boyhood love for hunting and spent his time, according to his friend Desmond MacCarthy, “half with the rich sporting-set, and half with the intellectuals.” He was excluded from the elite debating society called the Apostles to which Woolf and Strachey were elected, though he had a better academic record than either of them.

Upon leaving Cambridge, Bell went to Paris, where he became transfixed by the simmering innovations in French painting that would soon erupt into an artistic revolution. He also kept up with his Cambridge friends, some of whom had taken up communal residence in London’s Bloomsbury district. In 1906 Thoby Stephen, to whom Bell was particularly close, contracted typhoid while on a holiday in Greece. Thoby’s subsequent death at age 26 was a reverberating shock, pulling his loved ones defensively together. His sister Vanessa Stephen, a promising painter, accepted Clive Bell’s marriage proposal two days after Thoby’s death, having previously rejected him several times. They wed in England the following year, quickly welcoming two sons in 1908 and 1910. Bell also drew close to another of Thoby’s siblings, Virginia, conducting a brief but intense emotional affair with her and encouraging her early fiction writing. Virginia herself would marry another close friend of Thoby’s, Leonard Woolf, in 1912.

Traditional marriage was one of the cornerstones of Victorian culture that the Bloomsbury set was most eager to destroy. “We all want to have and not to have

husbands and wives,” declared Keynes. From the time of World War I—which Bell, a lifelong pacifist, spent farming in Sussex—Vanessa Bell lived mostly with Duncan Grant, a fellow painter and the father of her daughter Angelica, who was born in 1918. Yet she remained officially married to Bell and continued to oversee his domestic requirements in a thousand wifely ways. Bell had lengthy relationships with other women, but was always a fervent champion of Vanessa’s and Grant’s achievements as painters. He supported Angelica, financially and emotionally, as if she were his own daughter (Vanessa told her the truth about her biological father when she turned 18).

Bell stumbled into a career as a proselytizer for modernism in 1910 when he agreed to help Roger Fry, the painter and authority on Italian art who joined the Bloomsbury group that year, in organizing an exhibition of recent French painting in London. “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” raised a storm of outrage when Britons took their first look at works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat and van Gogh—works so strange that many thought the show was a hoax. Explaining the new movement in a 1914 book called “Art,” Bell used a shorthand phrase, “significant form,” to advance the idea that a painting should evoke emotion in the viewer rather than seeking merely to imitate life.

As Bell refined his ideas about apprehending art, his entertaining prose style won him assignments in such magazines as the *Athenaeum* in England and *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and the *New Republic* in America. He was both authoritative and self-deprecating, stating his occupation in the British “Who’s Who” as “highly civilised loafer” and quipping in 1922 that the practice of art history too often involved the “half-dead drearily writing about the wholly dead.” Not everyone was charmed. Rebecca West dismissed Bell’s 1931 book “An Account of French Painting” this way: “He hails every feature of French life and history with a cheer and a wave of the concertina as if it were one more village passed on the happy highway.”

Backlash follows innovation as dusk follows dawn, and Bell’s moment of relevance was no exception. For many cultural commentators “Bloomsbury” quickly became (and

remains today) a lazy abbreviation for snobbery and cliquishness. Bell wrote in his 1956 memoir “Old Friends” that “few people, so far as I can make out, understand by it anything more precise than ‘the sort of thing we all dislike.’ ” More gradually, modernism lost its power to shock. As he himself grew older, Bell took injections from beauty specialists to treat his baldness and used cocaine to increase his stamina at nightclubs, where, he rather sadly told Vanessa, “everyone congratulates me on looking young.”

As Mr. Hussey observes in an astute summary of Bell’s career as a critic, Bell was not a scholar, but he most certainly was not a dilettante. Instead he sat somewhere astride, occupying an undervalued position as a stylish enthusiast. In “Old Friends,” Bell expressed his admiration for writers “who can make a coterie of all the world.” It was a poignant statement from a man who had hoped for a fuller embrace in every coterie he encountered.

—Ms. Rifkind is the author of “The Sun and Her Stars: Salka Viertel and Hitler’s Exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood.”

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