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978-1-009-42366-3 — A History of the Bloomsbury Group
Edited by Derek Ryan
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CHAPTER 1

The Bloomsbury Friction

Derek Ryan

"Bloomsbury" has proved to be a durable and disputed label in equal measure. Widely used in scholarly discourse and popular culture to refer to the artists and intellectuals associated with a particular district of London in the early twentieth century, the term has never fully shaken off the mockery that accompanied its earliest use by "baiters" outside the group or the repudiations of several figures within it.[1] Today, Bloomsbury is easily recognizable and often very sellable. It headlines monographs, biographies, exhibitions, novels, plays, television dramas, and podcasts. But the word can also feel overdetermined, outmoded, exhausted – a remnant of the exclusive brand of "high" or coterie modernism. Rather than seeking to resolve its contradictory status or settle on a definition once and for all, *A History of the Bloomsbury Group* starts from the premise that the uneasy relationship between Bloomsbury's broad influence and narrow elitism is precisely why it continues to gain traction in critical debates. Instead of choosing sides between the group as either radicals or gatekeepers, contributors to this volume grapple with Bloomsbury's imperialist biases and class complacencies at the same time as they resituate the group's innovative aesthetics, transgressive relationships, and varied involvement in public life in national and global contexts. Read together, the chapters offer an expansive and multifaceted account of the group's activities and ongoing significance.

Raymond Williams' classic essay "The Bloomsbury Fraction" (1980) is notable among studies of Bloomsbury for striking a balanced critical tone. Based on a lecture given at the University of Kent – from where I write this Introduction – Williams offers a seminal analysis of the group's contribution to English culture. In it, he refuses outright castigation or celebration. On the one hand, "[n]othing more easily contradicts the received image of Bloomsbury as withdrawn and languid aesthetes than the remarkable record of political and organizational involvement, between the wars," with Williams acknowledging John Maynard Keynes' influence on economic

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policy, Virginia Woolf's support of the Women's Cooperative Guild, and Leonard Woolf's work for the League of Nations, the Cooperative movement, and the Labour Party ("especially on anti-imperialist questions").[2] On the other hand, Bloomsbury's key players remained attached to "what are really quite unchanged class feelings – a persistent sense of a quite clear line between an upper and a lower class," which is to say that the group's class allegiances led to "sympathy" for, rather than "solidarity" with, working-class people.[3] Williams therefore presses his consideration of Bloomsbury's accomplishments against its social position as an upper-class "fraction" that was "at once against its dominant ideas and values and still willingly, in all immediate ways, part of it."[4] His assessment is all the more noteworthy because of the period in which it was written. As Alistair Davies points out, "[w]hen in his paper Williams spoke positively – or even half-positively – about the Bloomsbury Group, he was speaking against the grain," finding in them "a useable past" at a time "before the feminist recovery of Virginia Woolf in the 1980s or the gay recovery of Forster and the painters of Bloomsbury in the 1990s."[5] If he was keen to point to the group's limitations, he also took seriously the notion that Bloomsbury was "a social, cultural and political phenomenon" that was "on the progressive wing of English culture."[6]

Beyond its elucidation of Bloomsbury's place in English culture, Williams' analysis is revealing in other, perhaps less intentional, ways. While stressing at the start of his essay that the group was not uniform in its aims and achievements, he nonetheless settles into a relatively stable description of Bloomsbury's *form*, epitomized in his use of the word "fraction." For the purposes of his major argument, it is an appropriate term: a fraction is the result of a rupture or breaking from the whole that is also a quantifiable part of that whole.[7] Yet in the process of making this claim, Williams too easily draws lines around the group, offering general statements based on (ironically) a fraction of their history. His reliance on Leonard Woolf's list of who else should be considered part of Bloomsbury – Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, and Roger Fry, among several others – is an understandable and frequently replicated critical move.[8] But there is a heavy weight placed on Leonard's autobiography, with Williams privileging a text that appeared decades after the main thrust of Bloomsbury's activity, and that was written by someone whose middle class and Jewish background did not match that of his friends.[9] Although he references the distinction Leonard makes about his class position in relation to the rest of the group, Williams smooths over these differences by classifying Woolf as

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one of the "new recruits" to the "professional and highly educated sector of the English upper class" through his Cambridge education and work in the colonial civil service in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).[10] The essay therefore misses opportunities to engage with an array of influential literary, artistic, and political output by the group during its most productive years. Viewed in this way, Williams' "fraction" is in danger of becoming an (homogenizing) abstraction.[11]

In opening this collection, I propose *friction* as an alternative, more tangible term to conceptualize both Bloomsbury's form and its role in culture. Unlike a fraction, friction is quantifiable only under specific conditions and contexts, and only ever momentarily – it therefore has the potential to be a stabilizing or destabilizing force, depending on what and how it brings two bodies (literally or figuratively) into contact. Friction is understood to be a fundamental condition of interaction in the world. In his foreword to *The Necessity of Friction* (1998), Nordal Akerman writes that the word "connotes the most basic of human conditions," where "[v]irtually every form of activity, mental or physical, will be met with opposition and difficulties" – a point borne out in chapters covering a diverse range of topics, including economics, philosophy, psychology, technology, science, sociology, and war.[12] Friction also appears where the local and global are intertwined in uncomfortable but unavoidable ways. In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2004), Anna Tsing is interested in "the sticky materiality of practical encounters" and "zones of awkward engagement" that make up significant but ever-changing "global connections."[13] "Cultures," she writes, "are continually co-produced in the interactions I call 'friction': the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference."[14] These studies are of course not concerned with the Bloomsbury group, but they demonstrate how the concept of friction – rich in metaphorical meanings precisely because it is so materially present in the world – might be put to use across different disciplines.[15]

Friction is abundantly present and yet mostly unacknowledged or overlooked in Williams' essay. Nowhere is it more apparent than in his guiding claim that, in failing to envisage "any alternative idea of a whole society," Bloomsbury cohered around a belief in "the supreme value of the civilized *individual*, whose pluralization, as more and more civilized individuals, was itself the only acceptable social direction."[16] Williams writes of "unobstructed free expression of the civilized individual" as "the true organizing value of the group," placing emphasis again on Leonard Woolf's view in his autobiography that before the war, "[i]t seemed as though human

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beings might really be on the brink of becoming civilized."[17] Here is where Williams' reluctance to bring other Bloomsbury voices into contact is perhaps most problematic. His final section titled "The Contribution of Bloomsbury" glosses over "the sensibility of the novels of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster," as well as Woolf's resistance to realist fiction (which Williams calls "social description") in *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (1924), and Clive Bell's emphasis on "significant form" and "aesthetic ecstasy" in *Art* (1913), judging them all to support the same ideal of "the free and civilized individual."[18] Earlier in the essay, Williams had mentioned *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) when noting (but not elaborating upon) the "persistent sexual asymmetry" in Bloomsbury's "composition," but at no point does he take seriously the dissonant approaches to the question of civilization found in Woolf's book-length essays and, say, Clive Bell's *Civilization* (1928). There is little recognition of Woolf's feminist critique of "civilization," whereby women are not only "the natural inheritor[s] of that civilization" but "outside of it, alien and critical," always questioning "what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves?"[19] For Clive Bell, Woolf memorably concluded, the answer was "a lunch party at no. 50 Gordon Square" – a comment that caricatures Bell's argument but does so in firm resistance to his elitist and patriarchal vision.[20] By the end of "The Bloomsbury Fraction," Williams has only grown firmer in his conclusions. Any of the evident "*dis*connections" among the group are left to one side in his return to the "final" and "exact" notion that Bloomsbury's offerings were "all in effect *alternatives* to a general theory" and, ultimately, a circling back to its "founding datum."[21]

Williams was far from being alone in smoothing over Bloomsbury's frictions. In the volume published to mark the 1978 seminar at which Williams gave his talk, Richard Shone – chronicler of the group's impact on the visual arts – plays down what he calls "the homosexual element in Bloomsbury." Remarking on the "good deal of friction in its ranks" due to shared lovers and personal strife, he quips that "compared to current revelations on television drawn from the very highest ranks of society and beyond, Bloomsbury appears positively chaste."[22] But when Shone somewhat curiously adds of the group's homosexuality that "there seems to have been only one hard-liner," before casually describing their sexual activity as "transitory experiment," the joke falls flat. Even when he admits that Bloomsbury's key figures "fought in public and in private for the furtherance of sexual tolerance," it comes with the caveat that "it [does not] seem particularly profitable to investigate what they have to tell us now."[23] Voiced by an admirer of the group, such ambivalent commentary

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explains how sexuality could be largely ignored in Williams' critique and why it has been so necessary for queer scholars to explore the topic in the five decades since.[24] Far from allowing sexual relations to merely "fall into place as an extension of Bloomsbury's unorthodox position," to again quote Shone, notable interventions such as *Queer Bloomsbury* (2016), edited by Brenda Helt and Madelyn Detloff, demonstrate how these two terms "Queer" and "Bloomsbury" are mutually constitutive and radically generative.[25] As Helt and Detloff underline in their introduction, queer approaches to Bloomsbury are not limited to gossip about their intimate liaisons but show "the importance of reading the elements of culture routinely relegated to personal life and those routinely elevated to an allegedly higher status – art, politics, philosophy – as more than intertwined, but, rather, inseparable aspects of the same phenomenon."[26] Bloomsbury's private and public exploits are, in other words, forever rubbing up against each other.

For all their intimacy and collaboration, those grouped under the Bloomsbury banner were themselves fully aware of the potential for, and of, friction between them. As Jane Goldman puts it, Bloomsbury "thrived on dissent and disagreement," while Susan Reid notes that discord also characterized "self-styled outsiders D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murry, who clashed with the 'Bloomsberries' as well as with each other."[27] The group was, then, defined internally and externally through "a creative friction" that "complicates and extends scholarly notions of influence and artistry."[28] To pick up any auto/biography, collection of letters, or volume of diaries related to Bloomsbury is to discover that while famed for its pursuit of friendship, beauty, and truth – perhaps too readily linked by many, including Williams, to G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) – the group clashed over politics and personal relations.[29] Virginia Woolf was not shy in documenting how this disharmony could affect her work. In a diary entry dated August 23, 1938, when she was struggling to write her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf records her anxiety over what she anticipates to be a very critical response from Keynes to *Three Guineas* (which had been published earlier that summer): "Its [*sic*] odd to be as nervous as I am at the idea of seeing Maynard tomorrow, & his heckling: dear old Hitler. But I wont [*sic*] be nervous; I'll go & walk on the terrace for 10 minutes before lunch. The worst of this kind of controversy is that it adds too much friction to my work on Roger." But it is exactly this friction that produces a spark of creativity, with Woolf resolving: "I have to urge my mind on, while the surface is all worried & flurried into tufts & vapours of replies [&] arguments. So it kindles, like a meteor, & burns."[30]

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In the end, Keynes remained silent on the topic during his visit, and Woolf did finish *Roger Fry* (1940). Yet the episode serves as a reminder that among the Bloomsbury group, there was not always a smooth, unhindered flow of intellectual exchange.[31] Such friction was evidently necessary and even welcomed: "I enjoy the friction: keeps my mind warm," Woolf notes in her diary on February 2, 1940, when contemplating the tasks competing for her attention (an essay she is asked to write "combatively on peace" as well as pieces for the *New Statesman and Nation* and *The Listener*).[32]

Three Guineas, with its positing of women as outsiders whose "country is the whole world," points to another friction central to Bloomsbury. As well as holding varied views on the (gendered) politics of war, the ways in which the group addressed this and many other questions was rarely confined to English class dynamics. Responding to Williams, Christine Froula has persuasively argued that Bloomsbury's defense of the individual, for example, is more powerfully understood when set against the international threat of totalitarianism rather than as a sign of bourgeois complicity or insularity.[33] This is where Anna Tsing's approach might become more directly useful for scholars of Bloomsbury. The preface to the twentieth anniversary edition of her aforementioned book includes a section on "Thinking with Friction," which reflects on the concept as a critical methodology, noting that it involves "the productive rubbing together of varied historical trajectories or modes of practice," which in turn "draws attention to unexpected connections and historical shifts."[34] Tsing deals with a very different disciplinary, geographical, and historical context – an ethnography of Indonesian rainforests in the 1980s and 1990s – than the one under focus in the current volume. Nonetheless, her work provides a methodological tool for approaching Bloomsbury in relation to what has been referred to as global, transnational, and even planetary modernisms. Susan Stanford Friedman, for instance, cites Tsing as offering a "circulation" model of "transnational relationality in the study of global cultures."[35] And although she does not cite Tsing specifically, Janet Lyon reminds us that one meaning of the word "Cosmopolitan" is to "describe the products or spaces of contact among cultures or cultural representatives, which would be characterized by mutual, palpable, interactive, *frictional* forms of change where such contact has occurred."[36] To think about Bloomsbury in this way is to understand that its formation, activity, and influence can never be properly grasped if it is limited to a narrowly English context.

In friction, then, there is a lesson for us as critical thinkers set on revisiting Bloomsbury. This word – friction – can be used to describe the group, but it can also invite new approaches to its many lives and works. What I

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have called the Bloomsbury friction is an effective drag on our efforts to categorize and draw conclusions, slowing us down so that we may carefully consider the group in all its multiplicity. It is also a reminder that the very term "Bloomsbury" has always gained its meaning in awkward resistance both to stinging criticism and fawning praise. The essays in this volume should, therefore, be read in productive friction with one another, and with the interrelated headings to Parts I to IV – "Aesthetic Bloomsbury," "Global Bloomsbury," "Intimate Bloomsbury," "Public Bloomsbury" – they have been placed under. In the following chapters, contributors feel their way through Bloomsbury differently, whether they are engaged with its familiar names, projects, and attractions, or with its more peripheral associates, lesser-known works, and contradictions. Too often judgment of Bloomsbury rests on a fixed form for the group, with repeated attempts to put lines around who, when, and where it was. To be sure, any history of Bloomsbury could neither ignore the commonly agreed upon list of core figures (though there was never any official membership), nor overlook its origins between 1904 and 1914 (the period referred to as "Old Bloomsbury"), rooted in the Cambridge Apostles and their meetings with the Stephen sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, in legendary gatherings at 46 Gordon Square, 29 Fitzroy Square, and 38 Brunswick Square, London. Many contributors to the volume focus on key events from this period, such as the Post-Impressionist exhibitions, as well as on the significance of the group's activities during and following the First World War, from the books published by the Hogarth Press, set up by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1917, to the books written (most famously Keynes' *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* [1919]) and artworks created at Charleston Farmhouse, where Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant relocated in 1916 and where many Bloomsbury figures would stay for considerable periods. However, in recognizing that "Bloomsbury" is a term always in friction with itself, the following chapters ask more varied and open-ended questions when addressing established narratives or pushing into new critical terrain. In this way, the group once again becomes an active and dynamic force, with the capacity to transform itself and others.

"Part I: Aesthetic Bloomsbury" explores the creative friction between Bloomsbury's experiments in form and genre. It begins with Jesse Matz's appraisal of how Bloomsbury's novelists – including E. M. Forster, Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf, David Garnett, and Mulk Raj Anand – write novels that ironize, but never fully disclaim, privilege. The handful of novels under discussion – *Howards End* (1910), *The Wise Virgins* (1914), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Lady into Fox* (1922), and *Untouchable* (1935) – encompass

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very different narratives, but they all rely on their authors' grip on free indirect discourse to present a voice that has special purchase in relation to modernism more broadly. An ironic or satirical tone is found in Bloomsbury's shorter fiction, too, though Bryony Randall charts the greater variety with which this occurs in stories by Woolf and Forster as well as by those figures who were little known for writing any fiction at all – notably Lytton Strachey and Desmond MacCarthy – or by more peripheral associates such as Vita Sackville-West and Katherine Mansfield. The compressed form of the short story results in frictions becoming even more apparent, and nowhere is this clearer than in Leonard Woolf's *Stories of the East* (1921), where racism and antisemitism clash with his critique of colonialism. Todd Avery's chapter suggests that in theorizing and putting into practice "new biography," which plays fast and loose with fact and fiction, Bloomsbury has left its distinctive mark on the genre. While Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf were at the vanguard of this innovative approach to writing lives in *Eminent Victorians* (1918), *Queen Victoria* (1921), *Orlando* (1928), and *Flush* (1933), they placed different emphases on how far biography should involve artistry. Wendy Hitchmough directs our attention toward the visual arts, detailing how the first and second Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912 upset Britain's artistic establishment. Through the Omega workshops over the years 1913–19 and in Mary Hutchinson's patronage and self-fashioning, a Bloomsbury "brand" emerges within the wider visual culture of the early twentieth century. An art form less commonly associated with the group is the subject of Tsung-Han Tsai's chapter on what music meant to Bloomsbury. On center stage is Cambridge music scholar Edward Dent, whose career was informed by Bloomsbury but who became part of international networks and interested in non-European traditions that, in turn, influenced the group's thinking (as found in the musicality of Woolf's and Forster's prose or in Keynes' public championing of music). To end this section, Sara Sullam assesses Bloomsbury's approach to poetry, the literary form least practiced by the group itself. Still, key members were involved in the publication of poetry at the Hogarth Press, wrote important critical essays in which they presented competing views on the topic, and, through Julian Bell, could boast a direct, if often strained, link to a new generation in the 1930s.

Placing Bloomsbury in international and transnational contexts, the essays in "Part II: Global Bloomsbury" explore frictions between Bloomsbury's avowed anti-imperialist worldview and complicity with the colonial system, as well as the different attitudes the group's members adopted toward countries that they had varying levels of knowledge

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about. In their coauthored chapter, Susheila Nasta and Florian Stadtler write about India and South Asia, focusing on sometimes complimentary and sometimes dissenting views of the group by writer Mulk Raj Anand and playwright, essayist, and novelist Aubrey Menen. In this reading, Bloomsbury is viewed as a transnational space geographically and artistically, but also, importantly, as one shaped by the history of colonialism. Attention remains on Asia as Patricia Laurence reflects on Virginia Woolf's reference to Lily Briscoe's "Chinese eyes" to consider affinities and dissonances between modernism in England and China. The comparison between modernist networks in both countries – especially the Crescent Moon group, Julian Bell's relationship with Ling Shuhua, and Woolf's encouragement of the latter's writing – invites critics to move beyond the Anglosphere at the same time as it calls attention to the necessity of recognizing one's positionality. Mark Hussey reorients us towards the United States of America to detail Bloomsbury's transatlantic networks via the Hogarth Press and American magazines. Some of the more positive sentiments about America voiced, for example, by Virginia Woolf's fictional characters run counter to prevailing attitudes among Bloomsbury and its class, though such views were changing by the time Clive Bell visited America after the Second World War. Rebecca Beasley documents Britain's fascination with Russian culture in the 1910s and 1920s, evinced in the Russian art displayed at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, the allure of the Ballets Russes, and the role of the Hogarth Press in publishing a steady stream of Russian books. Stances on the country's politics diverged, but Leonard Woolf and Maynard Keynes played significant roles in debates about post-revolutionary Russia. The conflict of war and hope for peace feature in the final two essays of the section. Claire Davison explains how pacifist activity across the Channel in the years following the First World War involved different modes of imperfect but vital cultural and political translation. For a diverse network of intellectuals – Virginia Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Paul Valéry, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Hope Mirrlees, André Maurois, and Paul Desjardins – the specter of the Napoleonic Wars worked its way into both the literature and landmarks of modernist Paris. Christine Froula fast-forwards to a later phase for the group in the lead up to the Second World War and their fight against totalitarianism. In late Bloomsbury pageantry – T. S. Eliot's *The Rock* (1934), Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), and Forster's *Abinger Pageant* (1934) and *England's Pleasant Land* (1940) – international politics and the critique of fascism meets with a renewed exploration of nation and community.

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Bloomsbury's committed if complicated personal relations and remodeling of self and sexuality is central to "Part III: Intimate Bloomsbury." Jesse Wolfe opens with an optimistic account of how Bloomsbury's experiments in love and friendship paved the way for future generations of urban tribes and polyamorous lovers. Occasionally, however, life and art make for uneasy bedfellows, especially in Woolf's and Forster's negotiation with the moral standards of their time. Pamela L. Caughie reflects on differences between genders as now conceived, the sexology of the early twentieth century, and what the group itself wrote about sex and sexuality. If its intimate sense of personal and intellectual community made a distinctive contribution to modernism, Bloomsbury was not always as subversive in its approach to gender relations as its reputation attests to. Jane Garrity directs our gaze explicitly onto the body to show how Bloomsbury mixed a celebration of nudism with primitive tropes that reinforced whiteness as a normative racial marker in Britain. Some of the group's most intimate photographs – a series of nude portraits of Vanessa Bell taken at Studland Bay – foreground unsettling political questions about British colonialism. From the surface of the body to the depths of the mind, Gabrielle McIntire turns to psychoanalysis, and especially the work of Sigmund Freud published by the Hogarth Press. In Roger Fry's (critical) pamphlet *The Artist and Psychoanalysis* (1924), as well as the group's writing on mourning, memory, and desire, we see that Bloomsbury's ambivalence over Freud was nonetheless sustained and productive. The section closes with Drew Shannon's survey of Bloomsbury's diverse and substantial body of life writing. From autobiography to letters to diaries, these friends were fascinated with the most everyday and intimate aspects of life, and their documentation of this was crucial in reviving interest in the group among the wider public up to the present day.

"Part IV: Public Bloomsbury" foregrounds Bloomsbury's interdisciplinary expertise and examines how it put this knowledge into practice in professional and public life. The first two chapters in the section are concerned with economics and labor. Paul Crosthwaite details how the group's highbrow allegiances were connected to the wish to democratize access to the aesthetic realm, as seen in the support from Desmond MacCarthy, Clive Bell, Maynard Keynes, and Roger Fry for spending public funds on the arts. Bloomsbury's novelists were also full of insight on aspects of property, wealth, and status, exemplified in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Forster's *Howards End*. Morag Shiach turns more pointedly to the matter of human labor, with sustained attention to Keynes' role on the international stage following the 1918 Armistice, and

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