



DELPHI
CLASSICS

Vita Sackville-West

Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

D E L P H I P O E T S S E R I E S

Vita Sackville-West

(1892-1962)



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Vita Sackville-West



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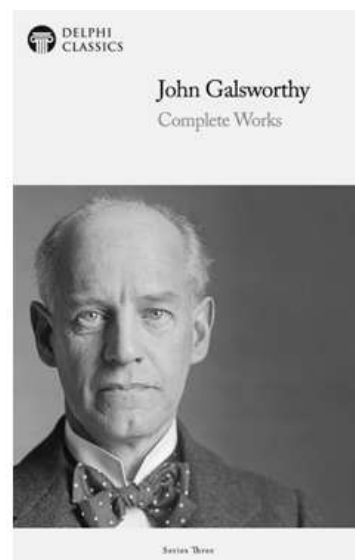
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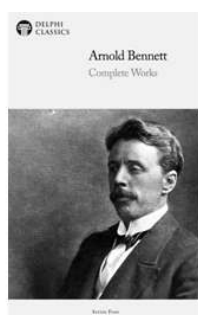
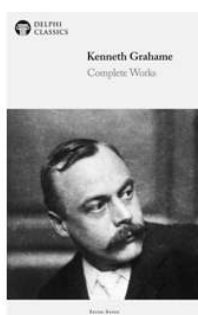
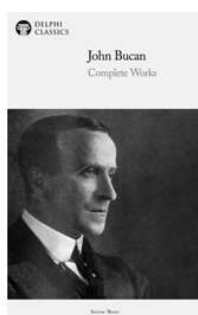
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NOTE



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The Life and Poetry of Vita Sackville-West



Knole, a country house and former archbishop's palace, Sevenoaks, Kent, 1880 — Vita Sackville-West's birthplace



Knole in recent times



Sackville-West with her father at Knole, c. 1899



Sackville-West with her mother at Knole, c. 1899

Brief Introduction: Vita Sackville-West



Vita Sackville-West was born at Knole, the Kent country home of her aristocratic ancestors. She was the only child of the cousins Victoria Sackville-West and Lionel Sackville-West, 3rd Baron Sackville. Although the marriage of Sackville-West's parents was initially happy, they drifted apart shortly after her birth and Lionel took as his mistress an opera singer that came to live with them at Knole. The grand house had been given to Thomas Sackville by Elizabeth I, in the sixteenth century. The Sackville-West family followed the English aristocracy's inheritance customs, preventing Vita from inheriting Knole upon the death of her father — a source of lifelong bitterness for her. The house followed the title and was bequeathed instead to her younger brother Charles, who became the 4th Baron. She was passionately attached to her ancestral home, which was known as a calendar home — with 365 rooms, 52 staircases, 12 entrances, and 7 courtyards. Losing Knole was a grave disappointment, but the traditional laws of primogeniture meant that inheritance passed automatically to the eldest male heir.

Sackville-West was initially taught at home by governesses, before she attended Helen Wolff's exclusive Mayfair day school, where she met her future lovers Violet Keppel and Rosamund Grosvenor. She did not befriend local children and made few friends at school. Her childhood was one of loneliness and isolation. She wrote prolifically at Knole, completing eight full-length (unpublished) novels between 1906 and 1910, ballads and several plays, some in French. Her lack of formal education led to later shyness with her peers. She believed herself to be slow of mind and she was never at the intellectual heart of her social group.

Sackville-West debuted in 1910, shortly after the death of Edward VII. She was courted by Orazio Pucci, the 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 1924 she had a passionate affair with the historian Geoffrey Scott. Scott's marriage collapsed shortly thereafter, as was often the fallout with Sackville-West's love affairs, all with women after this point, as most of them had been before.

She became 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 both would become prominent authors.

Sackville-West was courted for 18 months by the young diplomat Harold Nicolson, 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 the age of 21, Vita married Nicolson in the private chapel at Knole. Her parents were opposed to the marriage on the grounds that that "penniless" Nicolson 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. Still, the wedding went ahead.

The couple had an open marriage. Both Sackville-West and Nicolson had had same-sex relationships before and during their marriage. 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 always secondary for him. 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”.

Nicolson was a diplomat, journalist, broadcaster, Member of Parliament and an author of novels. After the wedding, the couple lived in Cihangir, a suburb of Constantinople, then the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Sackville-West admired the Eastern way of life, but the duties of a diplomat's wife never appealed to her. When she became pregnant in the summer of 1914, they returned to England to ensure that she could give birth in a British hospital. They lived at Ebury Street, Belgravia and bought Long Barn in Kent as their country house. They employed the architect Edwin Lutyens to make improvements to the property. The British declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire in November 1914, following Ottoman naval attacks on Russia, precluded any return to Constantinople.

Sackville-West continued to receive devoted letters from her past lover Violet Keppel. They disappeared together several times from 1918, mostly holidaying in France. One day in 1918, Sackville-West wrote that she had experienced a radical ‘liberation’, where her male aspect was unexpectedly freed. She explained: “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. However, they were unsuccessful. Sackville-West often dressed as a man, styling herself as Keppel's husband. They made a bond to remain faithful to one another, pledging that neither would engage in sexual relations with their husband.

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 depressed, 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 their oath of fidelity had been broken. Despite their separation, the two women remained devoted to each other.

From 1925 to 1927, Nicolson lived in Tehran where Sackville-West often visited him. Her successful travelogue *A Passenger to Tehran* recounts her adventures 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.

Sackville-West's relationship with the prominent modernist author Virginia Woolf commenced in 1925 and ended ten years later, reaching its height by 1928. This decade spent together was the artistic peak of both women's careers, owing to the positive influence they had on one another's work. Neither author was as prolific as at this period of their careers. Though Sackville-West came from an aristocratic family that was much wealthier and better connected than Woolf's, the women bonded over their confined childhoods and emotionally absent parents. Woolf learnt of Sackville-West's relationship with Keppel and was impressed by her free spirit. In return, Sackville-West greatly admired Woolf's writings, considering her to be the superior 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 felt that her books were written with too much haste: “Vita's prose is too fluent.”

To help the Woolfs, Sackville-West chose their company Hogarth Press to be her publisher. *Seducers in Ecuador*, the first Sackville-West book 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 book's romantic themes. The increased security of the Press' fortunes allowed Woolf to write more experimental novels such as *The Waves*, now widely regarded as a staple work of modernist literature. Interestingly, though critics today widely consider Woolf the better writer, critics in the 1920's viewed Sackville-West as more accomplished, with her books outselling Woolf's by a wide 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 her intensely. *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 that changes sex over the centuries. This work was later famously 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 frustrated by Sackville-West's 'promiscuity', charging that her great need for sex led her to take up with "anyone that 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. In the 1930's the lovers clashed over Nicolson's 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, ultimately leading to the end of their relationship in 1935.

In 1930 Sackville-West and her husband acquired and moved to Sissinghurst Castle, near Cranbrook, Kent, which had once belonged to her ancestors. This dynastic link was a great attraction for her, since she had been excluded from inheriting Knole and a title. Sissinghurst was an Elizabethan ruin and the creation of the gardens would become a joint labour of love that would last many decades, beginning with several years of clearing debris from the land. Nicolson provided the architectural structure, with strong classical lines, which would frame his wife's innovative and informal planting schemes. She fashioned an experimental system of enclosures or rooms, such as the White Garden, Rose Garden, Orchard, Cottage Garden and Nuttery. She also pioneered single colour-themed gardens and design principles orientating the visitors' experience to discovery and exploration. Now a world-famous garden, Sissinghurst was first opened to the public in 1938.

Sackville-West took up writing again in 1930 after a six-year hiatus, as she needed money to pay for her gardens. Nicolson, having left the Foreign Office, no longer had a diplomat's salary to draw upon. She also had to pay the tuition of her two sons to attend Eton College. Thanks to the mentorship of Woolf, she felt that she had become a better writer and she took up a weekly column in *The Observer* called "In your Garden". She continued the popular column until a year before her death; her accounts 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.

Sackville-West's poetry remains the least known of her literary work, encompassing epics and translations of volumes such as Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Her epic poems *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946) reveal her enduring passion for the earth and family tradition. *The Land* was likely written in response to T. S. Eliot's central work of Modernist poetry, *The Waste Land* (also published by Hogarth Press). Sackville-West dedicated *The Land* to her lover Dorothy Wellesley. The poem went on to win 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, features numerous references to the Bible, Paracelsus, Ixion, Catullus, Andromeda, the *Iliad* and a Sabine bride, all of which were quite acceptable in early twentieth century verse, though they 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 — being implied at various points to be a man or a woman — it is made clear the narrator loved intensely a woman that is no longer present and who is deeply missed. The narrator's horror and disgust at Ixion, a brutal rapist, implies that she is a woman. At another point in *Solitude*, the narrator's 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.

In time, her love of the classical traditions in literature put her out of favour with modernist critics and by the 1940's she was often dismissed as a dated writer, much to her vexation. In 1947 she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Companion of Honour. She died at Sissinghurst in June 1962, aged 70, from abdominal cancer. She was cremated and her ashes were buried in the family crypt in the church at Withyham, eastern Sussex.



Sackville-West, aged 8



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



Sackville-West in costume for the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Ball at the Royal Albert Hall, June 20, 1911



From left to right: Harold Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West, Rosamund Grosvenor, and Lionel Sackville-West in 1913



Sackville-West's husband, Harold Nicolson, c. 1935



Sackville-West with her sons in 1924



Vita Sackville-West as her alter ego the Duke Orlando, posed specifically for Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel 'Orlando'



Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West at Monk's House, Virginia's home, c. 1932



Sissinghurst Castle, Biddenden Road, Sissinghurst, Kent



Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicolson at Sissinghurst, with their dog Rollo, c. 1960

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