

Vita Sackville-West

Born 1892.

Writer and garden designer.

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1. Introduction



Victoria Mary Sackville-West, Lady Nicolson, CH (9 March 1892 – 2 June 1962), usually known as Vita Sackville-West, was an English author and garden designer.

She was a successful novelist, poet, and journalist, as well as a prolific letter writer and diarist. She published more than a dozen collections of poetry during her lifetime and 13 novels. She was twice awarded the Hawthornden Prize for Imaginative Literature: in 1927 for her pastoral epic, *The Land*, and in 1933 for her *Collected Poems*. She was the inspiration for the protagonist of *Orlando: A Biography*, by her famous friend and lover, Virginia Woolf.

She had a longstanding column in *The Observer* (1946–1961) and is remembered for the celebrated garden at Sissinghurst created with her husband, Sir Harold Nicolson.

2. Biography

Antecedents



Victoria Josefa Dolores Catalina Sackville-West, Baroness Sackville. Vita's mother, circa 1885.

Knole, the home of Vita's aristocratic ancestors in Kent, was given to Thomas Sackville by Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century. Vita was born there, the only child of cousins Victoria Sackville-West and Lionel Sackville-West, 3rd Baron Sackville. Vita's mother, raised in a Parisian convent, was the illegitimate daughter of Lionel Sackville-West, 2nd Baron Sackville and a Spanish dancer, Josefa de Oliva (née Durán y Ortega), known as Pepita. Pepita's mother was an acrobat who had married a barber.

Although the marriage of Vita's parents was initially happy, shortly after her birth, the couple drifted and Lionel took an opera singer for a mistress who came to live with them at Knole.

Christened Victoria Mary Sackville-West, the girl was known as "Vita" throughout her life to distinguish her from her mother, also called Victoria. The usual English aristocratic inheritance customs were followed by the Sackville-West family, preventing Vita from inheriting Knole on the death of her father, a source of life-long bitterness to Vita. The house followed the title, and was bequeathed instead by her father to his nephew Charles, who became the 4th Baron.

Early life



Vita in childhood.

Vita was initially taught at home by governesses and later attended Helen Wolff's school for girls, an exclusive day school in Mayfair, where she met first loves Violet Keppel and Rosamund Grosvenor. She didn't befriend

local children and found it hard to make friends at school. Her biographers characterise her childhood as one filled by loneliness and isolation. She wrote prolifically at Knole, penning eight full-length (unpublished) novels between 1906–1910, ballads, and many plays, some in French. Her lack of formal education led to later shyness with her peers, such as those in the Bloomsbury Group. She felt herself to be sluggish of mind and she was never at the intellectual heart of her social group.

Vita's apparently Roma lineage introduced a passion for "gypsy" ways, a culture she perceived to be hot-blooded, heart-led, dark and romantic. It informed the stormy nature of many of Vita's later love affairs and was a strong theme in her writing. She visited Roma camps and felt herself to be at one with them.

Vita's mother had a wide array of famous lovers, including financier J. P. Morgan and Sir John Murray Scott (from 1897 until his death in 1912). Scott, secretary to the couple who inherited and developed the Wallace Collection, was a devoted companion and Lady Sackville and he were rarely apart during their years together. During her childhood, Vita spent a great deal of time in Scott's apartments in Paris, perfecting her already fluent French.

First loves

Vita debuted in 1910, shortly after the death of Edward VII. She was wooed by Orazio Pucci, son of a distinguished Florentine family; by Lord Granby (later 9th Duke of Rutland); and by Lord Lascelles (later 6th Earl of Harewood), among others. In 1914, she had a passionate affair with historian Geoffrey Scott. Scott's marriage collapsed shortly thereafter, as was often the fallout with Vita's affairs, all with women after this point.

Vita fell in love with Rosamund Grosvenor (1888–1944), who was four years her senior. In her journal, Vita wrote "Oh, I dare say I realized vaguely that I had no business to sleep with Rosamund, and I should certainly never have allowed anyone to find it out," but she saw no real conflict. Lady Sackville, Vita's mother, invited Rosamund to visit the family at their villa in Monte Carlo (1910). Rosamund also stayed with Vita at Knole House, at Murray Scott's pied-à-terre on the Rue Laffitte in Paris, and at Sluie, Scott's shooting lodge in the Scottish Highlands, near Banchory. Their secret relationship ended in 1913 when Vita married.

Vita was more deeply involved with Violet Keppel, daughter of the Hon. George Keppel and his wife, Alice Keppel. The sexual relationship began when they were both in their teens and strongly influenced them for years. Both later married and became writers.



Vita Sackville-West in 1913

Harold Nicholson

Sackville-West was courted for 18 months by young diplomat Harold Nicholson (below) whom she found to be a secretive character. She writes that the wooing was entirely chaste and throughout they did not so much as kiss. In 1913, at age 21, Vita married him in the private chapel at Knole. Vita's parents were opposed to the marriage on the grounds that "penniless" Nicholson had an annual income of only £250. He was the third secretary at the British Embassy in Constantinople and his father had been made a peer only under Queen Victoria. Another of Sackville-West's suitors, Lord Granby, had an annual income of £100,000, owned vast acres of land and was heir to an old title, the Duchy of Rutland.

The couple had an open marriage. Both Sackville-West and her husband had same-sex relationships before and during their marriage, as did some of the Bloomsbury Group of writers and artists, with whom they had connections. Sackville-West saw



herself as psychologically divided into two: one side of her personality was more feminine, soft, submissive and attracted to men while the other side was more masculine, hard, aggressive and attracted to women.

Harold had a series of relationships with men who were his intellectual equals, but the physical element in them was very secondary. He was never a passionate lover. To him sex was as incidental, and about as pleasurable as a quick visit to a picture-gallery between trains.



Vita Sackville-West in 1916.

Following the pattern of his father's career, Harold Nicolson was at various times a diplomat, journalist, broadcaster, Member of Parliament, and author of biographies and novels. After the wedding the couple lived in Cihangir, a suburb of Constantinople (now Istanbul), the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Sackville-West loved Constantinople, but the duties of a diplomat's wife did not appeal to her. It was only during this time that she attempted to don, with good grace, the part of a "correct and adoring wife of the brilliant young diplomat", as she sarcastically wrote. When she became pregnant, in the summer of 1914, the couple returned to England to ensure that she could give birth in a British hospital.

The family lived at 182 Ebury Street, Belgravia and bought Long Barn in Kent as a country house (1915–1930). They employed the architect Edwin Lutyens to make improvements to the house. The British declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire in November 1914, following Ottoman naval attacks on Russia, precluded any return to Constantinople.



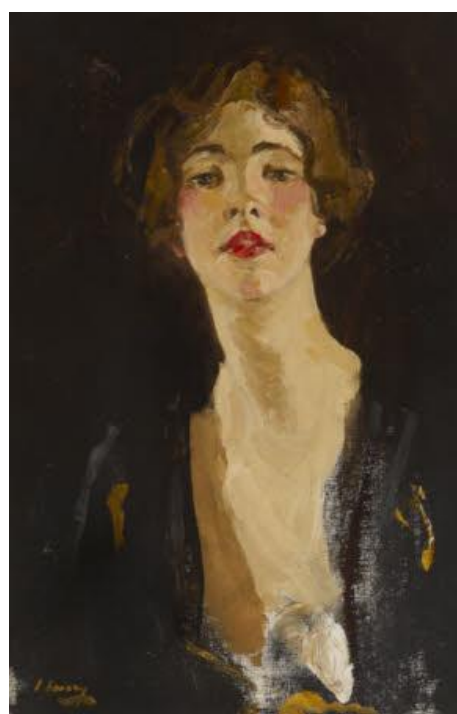
Long Barn, Kent.

The couple had two children: Benedict (1914–1978), an art historian, and Nigel (1917–2004), a well-known editor, politician, and writer. Another son was stillborn in 1915.

Violet Keppel

Sackville-West continued to receive devoted letters from her lover Violet Keppel (right). She was deeply upset to read of Keppel's engagement. Her response was to travel to Paris to see Keppel and persuade her to honour their commitment. Keppel, depressed and suicidal, did eventually marry her fiancé Major Trefusis, under pressure from her mother, though Keppel made it clear that she did not love her husband. Sackville-West called the marriage her own greatest failure.

Sackville-West and Keppel disappeared together several times from 1918 on, mostly to France. One day in 1918 Vita writes that she experienced a radical 'liberation', where her male aspect was unexpectedly freed. She writes: "I went into wild spirits; I ran, I shouted, I jumped, I climbed, I vaulted over gates, I felt like a schoolboy let out on a holiday ... that wild



irresponsible day".

The mothers of both women joined forces to sabotage the relationship and force their daughters back to their husbands. But they were unsuccessful. Vita often dressed as a man, styled as Keppel's husband. The two women made a bond to remain faithful to one another, pledging that neither would engage in sexual relations with their husband.



Vita Sackville-West in her twenties, by William Strang, 1918.

Keppel continued to pursue her lover to great lengths, until Sackville-West's affairs with other women finally took their toll. In November 1919, while staying at Monte Carlo, Sackville-West wrote that she felt very low, entertaining thoughts of suicide, believing that Nicolson would be better off without her. In 1920 the lovers ran off again to France together and their husbands chased after them in a small two-seater aeroplane. Sackville-West heard allegations that Keppel and her husband Trefusis had been involved

sexually, and she broke off the relationship as the lesbian oath of fidelity had been broken. Despite the rift, the two women stayed devoted to one another.

Persia

From 1925 to 1927, Nicolson lived in Tehran where Sackville-West often visited him. Sackville-West's book *A Passenger to Tehran* recounts her time there. The couple were involved in planning the coronation of Rezā Khan and got to know the six-year old Crown Prince Mohammad Reza well. She also visited and wrote about the former capital of Isfahan to see the Safavid palaces.

Virginia Woolf



Portrait photograph of Virginia Woolf, 1927.

Her relationship with the prominent writer Virginia Woolf began in 1925 and ended in 1935, reaching its height between 1925–28. The American scholar Louise DeSalvo wrote that the ten years while they were together

were the artistic peak of both women's careers, owing to the positive influence they had on one another: "neither had ever written so much so well, and neither would ever again reach this peak of accomplishment".

In December 1922, Sackville-West first met Virginia Woolf at a dinner party in London. Though Sackville-West came from an aristocratic family that was far richer than Woolf's own, the women bonded over their confined childhoods and emotionally absent parents. Woolf knew about Sackville-West's relationship with Keppel and was impressed by her free spirit.

Sackville-West greatly admired Woolf's writings, considering her to be the better author. She told Woolf in one letter: "I contrast my illiterate writing with your scholarly one, and I am ashamed". Though Woolf envied Sackville-West's ability to write quickly, she was inclined to believe that the volumes were written too much in haste: "Vita's prose is too fluent".



Sackville-West, 1926.

As the two grew close, Woolf disclosed how she had been abused by her step-brother as a child. It was largely due to Sackville-West's support that Woolf began to heal from the trauma, allowing her for the first time to have a satisfying erotic relationship. Woolf purchased a mirror during a trip to

France with Sackville-West, saying she felt she could look in a mirror for the first time in her life. Sackville-West's support gave Woolf greater confidence and helped her cast off her self-image of a sickly semi-recluse. She persuaded Woolf that her nervous ailments had been misdiagnosed, and that she should focus on her own varied intellectual projects; that she must learn to rest.

To help the Woolfs, Sackville-West chose their Hogarth Press to be her publisher. *Seducers in Ecuador*, the first Sackville-West novel to be published by Hogarth, sold only 1,500 copies in its first year. *The Edwardians*, published next, sold 30,000 copies in its first six months. The boost helped Hogarth financially, though Woolf did not always value the books' romantic themes. The increased security of the Press's fortunes allowed Woolf to write more experimental novels such as *The Waves*. Though contemporary critics consider Woolf a better writer, critics in the 1920s viewed Sackville-West as more accomplished, with her books outselling Woolf's by a large margin.

Sackville-West loved to travel, frequently going to France, Spain and to visit Nicolson in Persia. These trips were emotionally draining for Woolf, who missed Sackville-West intensely. Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, noteworthy for its theme of longing for someone absent, was partly inspired by Sackville-West's frequent absences. Sackville-West inspired Woolf to write one of her most famous novels, *Orlando*, featuring a protagonist who changes sex over the centuries. This work was described by Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicolson as "the longest and most charming love-letter in literature."

There were, however, tensions in the relationship. Woolf was often bothered by what she viewed as Sackville-West's promiscuity, charging that Sackville-West's great need for sex led her to take up with anyone who struck her fancy. In *A Room Of One's Own* (1929), Woolf attacks patriarchal inheritance laws. This was an implicit criticism of Sackville-West, who never questioned the leading social and political position of the aristocracy to which she belonged. She felt that Sackville-West was unable to critique the system she was both a part of and, to a certain extent, a victim of. In the 1930s they clashed over Nicolson's "unfortunate" involvement with Oswald Mosley and the New Party (later renamed the British Union of Fascists), and they were at odds over the imminent war. Sackville-West supported rearmament while Woolf remained loyal to her pacifism, leading to the end of their relationship in 1935.

Other lovers

One of Vita's male suitors, Henry Lascelles, would later marry the Princess Royal and become the 6th Earl of Harewood.

In 1927 Sackville-West had an affair with Mary Garman, a member of the Bloomsbury Group and between 1929 and 1931 with Hilda Matheson, head of the BBC Talks Department. In 1931, Sackville-West was in a ménage à trois with journalist Evelyn Irons and Irons's lover, Olive Rinder. Irons had interviewed Vita after her novel *The Edwardians* had become a best-seller.

3. Sissinghurst Castle



Sissinghurst Castle, Kent.

In 1930 the family acquired and moved to Sissinghurst Castle, near Cranbrook, Kent. It had once been owned by Vita's ancestors. This gave it a dynastic attraction as she was excluded from inheriting Knole and a title. Sissinghurst was an Elizabethan ruin and the creation of the gardens would be a joint labour of love that would last many decades, first entailing years of clearing debris from the land. Nicolson provided the architectural structure, with strong classical lines, which would frame his wife's innovative informal planting schemes.

She created a new and experimental system of enclosures or rooms, such as the White Garden, Rose Garden, Orchard, Cottage Garden and Nuttery. She also innovated single colour-themed gardens and design principles orientating the visitors' experience to discovery and exploration. Her first garden at Long Barn (Kent, 1915–1930) was experimental, a place of

learning by trial and error and she carried over her ideas and projects to Sissinghurst, utilising her hard won experience. Sissinghurst was first opened to the public in 1938.



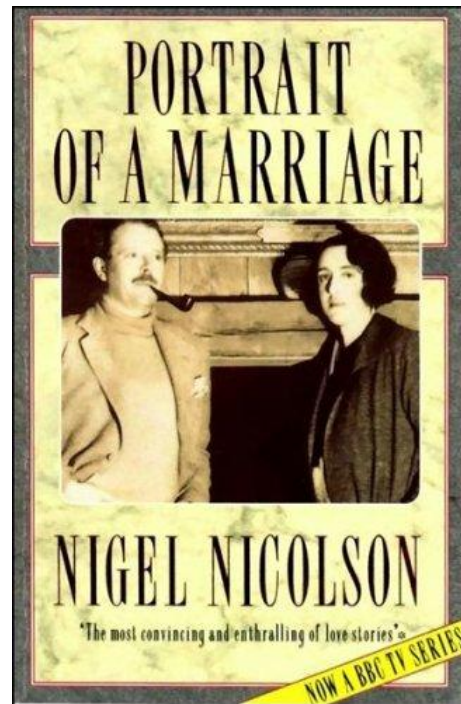
The gardens at Sissinghurst Castle.

Sackville-West took up writing again in 1930 after a six-year break as she needed money to pay for Sissinghurst. Nicolson, having left the Foreign Office, no longer had a diplomat's salary to draw upon. She also had to pay tuition for her two sons to attend Eton College. She felt she had become a better writer thanks to the mentorship of Woolf. In 1947 she began a weekly column in *The Observer* called "In your Garden", although she was not a trained horticulturalist or designer. She continued the very popular column until a year before her death, and writing helped to make Sissinghurst one of the most famous and visited gardens in England. In 1948 she became a founder member of the National Trust's garden committee. The grounds are now run by the National Trust. She was awarded the Veitch Memorial Medal from the Royal Horticultural Society.

4. Writing

Portrait of a Marriage

In the early 1920s Sackville-West wrote a memoir of her relationships. In it she sought to explain both why she had chosen to stay with Nicolson and why she had fallen in love with Violet Keppel. The work, titled *Portrait of a Marriage*, was not published until 1973. In the book she uses metaphors from nature to present her account as truthful and honest, describing her life as a "bog" and a "swamp", suggesting that her personal life was naturally unappealing and unpleasant. Sackville-West stated that she wanted to explain her sexuality, which she presented as being at the core of her personality. She wrote that in the future "it will be recognized that many more people of my type do exist than under the present-day system of hypocrisy is commonly admitted".



Reflecting a certain ambivalence about her sexuality, Sackville-West presented her sexual desires for Keppel as both "deviant" and "natural", as if she herself was uncertain of whether her sexuality was normal or not, though the American scholar Georgia Johnston has argued that Sackville-West's confusion on this point was due to her wish to have this memoir published one day. In this regard, Sackville-West wrote of her deep desire and love for Keppel while at same time declaring her "shame" about this "duality with which I was too weak and too self-indulgent to struggle". At various times, Sackville-West called herself a "pariah" with a "perverted nature" and "unnatural" feelings for Keppel, who was portrayed as a tempting, if degrading, object of her desire. Sackville-West called for a "spirit of candor" in society that would allow for tolerance of gay and bisexual people. Much influenced by the theories promoted by sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld, Edward Carpenter, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, Sackville-West sometimes wrote of her sexuality as abnormal and wrong and due to some psychological flaw she was born with, portraying heterosexuality as the norm that she wanted, but failed to live up to.

Several times, Sackville-West stated that she wrote *Portrait of a Marriage* for scientific purposes so people would be able to understand bisexual

people, which would thus allow her, despite her self-condemnation, to present her sexuality as in some way normal. Several of the sexologists Sackville-West cited, most notably Carpenter and Ellis, had argued that homosexuality and bisexuality were in fact normal, and despite her condemning herself, her use of a "scientific" approach backed up with quotes from Ellis and Carpenter allowed her to present her bisexuality as implicitly normal. Writing in the third person, Sackville-West declared "she regrets that the person Harold married wasn't entirely and wholly what he had thought of her, and that the person who loves and owns Violet isn't a second person, because each suits each other". Sackville-West presented her sexuality as part of the personality she had been born with, portraying herself as an accursed woman who should be the object of sympathy, not condemnation.

In 1973, when her son Nigel Nicolson published *Portrait of a Marriage*, he was uncertain if he was going to be charged with obscenity, going to considerable lengths to stress the legitimacy of a love for a person of the same sex in his introduction. Despite portraying herself as in some way "deviant" because of her feelings for women, Sackville-West also wrote in *Portrait of a Marriage* of the discovery and acceptance of her bisexuality as a teenager as the joyous "liberation of half my personality", suggesting that she did not really see herself as a woman with "deviant" sexuality, as this statement contradicted what she had written at the beginning of the book about her "perverted" sexuality. Johnson wrote that Sackville-West, in presenting the lesbian side of herself in terms that depicted Keppel as evil and Nicolson as good, was the only way possible at the time to express this side of her personality, writing "even if annihilating herself seemed the only way she could present any type of acceptable self."

The memoir was dramatised by the BBC (and PBS in North America) in 1990, starring Janet McTeer as Vita, and Cathryn Harrison as Violet. The series won four BAFTAs.

Challenge

Sackville-West's novel *Challenge* (1923) also bears witness to her affair with Keppel: Sackville-West and Keppel had started writing this book as a collaborative endeavour. It was published in America but banned in the UK until 1974.

The male character's name, Julian, had been Sackville-West's nickname when passing as a man. *Challenge* (first entitled *Rebellion*, then *Enchantment*, then *Vanity* and at some point *Foam*), is a roman à clef with the character of Julian being a male version of Sackville-West and Eve, the woman he desires so passionately is Keppel. Notably, Sackville-West in *Challenge* defends Keppel against several of the insults Nicolson had

applied to her in his letters to her; for example Nicolson often called Keppel a "swine" and a "pig", and in the book Julian goes out of his way to say that Eve is neither a swine nor a pig. In the book, Julian says that "Eve is not a 'little swine', she just has the weaknesses and faults of femininity carried to the 9th degree, but is also redeemed by a self-sacrifice, which is very feminine".

Reflecting her obsession with the Romany people, Eve is portrayed as a seductive Romany woman with an "insinuating femininity" that Julian cannot resist, calling him away from his political mission of winning independence on a fictional Greek island during the Greek war of independence. Nicolson wrote in a letter to his wife: "Don't please dedicate it to Violet, it would kill me if you did". When *Challenge* was published in 1924, the dedication was written in Romany reading: "This book is yours, honoured witch. If you read it, you will find your tormented soul changed and free". Throughout their relationship, Keppel was given to threatening suicide if Sackville-West left her, a character trait shared by Eve, who finally attempts to drown herself in the sea while Julian tries to come to her rescue. As Eve changes her mind about taking her life and tries to swim ashore as Julian swims out to her, it is too late and she is swept away by the tide to drown. The book's ending reflected Sackville-West's guilt about breaking her relationship with Keppel.

Her mother, Lady Sackville, found the portrayal obvious enough to refuse to allow publication of the novel in England; but Vita's son Nigel Nicolson praises his mother: "She fought for the right to love, men and women, rejecting the conventions that marriage demands exclusive love, and that women should love only men, and men only women. For this she was prepared to give up everything ... How could she regret that the knowledge of it should now reach the ears of a new generation, one so infinitely more compassionate than her own?"

Sackville-West was fascinated with and often wrote about the Roma people. As the British scholar Kirstie Blair noted, for her: "Gypsies represent liberation, excitement, danger and the free expression of sexuality". In particular, the Roma women, especially Spanish Romany women, served as a symbol for lesbianism in her writings. As with many other women writers in this period, for Sackville-West, the Romany represented a social element both familiar and strange; a people perceived and admired as flamboyant romantics while at the same time viewed and hated as shifty, dishonest types; a rootless people who belonged nowhere yet could be found everywhere in Europe, serving as a symbol for a sort of unconventional femininity. The picture Sackville-West held of the Romany was much influenced by "Orientalism", as the Romany were believed to have originated from India. The idea of a people who belonged nowhere, existing outside of the values of "civilization", held genuine appeal to her

as it offered up the possibility of gender roles different from those held in the West. Sackville-West was English, but she invented Romany ancestry for herself on the Spanish side of her family, explaining her bohemian behavior as due to her alleged "Gypsy" descent.

Orlando

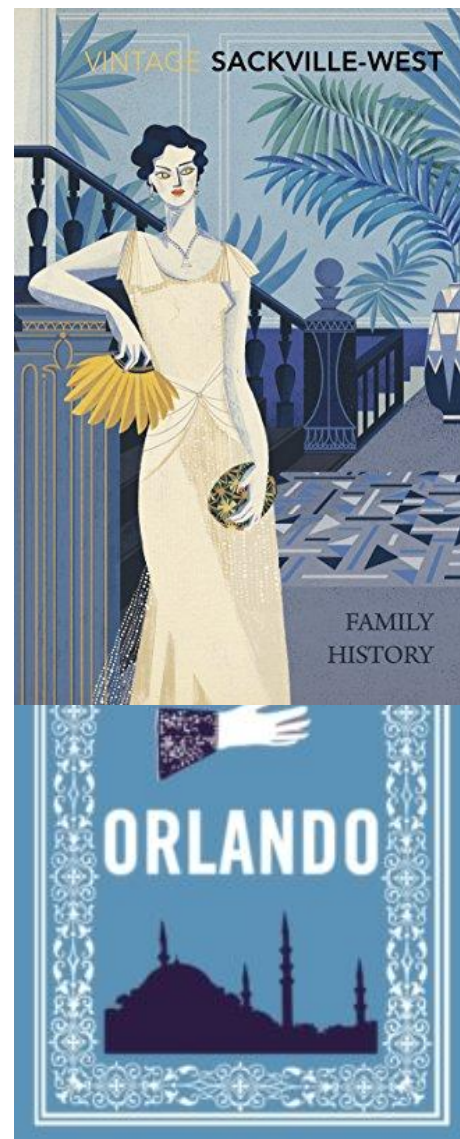
Woolf was inspired by Sackville-West to write her most famous novel, *Orlando* (1928), featuring a protagonist who changes sex over the centuries. Reflecting Sackville-West's interest in the Romany, when Orlando goes to bed as a man and mysteriously wakes up as a woman in Constantinople (which is implied might have been the result of a spell cast by a Romany witch whom he married), it is at a Romany camp in the Balkans that Orlando is first welcomed and accepted as a woman, as the Romany in the novel make no distinctions between the sexes.

Ultimately Woolf satirizes Sackville-West's Romany fetish, as Orlando, an English aristocrat, prefers not to live in poverty as part of wandering Romany caravan in the Balkans, because the call of a settled life of the aristocracy at a country house in England proves too strong for her, just as in real life Sackville-West fantasised about living the nomadic life of a Romany, but in reality preferred the settled life in the English countryside.

Orlando, which was intended as a fantasy where the character of Orlando (a stand-in for Sackville-West) inherits an estate, not unlike Knole (which Sackville-West would have inherited as the eldest child if she had been a man), ironically marked the beginning of a tension between the two women. Sackville-West often complained in her letters that Woolf was more interested in writing a fantasy about her than in returning her gestures of affection in the real world.

Family History

Sackville-West's 1932 novel *Family History* tells the story of Evelyn Jarrold, a rich widow who married into a family which owes its recent wealth and social position to the ownership of coal mines, and her ill-fated



love affair with Miles Vane-Merrick, a much younger man with progressive social ideas. Evelyn Jarrold's husband, Tommy, died in the Great War, and she has nothing to occupy her apart from her son Dan, the Jarrolds' heir, who is away at Eton, social events and visits to her dressmaker. Vane-Merrick is a farming landowner and Member of Parliament, and is writing a book on economics. He represents new, progressive values and the male world of work and economic activity, and Evelyn Jarrold represents traditional values and the female world of family ties and social engagements.

The characters of Viola and Leonard Anquetil in *Family History* are socialists, pacifists and feminists, thinly veiled versions of Virginia and Leonard Woolf. In *Orlando*, Woolf allowed Vita to finally "own" Knole, and in *Family History*, Vita returns the gesture, as the Anquetils have children who turned out to be intelligent and decent people. Woolf had never had children and was afraid that she would have been a bad mother. In casting her fictional alter-ego as an excellent mother she was offering a "gift" to Woolf.

Other work and achievements

Most of the novels were an immediate success (except *Dark Island*, *Grand Canyon* and *La Grande Mademoiselle*). *All Passion Spent* (1931) and *Seducers in Ecuador* (1924) sold especially well. Somewhat Ironically *Seducers* overtook her mentor's novel *Mrs Dalloway* at the top of the sales charts.

The Edwardians (1930) and *All Passion Spent* are perhaps her best-known novels today. In the latter, the elderly Lady Slane courageously embraces a long suppressed sense of freedom and whimsy after a lifetime of following convention. This novel was dramatised by the BBC in 1986 starring Dame Wendy Hiller. *All Passion Spent* appears to reflect Woolf's influence. The character of Lady Slane begins to truly live only after the death of her husband, a former prime minister. She befriends the servants of her estate, discovering the lives of people she had previously ignored. At the end of the novel Lady Slane persuades her granddaughter to break off an arranged marriage in order to pursue her career as a musician.

Grand Canyon (1942) is a science fiction "cautionary tale" (as she termed it) about a Nazi invasion of an unprepared United States. The book takes an unsuspected twist, however, that makes it something more than a typical invasion yarn.

A recently re-discovered work from 1922 "A Note of Explanation" was written specifically to be a part of the miniature collection of books within the doll's House, and tells the story of a sprite that inhabits the doll's house and re-tells several fairy tales from the point of view of the sprite,

indicating how they had influenced the story. The book was adapted for the stage by Emily Ingram under the title "A Sprite in the Doll's House" in 2019 and was performed in Edinburgh, at the Palace of Holyrood House as part of their Christmas festivities.

The poetry remains the least known of Sackville-West's work. It encompassed epics and translations of volumes such as Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Her epic poems *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946) reflect an enduring passion for the earth and family tradition. *The Land* may have been written in response to the central work of Modernist poetry *The Waste Land* (also published by Hogarth Press). She dedicated her poem to her lover Dorothy Wellesley. A recording of Sackville-West reading it was released by Columbia Records. Her poem won the Hawthornden Prize in 1927. She won it again in 1933 with her *Collected Poems*, becoming the only writer to do so twice. *The Garden* won the Heinemann Award for literature.

Her epic poem *Solitude*, published by the Hogarth Press in October 1938 contains references to the Bible, Paracelsus, Ixion, Catullus, Andromeda, the *Iliad* and a Sabine bride, all of which were quite acceptable in the early 20th century, but were seen as anachronistic by 1938. The narrator of *Solitude* has an ardent love of the English countryside. Though the sex of the narrator is left ambiguous, implied at various points to be a man or a woman, it is made clear the narrator loved intensely a woman who is no longer present and who is deeply missed. At one point, the narrator's horror and disgust at Ixion, a brutal rapist, implies that she is a woman. At another point in the poem, her desire to free Andromeda from her chains and to make love suggests that she is a lesbian. The narrator compares the love of nature to the love of books, as both cultivate her mind. She thinks of herself as superior to the farmers who merely work the land without the time or the interest for poetry, all of which make it possible for her to have a deeper appreciation of nature.

She is not well known as a biographer. The most famous of those works is her biography of Saint Joan of Arc in the work of the same name. Additionally, she composed a dual biography of Saint Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse of Lisieux entitled *The Eagle and the Dove*, a biography of the author Aphra Behn, and a biography of her maternal grandmother, the Spanish dancer known as Pepita (right).



Despite being a shy woman, Sackville-West often forced herself to participate in literary readings before book clubs and on the BBC in order to feel a sense of belonging. Her love of the classical traditions in literature put her out of favour with modernist critics and by the 1940s, she was often dismissed as a dated writer, much to her chagrin. In 1947 Sackville-West was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Companion of Honour.

5. Death and legacy



St Michael and All Angels Church, Withyham, where Sackville-West's ashes are buried.

Vita Sackville-West died at Sissinghurst in June 1962, aged 70, from abdominal cancer. She was cremated and ashes buried in the family crypt within the church at Withyham, eastern Sussex.



Image from the film Vita and Virginia, 2018.

Sissinghurst Castle is owned by the National Trust. Her son Nigel Nicolson lived there after her death, and following his death in 2004 his own son Adam Nicolson, Baron Carnock, came to live there with his family. With his wife, the horticulturalist Sarah Raven, they committed to restore the

mixed working farm and growing food on the property for residents and visitors, a function that had withered under the aegis of the Trust.

The film *Vita and Virginia*, with Gemma Arterton as Vita and Elizabeth Debicki as Virginia, had its world premiere at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival. It is directed by Chanya Button and based on a play by Eileen Atkins, created from the love letters between Sackville-West and Woolf. The play was first performed in London in October 1993 and off Broadway in November 1994.

6. Works

Poetry collections

Chatterton (1909)

A Dancing Elf (1912)

Constantinople: Eight Poems (1915)

Poems of West and East (1917)

Orchard and Vineyard (1921)

The Land (1926)

King's Daughter (1929)

Sissinghurst (1931)

Invitation to Cast out Care (1931)

Collected Poems: Volume 1 (1933)

Solitude (1938)

The Garden (1946)

Novels

Heritage (1919)

The Dragon in Shallow Waters (1921)

The Heir (1922)

Challenge (1923)

Grey Wethers (1923)

Seducers in Ecuador (1924)

Passenger to Teheran (1926)

The Edwardians (1930)

All Passion Spent (1931)

The Death of Noble Godavary and Gottfried Künstler (1932)

Thirty Clocks Strike the Hour (1932) - short stories

Family History (1932)

The Dark Island (1934)

Grand Canyon (1942)

Devil at Westease (1947)

The Easter Party (1953)

No Signposts in the Sea (1961)

Children's Books

A Note of Explanation (written for Queen Mary's Dolls' House in 1924, published posthumously in 2017)

Translations

Duineser Elegien: Elegies from the Castle of Duino, by Rainer Maria Rilke
trns. V. Sackville-West (Hogarth Press, London, 1931)

Biographies and non-fiction

"Aphra Behn: the Incomparable Astrea" (Gerald Howe 1927)

Passenger to Teheran (Hogarth Press 1926, reprinted Tauris Parke
Paperbacks 2007, ISBN 978-1-84511-343-8)

Knole and the Sackvilles (1922)

Saint Joan of Arc (Doubleday 1936, reprinted M. Joseph 1969)

English Country Houses (William Collins, 1941, illustrated)

Pepita (Doubleday, 1937, reprinted Hogarth Press 1970)

The Eagle and The Dove (M. Joseph 1943)

Twelve Days: an account of a journey across the Bakhtiari Mountains of
South-western Persia (first published UK 1927; Doubleday Doran 1928; M.
Haag 1987, reprinted Tauris Parke Paperbacks 2009 as Twelve Days in
Persia)

Country Notes in Wartime, 1940, (The Hogarth Press)

7. Knole and Sissinghurst Today

Knole, the ancestral home of Vita Sackville-West's family, and Sissinghurst, the home which she bought, are both now in the care of the National Trust.

Knole



Aerial view of Knole.

Knole is a country house and former archbishop's palace situated within Knole Park, a 1,000-acre (400-hectare) park located immediately to the south-east of Sevenoaks in west Kent. The house apparently ranks in the top five of England's largest houses, under any measure used, occupying a total of four acres.

The current house dates back to the mid-15th century, with major additions in the 16th and, particularly, the early 17th centuries. Its grade I listing reflects its mix of late-medieval to Stuart structures and particularly its central façade and state rooms. In 2019 an extensive conservation project, "Inspired by Knole", was completed to restore and develop the structures of the buildings and thus help to conserve its important collections. The surrounding deer park has also survived with varying degrees of management in the 400 years since 1600.

The house is cared for and opened by the National Trust, which has owned the house since it was donated by Charles Sackville-West, 4th Baron Sackville in 1947; however, the Trust owns only the house and an adjoining modest park – overall 52 acres (21 ha). Much of the house is lived in by the Sackville-Wests: the Sackville family or the family trust

own the remainder of the deer park but permit commercialised access and certain charitable and sporting community events.

There is an oft repeated myth that Knole is a calendar house, which had 365 rooms, 52 staircases, 12 entrances and 7 courtyards. Wodehouse, in Ch. 14 of his 1953 work *Bring On the Girls!*, makes it 365 rooms, 52 staircases, 12 courtyards, and 20 bathrooms - including one that is haunted. While the number of rooms is approximately correct, the number of staircases has been reduced by internal renovations and changes.

Traditionally there have been 7 spaces called courts – Green Court, Stable Court, Stone Court, Water Court, Queen's Court, Pheasant Court and Men's Court. This definition is somewhat loose, with additional courtyards such as Brewhouse Yard and Carpenters Yard not being included.



Interior of Knole.

Sissinghurst Castle.

Sissinghurst Castle Garden, at Sissinghurst in the Weald of Kent in England, was created by Vita Sackville-West, poet and writer, and her husband Harold Nicolson, author and diplomat. It is among the most famous gardens in England and is designated Grade I on Historic England's register of historic parks and gardens. It was bought by Sackville-West in 1930, and over the next thirty years, working with, and later succeeded by, a series of notable head gardeners, she and Nicolson transformed a farmstead of "squalor and slovenly disorder" into one of the world's most influential gardens. Following Sackville-West's death in 1962, the estate was donated to the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty. It is one of the Trust's most popular properties, with nearly 200,000 visitors in 2017.

The gardens contain an internationally respected plant collection, particularly the assemblage of old garden roses. The writer Anne Scott-James considered the roses at Sissinghurst to be "one of the finest collections in the world". A number of plants propagated in the gardens

bear names related to people connected with Sissinghurst or the name of the garden itself. The garden design is based on axial walks that open onto enclosed gardens, termed "garden rooms", one of the earliest examples of this gardening style. Among the individual "garden rooms", the White Garden has been particularly influential, with the horticulturalist Tony Lord describing it as "the most ambitious ... of its time, the most entrancing of its type."



The Tower at Sissinghurst Castle.



Sissinghurst Castle Garden.



Sissinghurst Castle Garden.
