

wrong, missing the point. He said that the book had been a part of her therapy, and that today she would rewrite it if she could. I asked him a question about Clive. During my tour of Charleston, I had been struck by the amount of space Clive occupied in the house—he had a downstairs study, an upstairs library, a bedroom, and his own bathroom—and had noted the special character of his rooms. They aren't *out* of character with the rest of the place—they are decorated with Duncan and Vanessa's usual painted panels, windowsills, bedboards, and bookcases—but they are more elegant and more luxurious. The bedroom has an expensive carpet and a pair of ornate Venetian chairs; the study has an elaborate early-nineteenth-century marquetry table. (It had been a wedding present to Clive and Vanessa from his parents.) Clive had evidently wanted his little comforts and conveniences, and had got them. Everybody except poor Angelica seemed to have got what he or she wanted at Charleston. ("The atmosphere was one of liberty and order," Angelica's daughter Henrietta Garnett has written of visits to Charleston during her childhood.) Quentin said of Clive that he was an extremely complex person, and that he had been very fond of him and had taken great pleasure in his company until they fell out over politics.

"Clive was conservative?" I asked. (I had not yet read Quentin's "Bloomsbury," in which he writes sharply of Clive's book "Civilisation," published in 1928: "It seemed that Clive Bell felt it more important to know how to order a good meal than to know how to lead a good life," and "Clive Bell sees civilisation as something that exists only in an élite and from which the helots who serve that élite are permanently excluded. The manner in which civilisation is to be preserved is immaterial; if it can be maintained by a democracy so much the better, but there is no fundamental objection to a tyranny so long as it maintains a cultured class with unearned incomes.")

"Conservative is putting it very mildly," Quentin said. "You could almost say he was Fascistic."

"Then he and Julian must have fallen out even more," I said.

"Well, no," Quentin said. He explained that he himself was the more left-wing of the brothers—in fact, the most left-wing of all the Bloomsbury set,



*Clockwise from top left: Charleston, 1986; Olivier Bell's pamphlet with art by Duncan Grant; Olivier and Quentin Bell this year at their Sussex home; the Charleston dining room, with Vanessa's painted table; Vanessa's self-portrait, c. 1958.*





though he had never joined the Communist Party.

I said that I had assumed Julian's extreme leftness because of his going to Spain in 1937.

"That is a common misconception about Julian," Quentin said, and he went on, "Julian liked wars. He was a very austere person." As Quentin talked about his brother, I felt that he was answering, in part, a question that had "stabbed my heart" when I was reading Vanessa's extraordinarily intimate letters to Julian. Some of them, as she herself was aware, were almost love letters, and I had wondered what Quentin's feelings had been as the less obsessively loved son, who had survived the favorite's death. But I did not pursue the point. Quentin has negotiated the feat of presiding over the Bloomsbury biographical industry while keeping himself out of the Bloomsbury narrative. He has offered only the barest indication of how he felt when he was growing up in his mother's remarkable household. He is mentioned in the family letters and memoirs and diary entries, of course, but the references are rather sparse and uninformative. (In a few of the Bloomsbury photographs in which he appears we glimpse some of the charm and merriness of the author of "Virginia Woolf.") He is almost a kind of generic younger son; Julian is always more visible and more fussed over. Julian's large shadow may have given Quentin's character the protection it needed to flourish outside the family orbit. For whatever reason, Quentin has succeeded in living his own life and keeping his own counsel. Now, in his mid-eighties, he evidently feels it safe (as his uncle Leonard felt it safe in *his* eighties) to break his silence and donate his person to the Bloomsbury novel. He has written a memoir, to be published in England in the fall.

Among the books I had bought in the Charleston gift shop (I noticed that neither DeSalvo's nor Poole's book was on sale there) was a thin pamphlet called "Editing Virginia Woolf's Diary," in which Olivier writes of her experiences as the editor of the diaries that Virginia kept between 1915 and 1941. Their publication, in five volumes, has earned her the highest praise for the excellence of their annotations. In the pamphlet Olivier writes with a voice as distinct as Quentin's, and with a tart note of her own about the invasions of scholars and jour-



nalists that followed the publication of "Virginia Woolf": "The house became a sort of honey-pot with all these Woolf-addicts buzzing around. I had to provide some of the honey in the form of food and drink. Earnest seekers after the truth armed with tape recorders came from Tokyo, Belgrade, or Barcelona; others we came to refer to as 'beard-touchers'—those for whom it was obligatory to be able to state 'I consulted with Professor Bell' when submitting their doctoral dissertation on *Mythic Patterns in 'Flush'* or whatever it might be." She allows herself a bitter comment: "We have sometimes found it hurtful to read articles or reviews by those we have entertained and informed and given up our time to, to the effect that we operated a sort of Bloomsbury closed shop—a protection racket maintained for the purposes of self-aggrandisement and financial gain." (As Olivier points out in the acknowledgments to Volume IV of the diaries, their full publication was possible only because Quentin's share of the royalties issuing from the copyright of Virginia's writings, which he and Angelica inherited from Leonard, were used to pay the costs.) Olivier's tartest comments, however, are reserved for the revisionist works "purporting to demonstrate that both Leonard and Quentin had completely misrepresented [Virginia], and by concealing or cooking the evidence to which only they had access, had been able to present their preferred image—and one in which Leonard himself figured as hero." She goes on, "Perhaps the most grotesque manifestations of this line of approach have been those which discern that it was the fundamental antagonism, sometimes fuelled by Virginia's alleged anti-semitism, between her and Leonard which drove her, not only to periods of despair, but to suicide; indeed, it has been suggested that he practically pushed her into the river."

I have to confess that I did not buy "Editing Virginia Woolf's Diary" because I expected it to be interesting. The title is as enticing as a piece of dry brown bread. What enticed me was the pamphlet's cover, which reproduces one of the minor but, in their way, momentous visual pleasures of the Charleston house. This pleasure—lying on a table beside an armchair in the living room—is a book on whose front cover someone (Duncan, it turns out) has pasted a few geometric shapes of hand-colored paper to form a most handsome

and authoritative abstraction of olive green, umber, black, ochre, and blue. The book is a volume of the plays of J. M. Synge, inscribed to Duncan from Clive in 1913. Why Duncan decorated it thus, no one knows—perhaps a child had put a glass of milk on it and left a ring, perhaps Duncan just felt like making a collage that day. Whatever its impetus, Duncan's little project comes down to us (Olivier told me she had pulled the book back from the brink of consignment to Sotheby's) as an emblem of the spirit of unceasing, unself-conscious—you could almost say artless—artmaking by which Charleston was inhabited.

Sitting beside me at the long, scrubbed table, Quentin returned to Angelica's book and to a photograph of Vanessa she included in it, which distressed him perhaps more than anything else in it. "Now, why did she put that picture in?" he said. "It's the only photograph of Vanessa I've ever seen that makes her look ugly. Do you agree?"

I said I did. The picture shows a grim old woman (it is dated 1951, when Vanessa was seventy-two) with thinning gray hair and round black-rimmed glasses; her mouth is turned down at the corners, and she is returning the camera's pitiless gaze with a kind of wounded directness. The photograph bears no resemblance to others of Vanessa that appear in Angelica's book, or to photographs of her that appear in any other Bloomsbury books. Nothing remains in it of the determined schoolgirl of Hyde Park Gate or the beautiful girl in white whom Leonard saw at Cambridge or the serene woman looking up from an easel or presiding over a garden tea table or the Madonna posing with her children. It is a picture out of a different world—a world stripped of beauty and pleasure and culture, the world of Forster's "panic and emptiness," the world after the great cat has pounced. "I really pity people who are not artists most of all, for they have no refuge from the world," Vanessa wrote in 1939 to a friend that Julian had made in China. "I often wonder how life would be tolerable if one could not get detached from it, as even artists without much talent can, as long as they are sincere." In Angelica's ugly picture, Vanessa is caught in a moment of engagement with the intolerable.

**I**N "A Sketch of the Past" Virginia describes "a certain manner" that she and Vanessa were indelibly taught to as-

sume when people came to tea at 11, Hyde Park Gate. "We both learnt the rules of the game of Victorian society so thoroughly that we have never forgotten them," she wrote in 1940. "We still play the game. It is useful. It has also its beauty, for it is founded upon restraint, sympathy, unselfishness—all civilized qualities. It is helpful in making something seemly out of raw odds and ends. . . . But the Victorian manner is perhaps—I am not sure—a disadvantage in writing. When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their side-long approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud."

Angelica has marched straight up and spoken out loud. She has cut her family down to size. She has shown up the civilized, oblique Bloomsbury manner for the hollow thing she believes it to be. She is a kind of counter-Cassandra—she looks back and sees nothing but darkness. Quentin's quarrel with Angelica over her book is more than a sibling's tiff about whose story is right. It is a disagreement about how stories of lives should be told. "To some extent the difference between us is the difference between one who plods and one who flies," Quentin writes with characteristic sidelongness in his review of "Deceived with Kindness," as he crushingly subjects his sister's flights of accusing generalization to his own tolerant specificity. The struggle between the obedient, legitimate son of Bloomsbury and its disobliging, illegitimate daughter is an uneven one, and Quentin will prevail. The achievement of his biography, his wise and liberal management of the family papers, and the existence of Charleston (in whose restoration Angelica took an active hand, such is the messiness of life: in a novel, she would never have looked at the place again) insure the preservation of the Bloomsbury legend in its seductive Fauve colors. But Angelica's cry, her hurt child's protest, her disappointed woman's bitterness will leave their trace, like a stain that won't come out of a treasured Persian carpet and eventually becomes a part of its beauty. ♦



*"Artist's Study at Charleston," by Duncan Grant, 1967.*