

Virginia Woolf and Scotland Background

Virginia Stephen was born in London on Burns Night in 1882, and died in Sussex in March 1941. In 1912, she married fellow writer and left-wing social commentator Leonard Woolf, and in 1917 they established the Hogarth Press, named after the house where they were then living in Richmond, London. Eventually bringing into print her most experimental fiction and criticism (including eight of her ten novels), as well as the work of other modernist writers, the Hogarth Press helped locate Virginia Woolf at the centre of British literary Modernism.

Although Virginia Woolf was not, as has sometimes been suggested, a member of the aristocracy, she certainly hailed from the upper middle classes, and from what biographers of both Woolf and her father Sir Leslie Stephen have termed an 'aristocracy of intellect'.¹ Her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen, born Julia Jackson, was the daughter of a prominent Anglo-Indian family. Woolf's paternal ancestors, the Stephens, can be traced back to seventeenth-century Aberdeenshire, where they appear to have made a living as farmers and smugglers; it was Woolf's great-great grandfather one James Stephen who migrated to England in the eighteenth century.² By the time of Woolf's birth, the Stephens had firmly established themselves amongst Britain's most influential professionals, as lawyers, judges, university dons, opponents of slavery and, not unparadoxically, colonial administrators; her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a philosopher, literary critic and editor who sought to immortalise the feats of such 'great men' in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. This

¹ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Penguin, 1997), 51; Noel Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 5-7.

² Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 58.

Scottish James Stephen, unlike his English descendants, does not make it into the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but he did have a starring role in the family mythology. Woolf's biographer Hermione Lee recounts:

The famous story about James Stephen, a big strong man, was of his stormy shipwreck in Dorset, in 1752, with a cargo of wine from Bordeaux, and his heroic climb, with four crewmen roped behind him, up a cliff which a cat could not have scaled. (An episode worthy of Walter Scott, as Leslie, a Scott devotee, observed.)³

After this adventure, James Stephen eloped with the customs officer's fifteen year old daughter and eventually became an inmate in a debtors' prison, whereupon he penned pamphlets decrying the injustice of imprisonment for debt and masterminded a prison protest. After his release he attempted to work as a lawyer, but this venture proved unsuccessful when 'the Benchers of the Inns of Court rejected him as a low fellow', and he died in obscurity in 1779.⁴

As Lee suggests above, the picaresque narrative through which the story of this ancestor was handed down to Virginia and her siblings must have been influenced by the literature popular during the Victorian period, and some of the *most* popular was Scottish. The historian James Hunter notes that the novels of James McPherson and Leslie Stephen's beloved Walter Scott, among others, helped establish the international image of Scotland's Highlands and Islands as places of 'romance and adventure' during the nineteenth century.⁵ Reading, as well as writing, was central to Woolf's identity; among the originary stories of

³ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 58.

⁴ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 58; Annan, *Leslie Stephen*, 7.

⁵ James Hunter, *Last of the Free: A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999), 286.

her childhood was not just Thomas Hughes' bestselling tale of quintessentially "English" boyhood, but the work of Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, as well, of course, as Scott himself:

I cannot remember any book before *Tom Brown's School Days* and *Treasure Island*; but it must have been very soon that we attacked the first of that long line of red backs—the thirty-two volumes of the Waverley Novels, which provided reading for many years of evenings because when we had finished the last he [Woolf's father] was ready to begin the first all over again. At the very end of a volume my father always gravely asked our opinion as to its merits, and we were required to say which character we liked best and why. I can remember his indignation when one of us preferred the hero to the far more life-like villain. My father always loved reading aloud, and of all books, I think, he loved Scott the best. [...] He put *Guy Mannering* before most of the others because of Dandie Dinmont, whom he loved, and the first part of the *Heart of Midlothian* he admired so much that his reading of it cannot be forgotten.⁶

Woolf had very little formal schooling (the politics of gender and education would become an important topic in her adult writing)—she took several degree-level courses through the Ladies' Department of King's College, London and had Greek lessons with Clara Pater, sister to the well-known Aesthetic writer Walter Pater. Throughout childhood and adolescence, however, she had free range of the family's extensive library at 22 Hyde Park Gate, and made equally good use of the British Library. Her literary acquaintance with Scotland was

⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'A Daughter's Impressions', in *The Platform of Time: Memoirs of Family and Friends*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (London: Hesperus, 2007), 55-6.

broadened further, and included some specifically Hebridean connections in the form of James Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Johnson* (1773).⁷

As Jane Goldman has demonstrated, this admiring acquaintanceship deeply informs the plot and texture of Woolf's fifth novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927). *To the Lighthouse* has a Scottish setting: the Hebridean Isle of Skye, but its narrative is also 'intertextual', responding to the history of the Island, to narratives of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion, which culminated in Charles Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie's) escape to Skye with Flora Macdonald.⁸ From this history would evolve the famous lullaby the 'Skye Boat Song', and a healthy strain of Jacobite tourism, with romantic visitors to Skye able to enjoy spending time 'under the roof which once harboured the Young Pretender'.⁹ This is a legacy that the fictional Ramsay family and their guests are well-positioned to benefit from.

Yet Woolf herself would not visit the Isle of Skye (in person) until the end of her life. In 1913 she had visited Glasgow with Leonard, but we hear very little of her responses to this, the first of her trips north of the border that we know of, except that their tour of northern cities (every one of them bar Glasgow English) yielded 'every kind of horror and miracle'.¹⁰ In the summer of 1938, the Woolfs crossed the border again: on their itinerary this time was the Borders, Edinburgh, Crainlarich, Glen Coe, Loch Ness, Spean Bridge, Oban and, between

⁷ See Jane Goldman, *'With You in the Hebrides': Virginia Woolf and Scotland* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2013), 8.

⁸ Jane Goldman, 'Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*: Some Hebridean Connections', in *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland*, ed. Caroline Gonda (London: Open Letters, 1992), 151-55; Goldman, *Woolf in Scotland*, 18-32.

⁹ Goldman, 'Metaphor and Place', 152.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman, 6 vols., (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-80), vol 2, 23.

June 24-26, the Isle of Skye.¹¹ Woolf's descriptions of the Island suggest a mixture of the deeply, but uncannily familiar, and a problematic strain of exoticisation which reminds us of Woolf's colonial role as upper-middle-class Englishwoman. Skye is 'Remote as Samoa; deserted: prehistoric' (L6 248); 'it feels like the South Seas—completely remote, surrounded by sea, people speaking Gaelic, no railways, no London papers, hardly any inhabitants [...] you can count all the natives on 20 feet' (L6 243-44). A number of Woolf scholars have explored *To the Lighthouse's* relationship to the British Empire; whether the novel is broadly critical, or whether (perhaps unconsciously on Woolf's part) it is supportive of Imperialist ideology is still debated.¹²

As Jane Goldman observes, Woolf's idiosyncratic account, on the back of a postcard, of Skye as 'fine: hardly embodied; semi-transparent; like living in a jelly fish lit up with green light' (L6 248) recalls Woolf's account of her most formative childhood memory: the experience of lying in bed at the other end of Great Britain, in St Ives, Cornwall and listening in sleepy ecstasy to the sounds of wind and sea, feeling that she was 'lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow'.¹³ It may or may be coincidence that Woolf also drew on memories of her yearly childhood holidays in St Ives when she composed her fictional account of Skye in *To the Lighthouse*, which interweaves its homages to Scotland with more autobiographical material (it was also 'to have father's character [...] & mother's;

¹¹ Goldman, *Woolf in Scotland*, 33.

¹² See, for example, Urmila Sheshagiri, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); David Bradshaw, introduction to Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, new ed., ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxii-xli; Janet Winston, "'Something Out of Harmony": *To the Lighthouse* and the Subject(s) of Empire', *Woolf Studies Annual* 2 (1996), 39-70; Kathy J. Phillips, *Virginia Woolf Against Empire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

¹³ Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past, in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, new ed., ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), 79. Goldman, *Woolf in Scotland*, 33-34.

& St Ives; & childhood'¹⁴). Either way, Skye in 1938 is very beautiful: 'As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if you poured a large jug of champagne over a hairpin.' (L6 244) Skye is also the perfect vantage point for Woolf to re-tell in her letters home some of the contemporary legends she has been encountering on her Scottish journey; regarding the story of the wealthy Winifred Hambro, who drowned in Loch Ness when her speedboat exploded in 1932:

We met a charming Irish couple in an Inn, who were in touch, through friends, with The Monster. They had seen him. He is like several broken telegraph posts and swims at immense speed. He has no head. He is constantly seen. Well, after Mrs Hambro was drowned, the Insurance Company sent divers after her, as she was wearing 3,000 pounds of pearls on her head. They dived and came to the mouth of a vast cavern, from which hot water poured; and the current was strong, and the horror they felt so great, they refused to go further, being convinced The Monster lived there, in a hollow under the hill. In short, Mrs Hambro was swallowed. (L6 244)

Perhaps the influence of Sir Walter Scott can be found in this rendition of the 'local gossip' also (L6 244).

In the novel Virginia Woolf wrote immediately after *To the Lighthouse*, the mock-biography *Orlando* (1928), she has the character of the biographer complain about the frustration of incomplete archives: 'Often the paper was scorched deep brown in the middle of the most important sentence. Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (vol. i) with Andrew McNeillie (vols ii-v), 5 vols., (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977-85), vol. 3, 18.

for hundreds of years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through.¹⁵ Scholars of Virginia Woolf find themselves similarly tempted and eluded trying to follow Woolf on her visit to Skye: ‘sick of copying’, Woolf ‘tore [up]’ portions of her diary notes from their 1938 tour of Scotland (*D5 154*), including her accounts of Skye, leaving her own archives tantalisingly incomplete. Like Orlando’s disgruntled biographer, we have to resort ‘the imagination’ to take her to the end of her Scottish trip.¹⁶

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, new ed., ed. Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 72.

¹⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 72.