

Bloomsbury

Q.Bell

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The book, or rather a sketch of a book, was written a few years before the author embarked on his biography of his aunt - Virginia Woolf. It provides no systematic attempt as to delineate what Bloomsbury was nor its history. A movement, a clique, or a coterie? The author was in a sense born into it, but when he came of age it was already in decline later to fade away and die, although many of its members lived on for another twenty thirty years. It was attacked during its time for being snobbish club of cerebral effetes given to pointless twaddle, attacks that the author feels obliged to counter out of family duty.

The origin was yet another clique of Cambridge students, many of them but not all, associated to the Apostles, membership of which was considered the highest possible intellectual acknowledgement, and all under the influence of the moral philosopher G.E.Moore, who came together in London and merged with the progeny of Leslie Stephen in the beginning of the 20th century. It was characterized by liberty in thought and sexual mores as a reaction against the strictures of the Victorian age and an engagement into the arts especially painting and literature with forays into philosophy and politics. It grew during the Edwardian times and the First World War constituted something of a crisis, which it weathered. Its high point and maturity coincided with the 20's and in the 30's many of its founding members started to die off. Although having a core of a dozen names, its exact membership was in a flux merging imperceptibly with the wider social setting of which it was only one of many manifestations. Its major characteristics was its charm, the charm of friendship and hence of belonging. What is happiness? Fame is not for everyone, there are far too many candidates claiming for attention, but there is always the possibility of local fame, of being famous among your friends, of being seen by others whom you see yourself, not by an anonymous invisible public. Thus Bloomsbury had it in a sense both ways. It was a set of friends set on a public stage for anyone to see and thus vicariously enjoy the charm of mutual friendship. This is the core of the cult of celebrities. A celebrity is not so by virtue of him- or herself solely, but by knowing and being friends with other celebrities. If you become a celebrity, the real reward is to get to know the other celebrities and being accepted by them. In short of being part of the select, of being socially accepted by the socially desirable. Thus Bloomsbury is essentially a celebrity clique for the highbrows, those who look down upon the vulgar manifestations of celebrityhood yet being far from indifferent to the passions which cause them. A foremost among those passions is that of gossip. The allure of the Bloomsbury is that of gossip. The book has its fair share of gossip, some of it rather arcane to the outsider. Why did not Lawrence like the Bloomsbury people? This question, along with others of the same dignity, takes up a fair amount of space. Is it so surprising after all? People have likes and dislikes and they are in no sense obliged to explain and justify them. After all a person is entitled to have personal opinions of individuals, although not apparently as to groups of people, judging from our

preoccupation with racism.

England is a land of class distinctions, more so than most other European countries, especially more so than the Scandinavian countries. For such people the finer points of English society becomes opaque. There is of course the aristocracy, which admittedly has become marginalized in recent years; but also a powerful professional class of influential families with a high degree of intermarriage. It is hardly surprising that the authors biography of Mrs Woolf comes equipped with an extensive family tree. It is of course out of this upper middle class that the Bloomsbury group is sprung. A class with its entitlements taken for granted. Admittedly not immune to financial anxiety but protected from destitution, a fate beyond their imagination. And more to the point assured of intellectual superiority. In short pampered living lives of comfort (as a larger and larger part of Western middle class people nowadays enjoy) based on the support of a servant class. In fact, as the author points out, his father 's (Clive Bell, although never referred as such) idea of a civilized society is exactly that. Pampered intellectuals refining good taste in food, arts and above all conversations. A kind of heaven on Earth. And in fact was I not mesmerized by this kind of life when I was a teenager? As I was becoming privy to the Cambridge youth of a Russell, or the novels by Aldous Huxley depicting gatherings at country houses, and indeed phantasies that in a somewhat more vulgar form are nowadays being pandered to by soaps such as 'Downtown Abbey'. Social stratification being a natural, but not necessarily commendable, feature of human societies. Whether they are entirely a reflection of economics is a controversial question, in particular whether some crucial reforms as to production would create a much more egalitarian society, or whether it is based on deeper psychological and sociological instincts, and thus that economy, rather than being a cause for social arrangement, is an effect of the the same. Why should they they otherwise engender such nostalgia?

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