
Chapter 1

Life

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It is quite a responsibility to relate even the bare facts of Virginia Woolf's life, given the sometimes explosively diverging accounts of it in circulation. There are numerous published biographies of Woolf, as well as various collective Bloomsbury ones, a number of which will be briefly considered in Chapter Two. And sketches and snippets concerning Woolf's life crop up in all sorts of places, from Hollywood films to fashion magazine spreads. Leaving aside for the moment such fleeting, and often wholly misleading, cultural appropriations of Woolf's life and persona, each serious biography presents Woolf in a different light, and some offer quite differing views of everything from her writing habits to her relationships, her sexuality, her illness and her suicide. The daughter of the literary biographer Leslie Stephen, and close friend of the innovative biographer of the Victorians, Lytton Strachey, Woolf herself put forward, in 'The New Biography' (1927) (reviewing work by another biographer acquaintance, Harold Nicolson), her own memorable theory of biography, encapsulated in her phrase 'granite and rainbow'. 'Truth' she envisions 'as something of granite-like solidity', and 'personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility', and 'the aim of biography', she proposes, 'is to weld these two into one seamless whole' (*E4* 473). The following short biographical account of Woolf will attempt to keep to the basic granite-like facts that Woolf novices need to know, while also occasionally attending in brief to the more elusive, but equally relevant, matter of rainbow-like personality.

Woolf did not publish – or indeed, write – a formal autobiography, but she did write, for her own circle of Bloomsbury intimates, a number of brief memoirs, reminiscences and autobiographical sketches, most of which have been published posthumously. Her letters, diaries and journals have also been

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published (in twelve volumes in all), and constitute a rich body of autobiographical writing. Although the diaries and letters are often plundered (as they will be below), for ‘the insights they afford into Woolf’s writing, or . . . into Woolf herself’, or, indeed, into the many notable contemporaries she knew, corresponded with and encountered, they are works also to be ‘read in their own right’.¹ In her most sustained document of reminiscence, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, written between the summer of 1939 and the winter of 1940, Woolf considers ‘the memoir writer’s difficulties’, concluding that ‘one of the reasons why . . . so many are failures’ is that they ‘leave out the person to whom things happened’. Memoir writers often describe what happened, she observes, ‘but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened’ (*MOB* 73). For this reason she begins her own memoir without factual preamble, but with two of her earliest ‘colour-and-sound memories’ of childhood. The first is the sight of the pattern of ‘purple and red and blue’ flowers on her mother’s black dress as she sat on her knee while they travelled ‘either in a train or in an omnibus’. The second, ‘most important’, and – for her – foundational, memory is of hearing from her bed ‘waves breaking . . . over the beach’ at St Ives, and hearing at the same time her window blind ‘draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out’. She remembers this experience of ‘the waves and the acorn on the blind’ producing ‘the purest ecstasy I can conceive’, and she is fond of describing it to herself, she confesses, as ‘the feeling . . . of lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow’ (*MOB* 73–4).

This surreal, yet tender, self-portrait of the writer as a young sensate grape seed is a brilliant introduction because it encourages us momentarily to clear our mind of whatever knowledge or preconceptions about Woolf we may bring to our reading of her life and her works. It encourages us to identify with the primary sensations of rhythmic sound and colour of early infancy, and to compare our own such personal, and distinct, ‘colour-and-sound memories’ with hers. A dialogue has begun between Woolf’s writing and her reader. ‘If life has a base that it stands upon,’ Woolf writes, ‘if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory’ (*MOB* 73). On what memory does your bowl stand? ‘A Sketch of the Past’ connects such memories to the material facts of Woolf’s life, too. She questions how these subjective moments themselves stand on the supposedly more tangible fabric of historical, political, social and familial experience. Woolf acknowledges the granite-like facts that she ‘was born into a large connection, born . . . of well-to-do parents, born into a very communicative, literate, letter writing, visiting, articulate, late nineteenth century world’; but she does not know, she says, ‘how much of this, or what part of

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this, made me feel what I felt in the nursery at St Ives. I do not know how far I differ from other people' (*MOB* 73). Woolf urges us to consider what experiences are formative for the individual, and for the writer; and what experiences may be common to us all.

Towards the close of her memoir, she records glimpses of darker historical events unfolding as she writes and reflects on her primal childhood moments: 'Yesterday (18 August 1940) five German raiders passed so close over Monks House that they brushed the tree at the gate. But being alive today, and having a waste hour on my hands – for I am writing fiction; and cannot write after twelve – I will go on with this loose story' (*MOB* 137). Woolf wrote her final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), and her final memoir, then, under a sky darkened by warfare; and under such a sky her writing constitutes, for her then and us now, a life-affirming act. Whatever other events and facts you discover about Woolf's life, whatever your response to her work, her first vital memories become a powerful touchstone. Whatever opinion you come to form of her life or of her writing, bear in mind that she remembers what it was like to sit on her mother's knee and see the colours of her dress, what it was like to lie in bed and hear waves and a window blind moving, the blissful feeling of lying at the centre of a luminous yellow grape. She knows what it is to remember and record such moments during the darkest of times. Her genius lies in seeing that this is the most important kind of communication to make.

1882–1909

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882, at 22 Hyde Park Gate, in Kensington, London. She was indeed 'born into a large connection'. Her father was the distinguished Victorian author, critic and Alpinist, Sir Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), editor of the *Cornhill Magazine* (1871–82), of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1882–90) and of the *Alpine Journal* (1868–72), who counted Thomas Hardy, Henry James and George Meredith among his friends. Leslie Stephen came from a long line of Puritan philanthropists, known as the Clapham Sect. His father, and Woolf's grandfather, was Sir James Stephen (1789–1859), Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University and noted Counsel to the Colonial Office and Board of Trade, who framed the bill to abolish slavery in 1833. Leslie Stephen was educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he became a deacon in 1855 and then parson (in the Church of England) in 1859. By 1862 he had lost his religious faith and so resigned his post as a tutor at

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Trinity Hall; he left Cambridge in 1864. He made a formative journey to America in 1863 and witnessed at first hand the turmoil of the Civil War. He was on the side of the Unionists and greatly admired Lincoln. He married Minnie, the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray, in 1867, and their daughter Laura was born in 1870. Minnie died in 1875. Three years after her death, Stephen married Woolf's mother.

Her mother was Julia Prinsep Stephen (1846–95), who was born Julia Prinsep Jackson, in India, the daughter of John and Maria Jackson. Her maternal grandmother, and Woolf's great-grandmother and namesake, was Adeline (1793–1845), daughter of Antoine Chevalier de L'Etang and Thérèse Blin Grincourt, who married James Pattle (1775–1845) of the Bengal Civil Service; this marriage was one of Woolf's 'favourite pieces of family history' (VWL 88). Julia Jackson, who returned with her mother to England in 1848, became a renowned beauty, admired and painted by Edward Burne-Jones and G. F. Watts in her youth, and photographed by her esteemed maternal aunt Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–97). The artists William Holman-Hunt and Thomas Woolner were among her disappointed suitors when she married, in 1867, Herbert Duckworth (1833–70) with whom she had three children, George (1868–1934), Stella (1869–97) and Gerald (1870–1937). She was widowed after three years shortly before the birth of her third child. Leslie Stephen was forty-six when he married Julia Duckworth in 1878. She was thirty-two. He had been a widower for three years, she a widow for eight. Leslie brought one child, Julia three, to their marriage. Virginia was the third of four children born to them. The eldest, Vanessa (1879–1961; later, Bell) became an important avant-garde visual artist; the second, Thoby (1880–1906) died tragically young; and the youngest, Adrian (1883–1948), became a psychoanalyst and prominent pacifist. Virginia's (secular) godfather was the distinguished American poet and critic James Russell Lowell (1819–91), whom Leslie Stephen met in America, and who became ambassador to the Court of St James in the 1880s, during which time he became an intimate of the Stephen household. Indeed, many of the period's most notable intellectuals, artists and writers were visitors to the Stephen household.

That household, in 22 Hyde Park Gate, London (formerly the Duckworth home), crammed into its narrow and gloomy confines, then, numerous children and several servants. But it transferred every summer, for the first ten years of Woolf's childhood, to Talland House, Cornwall, the scene of her childhood idylls. It was in this house that she enjoyed her formative, blissful, experience of hearing waves and a window blind moving. These childhood summers 'permeated' her life, she claims, 'how much so I could never explain' (D2 103). In both locations the Stephen household was dominated

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by the scholarly and critical activities of Leslie Stephen. Woolf drew on her memories of her holidays in Cornwall for *To the Lighthouse*, which was conceived in part as an elegy on her parents. Her father was a vigorous walker and an Alpinist of some renown, a member of the Alpine Club and editor of the *Alpine Journal* from 1868 to 1872; he was the first person to climb the Schreckhorn in the Alps and he wrote on Alpine pleasures in *The Playground of Europe* (1871). By the time he married Julia Duckworth in 1878, however, a more sedentary Leslie Stephen was the established editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, from which he later resigned to take up the editorship of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1882, the year of Woolf's birth. Stephen laboured on this monumental Victorian enterprise until 1990, editing single-handed the first twenty-six volumes and writing well over 300 biographical entries. He also published numerous volumes of criticism, the most important of which were on eighteenth-century thought and literature.

Meanwhile, the Stephen children enjoyed inventing nightly stories between themselves and also produced a weekly paper, *The Hyde Park Gate News*, for the entertainment of their parents.² Woolf recalls awaiting her mother's response:

How excited I used to be when 'The Hyde Park Gate News' was laid on her plate on Monday morning, and she liked something I had written! Never shall I forget my extremity of pleasure – it was like being a violin and being played upon – when I found that she had sent a story of mine to Madge Symonds; it was so imaginative, she said; it was about souls flying round and choosing bodies to be born into. (*MOB* 95)

But there were darker undercurrents in this idyllic life. In 1891 Laura (1870–1945), Woolf's half-sister from her father's first marriage, was considered slow and disturbed enough to merit permanent consignment to an asylum. Woolf's childhood and adolescence were marred by sexual abuse at the hands of her half-brothers from her mother's first marriage, especially George, a matter of incendiary concern for some biographers. Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia and Adrian, however, enjoyed among themselves a close-knit and happy childhood. Virginia and Vanessa were not schooled like their brothers, but educated at home. Both parents contributed to Virginia's education, but it was her father who shaped her intellectual foundations, encouraging her to roam freely, from an early age, through his extensive library, and later giving her daily supervision in reading, writing and translation (of Greek and Latin).

It was her mother, however, who was, as Woolf later recalled, 'in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood . . . the creator of

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that crowded merry world . . . there it always was, the common life of the family, very merry, very stirring, crowded with people; and she was the centre' (*MOB* 75). Julia Stephen did not seem to exist as a separate person in her own right, but rather she became the personification of the Stephen household life. 'She was the whole thing; Talland House was full of her; Hyde Park Gate was full of her,' Woolf later recalled, realising that this 'general' existence explained 'why it was that it was impossible for her to leave a very private and particular impression upon a child. She was keeping what I call in my shorthand the panoply of life – that which we all lived in common — in being' (*MOB*). When her mother died in May 1895, Virginia, at the age of thirteen, suffered her first breakdown, and the family endured a deeply unhappy period of mourning. After this tragic loss, Leslie Stephen embarked on the compilation of a family memoir of Julia, which became known as the 'Mausoleum Book'. The brunt of Leslie Stephen's gloomy domestic demands, and of his need for solace, was born by Stella, his step-daughter, who also became a much-appreciated maternal figure to the Stephen children. 'It was Stella who lifted the canopy again,' Woolf recalls: 'A little light crept in' (*MOB* 95).

It was in January 1897 that she began her first diary. The entry for 24 February begins typically: 'Nessa went to her drawing. Father and I went out for our walk after breakfast.'³ Vanessa went to art classes while Virginia was tutored by their father. She records a daily life packed with reading under her father's guidance, his tuition often preceded by a morning walk together; and she gives lively accounts of excursions into London on shopping errands, charitable visits and social calls; also of various private lessons, of her father's reading Walter Scott, William Wordsworth and many other writers to them, and of Stella's companionship and administration of household affairs. It was difficult for Stella to extricate herself from her stepfather's household when she married Jack Hills in April 1897, and after her marriage she lived with her husband in a house in the same street so as to continue with her attentions. But this happy interlude was cut short by her sudden death, while pregnant, in July 1897. This second loss was devastating: 'the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me; tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis' (*MOB* 124). Her journal entries for the hot summer that followed are brief and telegraphic, but as well as the gloom and emotional turbulence of grief, they record the Stephen family pleasures of reading, playing cricket and moth-hunting.

After Stella's death, Leslie Stephen 'was quite prepared to take Vanessa for his next victim', as Virginia recalls in her 1904 memoir of her sister. Vanessa

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took the brunt of their father's monstrous and gloomy rages with memorable stoicism: 'she stood before him like a stone' (*MOB* 64). His children took him to be 'a tyrant of inconceivable selfishness, who had replaced the beauty and merriment of the dead with ugliness and gloom' (*MOB* 65). Woolf concedes that 'we were bitter, harsh and to a great extent, unjust', but that nevertheless 'even now it seems to me that there was some truth in our complaint' (*MOB* 65). Later, as well as the 'tyrant father', Woolf was able to recall with some readerly, if not filial, affection the 'writer father', and she records his continuing influence on her reading: 'I always read *Hours in a Library* by way of filling out my ideas . . . and always find something to fill out; to correct; to stiffen my fluid vision.' Reading her father's published works, she finds not a 'subtle' nor an 'imaginative mind' but a 'strong' and 'conventional' one: 'I get a sense of Leslie Stephen, the muscular agnostic; cheery, hearty; always cracking up sense and manliness; and crying down sentiment and vagueness' (*MOB* 127). It is important to recognise Woolf's acknowledgement of her father's dually formative influence. The domestic dictator was also an intellectual who powerfully shaped her developing intellect, even if, at times, antithetically so: 'just as a dog takes a bite of grass, I take a bite of him medicinally' (*MOB* 128).

By the close of the nineteenth century her studies with her father were being supplemented by tuition in the classics from Dr Warr of King's College, Kensington, and from Clara Pater, sister of the English essayist and critic Walter Pater (1839–94). Woolf was very fond of Clara and an exchange between them later became the basis for her short story 'Moments of Being: Slater's Pins Have No Points' (1928). Thoby boarded at Clifton College, Bristol, Adrian was a dayboy at Westminster School, and Vanessa attended Cope's School of Art. Thoby, and later Adrian, eventually went to Trinity College, Cambridge, and Vanessa undertook training in the visual arts (attending the Slade School of Fine Art for a while). From 1902 Virginia's tuition in classics passed from Clara Pater to the very capable Janet Case, one of the first graduates from Girton College, Cambridge, and a committed feminist. The sisters visited Cambridge a number of times to meet Thoby, whose friends there included Clive Bell (1881–1964), Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), Leonard Woolf (1880–1969) and Saxon Sydney-Turner.

Leslie Stephen died in 1904. In that year his children retreated to Wales for a period and then travelled in Italy. Vanessa and Virginia went on to Paris, where they met up with Clive Bell. On returning to London, Virginia suffered a severe, suicidal breakdown. But several positive changes also occurred. During her sister's convalescence Vanessa moved the Stephen household to 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, a move that ushered in a new period of

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freedom and independence, particularly for the sisters. They relished creating a new domestic interior that replaced the dark and intricately patterned Morris wallpapers of Hyde Park Gate's gloomy confines with 'washes of plain distemper' and fresh white and green chintzes. Domestic practices were revolutionised, too. Woolf recalls, in her memoir of 'Old Bloomsbury' (c.1922), their creation of an environment in which to paint and to write rather than to worry about bourgeois tea-table conventions: 'Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial' (*MOB* 201).

In that same year she assisted F. W. Maitland with a biography of her father, and her first (anonymous) review appeared in the *Guardian*. In 1905 she began work as a teacher of literature at Morley College in South London, and travelled to Portugal. Thoby began hosting 'Thursday Evenings' in the Bloomsbury house, and Vanessa founded the Friday Club, a society in which young, and at first, female, artists could meet, debate and exhibit work. As well as Virginia, Vanessa and Adrian, in the years that followed core Bloomsbury members were to include the high-ranking civil servant Saxon Sydney-Turner, the critic Lytton Strachey, the art critics Roger Fry (1866–1934) and Clive Bell, Desmond (1877–1952) and Molly MacCarthy, the artist Duncan Grant (1885–1978), the economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), the novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970) and the political journalist and publisher Leonard Woolf, plus James and Alix Strachey, Marjorie Strachey, Karin Stephen (Adrian's wife), and the society hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell.

The Bloomsbury Group has been characterised as a liberal, pacifist, and at times libertine, intellectual enclave of Cambridge-based privilege. The Cambridge men of the group (Bell, Forster, Fry, Keynes, Strachey, Sydney-Turner) were members of the elite and secret society of Cambridge Apostles. Woolf's aesthetic understanding, and broader philosophy, were in part shaped by, and at first primarily interpreted in terms of, (male) Bloomsbury's dominant aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations, rooted in the work of G. E. Moore (a central influence on the Apostles), and culminating in Fry's and Clive Bell's differing brands of pioneering aesthetic formalism. 'The main things which Moore instilled deep into our minds and characters,' Leonard Woolf recalls, 'were his peculiar passion for truth, for clarity and common sense, and a passionate belief in certain values.'⁴ Increasing awareness of Woolf's feminism, however, and of the influence on her work of other women artists, writers and thinkers has meant that these Moorean and male points of reference, though of importance, are no longer considered adequate

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in approaching Woolf's work, and her intellectual development under the tutelage of women, together with her involvement with feminist thinkers and activists, is also now acknowledged.

After an ill-fated family visit to Greece in 1906, Thoby died of typhoid, at the age of twenty-six. Vanessa married Clive Bell in 1907. Leaving the newlyweds to Gordon Square, Virginia moved with Adrian to 29 Fitzroy Square, where they continued hosting 'Thursday Evenings'. She presided as hostess over meetings that were as often bawdy and childish as erudite and intellectually rarefied. 'If you could say what you liked about art, sex or religion,' her sister recalls, 'you could also talk freely and very likely dully about the ordinary doings of daily life.'⁵ Bloomsbury life was defined by the freedom to talk, without self-consciousness, about anything at all, a reaction in part to the 'darkness and silence' of Hyde Park Gate where communication was often strained, and the overbearing Leslie Stephen 'could only be spoken to through a tube and if it was shy work doing this in front of the family,' Vanessa recalls, 'it was worse with strangers there. Then his sighs and groans needed accounting for . . . and even when accounted for did not lead to cheerfulness.'⁶ Compare and contrast this scene with the infamous moment, in Fitzroy Square, when Lytton Strachey, 'point[ing] his finger at a stain on Vanessa's white dress,' enquired: 'Semen?' And 'with that one word,' Woolf recalls, 'all the barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips' (*MOB* 213). The licentious behaviour of Vanessa and Maynard Keynes together on a settee became the stuff of Bloomsbury legend, too. Virginia and Adrian began to have German lessons in Fitzroy Square, and it was there that in 1907, Woolf began to write 'Melymbrosia,' her first novel, which was later published as *The Voyage Out* (1915).

If the word 'bugger' and her male homosexual friends seemed to dominate the conversation of Woolf's circle, it is also the case that she was building a reputation for herself as an incorrigible flirt with other women. 'I am so susceptible to female charms,' she wrote to Violet Dickinson in 1903, 'in fact I offered my blistered heart to one in Paris, if not two' (*L1* 69–70). Dickinson, initially a friend of Stella Duckworth's, became very close to Woolf, who wrote to her in an erotic vein of the 'astonishing . . . depths – hot volcano depths – your finger has stirred in Sparrow – hitherto entirely quiescent' (*L1* 85). She presented Dickinson with a mock biography of Dickinson and her close friend Lady Robert ('Nellie') Cecil, 'Friendships Gallery' (1907), which she typed in violet ink and bound in violet leather.⁷ Vanessa remarked, in

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1906, on her sister's liability to 'get up a flirtation in the train. You really aren't safe to be trusted alone. I know some lady will get a written promise of marriage out of you soon and then where will you be?' (VBL 37).

In 1908 Vanessa's first child, Julian was born. This event inspired Virginia to write a memoir of her sister for her nephew, which included portraits of their mother Julia, and half-sister Stella, too. But this was also a time when Vanessa's husband Clive began intimate flirtations with her sister. Virginia seems to have enjoyed and encouraged this intimacy, which fell short of sexual consummation and comprised intellectual as well as emotional bonds. It caused friction between the sisters, yet they remained close. 'Whisper into your wife's ear', Virginia wrote to Bell in August 1908, 'that I love her. I expect she will scold you for tickling her (when she hears the message)' (L1 362). Vanessa was Woolf's declared inspiration for characters in *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day* (1919) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Clive Bell read and commented on early drafts of Woolf's first novel, and she valued his literary mentorship. He combined genuine encouragement with constructive criticism. He recognised her words to have the 'force' of poetry, and the work to be 'alive' and 'subtle', but he also counselled against passages that were 'too didactic, not to say priggish'. He identified her tendency in draft to draw 'marked contrasts between the subtle, sensitive, tactful, gracious, delicately perceptive, & perspicacious women, & the obtuse, vulgar, blind, florid, rude, tactless, emphatic, indelicate, vain, tyrannical, stupid men, [a]s not only rather absurd, but rather bad art' (VWB2 209–10). Woolf later acknowledged to him that he was 'the first person who ever thought I'd write well' (VWB2 212).

In the spring of 1908 Virginia holidayed in St Ives, where she was joined by the Bells, and she accompanied them in the autumn to Italy, then Paris. During this period she refused romantic attention and proposals of marriage from a number of young men associated with her brother's Cambridge circle – Edward Hilton Young, Walter Lamb and Sydney Waterlow.⁸ She seemed to prefer the security of flirtations, it has been suggested, with men, such as her brother-in-law, whom she could not possibly marry. In February 1909 she was even engaged very briefly to Lytton Strachey, an open homosexual with whom she enjoyed an intimate and flirtatious intellectual friendship.

It is significant that Strachey recounted their twenty-four-hour engagement in letters to his friend Leonard Woolf, who was at that time on colonial service in Ceylon. Indeed, his account 'was written *in reply* to Leonard's own fantasy of marriage to her' (VWL 261). He confesses to Leonard that even as he proposed, he saw 'it would be death if she accepted', and that the next day she 'declared she was not in love with me, and I observed finally that