



# The Bloomsbury Group: A Queer History

Nino Strachey

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## Introduction

I'm delighted to be here at Gresham College talking about the queer history of the Bloomsbury Group. I'm going to start by focusing on the younger associates of the Bloomsbury Group in the 1920s, looking at what it meant to be young and queer a hundred years ago, and how their open way of living and loving is still relevant to our present day.

In the years before the First World War, a collection of writers and artists began to make a name for themselves in England and America – celebrated for their irreverent spirit, and provocative works of literature and art. Including Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant, they called themselves the Bloomsbury Group and by the 1920s they were at the height of their influence.

Then a new generation stepped forward – creative young people who tantalized their elders with their captivating looks and bold ideas. Some were the children of the Bloomsbury families; others were lovers who became friends. Most remarkably for the period, they were a group of queer young people who found the freedom to express their sexuality amidst a group of supportive adults. To a 21<sup>st</sup> century world still riven by homophobia, biphobia and transphobia they provide a powerful historical example of the benefits of acceptance.

Bloomsbury had always celebrated sexual equality and freedom in private, feeling that every person had the right to live and love in the way they chose. But as transgressive self-expression became more public, this younger generation gave Old Bloomsbury a new voice. Together they pioneered an inclusive way of living not seen for another century – a brief flowering of intergenerational acceptance, pushing at gender boundaries, flouting conventions, embracing sexual freedom.

## Old Bloomsbury

The Bloomsbury Group had gained a controversial reputation before the First World War; by the Twenties they reached a new level of commercial success. Bloomsbury's irreverent spirit struck a chord with the post-war generation, reaching an audience eager to challenge traditional conventions. Young people who met them in person were struck by their frank approach to life and love. It was rare to find an older group so open to new ideas, so accepting of different sexualities. Meeting your heroes was easier when most of them lived next door to each other. *Vogue's* October 1925 edition provided a helpful guide to the Bloomsbury area of London: the Strachey family, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant and Maynard Keynes were all in Gordon Square. Virginia and Leonard Woolf were round the corner in Tavistock Square, living above their Hogarth Press.

It's easy to imagine the Bloomsbury Group running on a smooth path towards success, in continuous occupation of their favoured territory in London. But their habitat was in fact the result of determined action: dispersed during the First World War, the friends came back together in the Twenties like homing pigeons, reassembling in the streets around 46 Gordon Square, the home to which Vanessa and Virginia Stephen had escaped after the death of their father in 1904, seeking a life free from adult interference. It was here that the Stephen sisters had first got to know the Cambridge friends of their brothers Toby and Adrian, finding new ways to connect: a commitment to honest communication between the sexes, to freedom in creativity, to openness in all sexual matters. A family of choice, they created ties of love that lasted a lifetime, embracing queerness, acknowledging difference, defying traditional moral codes.

With Lytton Strachey as their agent provocateur, the friends challenged each other to break new ground. Economist Maynard Keynes stood alone amidst a group dominated by artists and writers. Painter Vanessa Stephen became Vanessa Bell when she married art critic Clive Bell; writer Virginia Stephen became Virginia Woolf when she married

aspiring author Leonard Woolf. Of the writers, only Edward Morgan (E. M.) Forster reached a major audience before the First World War. In the early days it was the painters who captured public attention: curator and critic Roger Fry inspired Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell with his passion for the French post-impressionists. Seen as part of a pioneering group of British modernists, their reputations were amplified through association with the Omega Workshops – an artists collective that helped to develop public perceptions of Bloomsbury as a brand.

Critical support was just gathering momentum when war broke out in 1914 and the war years formed a temporary break in the group's activities, but sales of works by Bloomsbury writers and artists took off again after 1918, building a definitive reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. By this stage most of the original members were nearing their forties, their ideas honed by years of close-knit conversation. Lytton Strachey set the ball rolling with *Eminent Victorians* in 1918; Maynard Keynes challenged conventional economic thinking with *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* in 1919; Duncan Grant held his first solo exhibition in 1920, impressing reviewers with his defiantly modern style. Strachey followed up with *Queen Victoria* in 1921, breaking British publishing records by selling four thousand copies in twenty-four hours. Virginia Woolf couldn't compete with Lytton's sales figures, but she took comfort in the response of literary critics, signing with the same US publisher – Harcourt Brace – for her American editions.

Virginia resented the way journalists began to lump together pre-war founding members with the younger circle of admirers who gathered in the 1920s. Others were more phlegmatic – well aware of the publicity value of linking their names with fashionable 'Bright Young Things'.

## Young Bloomsbury

'Young Bloomsbury' seems the most helpful shorthand to describe the younger admirers who gathered near Gordon Square, renting rooms in Gordon Place, Taviton Street, Brunswick Square and Heathcote Street. A lucky few found lodgings in Gordon Square itself, leasing whole floors of tall Bloomsbury houses from Vanessa Bell or Lytton's brother James and his wife Alix Strachey. Many were fresh from university, finding useful starter roles as models or assistants; they posed for Grant and Bell's paintings, organised exhibitions, set type for the Woolfs at the Hogarth Press, and sifted Lytton Strachey's erotic correspondence. Others were already launched on their own successful careers, bringing reflected glory on their idols. Talented and productive, they led interesting professional lives, and complicated emotional ones. Individually intriguing, their collective value has been consistently underplayed – their achievements obscured in later accounts: young men dismissed as frivolous for embracing their femininity; young women judged by their relationships rather than their careers; connections with fashion, show business or the popular press portrayed as culturally inferior to more 'intellectual' pursuits.

Most were graduates from Oxford, Cambridge or the Slade School of Fine Art, young people with artistic or literary ambitions seeking their way in the world. Nearly all were looking for ways to explore different sexual identities post-university, and Bloomsbury's approach was unusually appealing.

Twenties London was a place of confusing extremes. On one side stood this new, syncopated world of the Bright Young Things – treasure hunts, fancy-dress parties, jazz music and cocktails. On the other stood the old establishment, stern figures of Conservative reaction, represented most fearsomely by William Joynson-Hicks, repressive Home Secretary from 1924 to 1929, who cracked down on nightclubs and indecent literature. At the beginning of the decade, Bloomsbury stood somewhere in between, offering safe spaces for experimentation, and conversations of reassuring emotional honesty with men and women who had earned a reputation for candour. Gradually, the closed circle expanded to bring in a wider range of new recruits, a more playful understanding of intellectually appropriate activity.

## Bloomsbury and the Bright Young Things

While I was researching the period, I was continually struck by the cultural resonances with the present day – the inclusive approach to sexuality, the joyous exploration of different gender identities. With this in mind, let's consider a wonderful image taken by Cecil Beaton. For me, it symbolizes more than any other the crossover between Bloomsbury and the Bright Young Things. The photograph was taken on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> October 1927, at Wilsford, the home of the artist Stephen Tennant. Later that day, the poet Siegfried Sassoon took Tennant over to tea with Lytton Strachey, and Strachey spread the story all round Bloomsbury. Lytton sent a wry account to his lover Roger Senhouse in London:

'The night before they had all dressed up as nuns, that morning they had all dressed up as shepherds and shepherdesses, in the evening they were going to dress up as – God knows what – but they begged and implored me to return with them and share their raptures'<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the romantic pastoral paintings of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French painter Nicolas Lancret, Tennant had supplied his guests with seven identical shepherd's outfits to wear in a tableau: printed floral jerkins with white ruffled collars on

top, knee breeches and stockings below. Beaton and Tennant led the group like pied pipers across the lawn, posing somewhat improbably with baskets of flowers, willow wands and dangling straw hats.

Although Lytton was correct to mention shepherds and shepherdesses as both men and women were involved, the costumes were actually unisex. If anything, the male members of the party look more decorative, as they seem to have whitened faces and rouged cheeks. The crop-headed young people skipped interchangeably across the grass, collapsed in abandon beneath a tree, and lined up on a rustic bridge, their ruffles and ribbons silhouetted against the sky.

Lytton's Wiltshire home, Ham Spray, was only a 40-minute drive from Wilsford, and Tennant would have found the atmosphere very welcoming. By October 1927 Lytton was deeply involved with former Oxford student Roger Senhouse, who made him so happy Lytton said he wanted to do cartwheels over the downs. He loved to deck Roger with garlands of flowers, and to devise plays and performances where genders were disguised. In 1927 Lytton was writing *Elizabeth and Essex*, and echoes of his relationship with Roger appear in the description of the relationship between the aging queen and her much younger favourite.

But I wouldn't want to give the impression that Ham Spray was all about Lytton and Roger. Lytton lived in a creatively productive polyamorous throuple with Dora Carrington and her husband Ralph Partridge. Carrington was a painter and decorative artist, and Partridge worked as Lytton's secretary and literary assistant. Their relationship was consensually non-monogamous, and Lytton welcomed Ralph and Carrington's lovers, in the same way as they welcomed his. Ham Spray became a creative crucible, with Lytton and Carrington nurturing the output of those they loved. Stephen Tomlin became Lytton's 'Sculptor in Ordinary' at Ham Spray, fulfilling multiple commissions, notably a 'Nymph of the Ilex' modelled on Lytton's niece, the writer Julia Strachey. When Julia and Tomlin fell in love, Lytton and Carrington encouraged their work, supported the couple financially, and gave them refuge at Ham Spray whenever challenges arose.

## Young People from Oxford and the Slade

So how did 'Old Bloomsbury' meet all these young people? By happy accident, Oxford University was only a short drive away from Garsington Manor, home of the pacifists Philip and Ottoline Morrell. A haven for Bloomsbury conscientious objectors during the war, it remained a welcome weekend retreat thereafter. Ottoline's eccentricities were ruthlessly mocked by Lytton and Virginia, but the charm of her golden stone house with its shaded terraces was hard to resist. In the 1920s Garsington gained a further attraction – delicate Oxford undergraduates, said by Virginia to grow like asparagus shoots on the lawn. Invited by Ottoline to amuse her teenage daughter, they were of much more interest to Lytton Strachey and Duncan Grant, who followed them attentively round the garden.

One young man who caught everyone's attention was Philip Ritchie. A handsome, broad-shouldered figure, he had thick auburn hair, green eyes and a tendency to burst into song. Escaping the restrictions of his background through drink and gambling, Ritchie experienced a sense of release when introduced to Lytton's Bloomsbury friends. Carrington remembered him talking frenziedly about male love at Ham Spray, and Virginia Woolf used him as bait to tempt Lytton to her parties. When Ritchie died suddenly of tonsillitis in 1927, Woolf experienced a twinge of regret – she wished she'd paid more attention to him during his life, been kinder. Suddenly conscious of her own mortality, Woolf wrote in her diary that she wanted to write a history of all her friends during their lifetimes. She created a hero who evaded death, remaining forever young, changing their gender as the centuries progress. This was the book which became *Orlando*.

Vita Sackville-West's role in the genesis of *Orlando* has been widely acknowledged. But the role of her first cousin Eddy Sackville-West, and his circle of genderqueer Oxford friends, tends to be downplayed. These were the graceful young men Virginia encountered at Garsington, surprising her with their tendency to wear lipstick and powder.

Small and delicate, with large violet eyes, Eddy had his own distinctive charm. Virginia pretended to be irritated by Eddy's effeminacy, his frivolous interest in make-up and jewellery, but she never turned him away. She listened to agonized accounts of broken relationships, had spirited debates regarding sexuality, even agreed to read his diary if it would help unravel some of the emotional complexities.

After Oxford, Eddy's life became a criss-cross of Bloomsbury connections. He moved into a London flat with Lytton's cousin John Strachey and enjoyed brief but passionate love affairs with Stephen Tomlin and Duncan Grant. His first two novels were snapped up by Heineman and appeared in quick succession in 1925 and 1926. The proud young author was photographed for *Vogue* by Cecil Beaton – lying under a leopard skin with Stephen Tennant.

Stephen Tennant didn't go to Oxford – he trained at the Slade School of Fine Art – but he fitted very neatly with Eddy's circle of painted Oxford boys. His clothing designs explored the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. Sometimes they veered into full drag – as when he appeared as Queen Marie of Romania for the

Impersonation Party of July 1927. More often they were blended in approach, with an element of parodic humour, as with his pink satin outfit for the Great Lovers for the Ages Pageant, where according to the press he had some difficulty with the slipper of his Cinderella.

Tennant produced beautiful line drawings in the style of Aubrey Beardsley; his proud mother mounted his first solo exhibition at the age of fifteen, and by 1927 he was swamped with illustrative work for books and magazines. Tennant's designs were sensuous and atmospheric, with a hint of the Russian artist Leon Bakst as well as Aubrey Beardsley. His exploration of bodily adornment and his love of performance anticipate the self-expressive confidence of modern drag culture, and his friends remembered his public appearances fondly.

## Young People from Cambridge

Cambridge University was an equally productive source of stimulating youth. Maynard Keynes left the Treasury to return to King's College as an Economics lecturer in 1919. One of his first actions was to help revive the Apostles – the secret discussion society where many of the original Bloomsbury Group had met in the early 1900s. Old members were allowed to return for the Saturday night meetings, and Lytton Strachey and E.M Forster spent many pleasurable weekends in Cambridge surveying each new set of initiates.

Walter Sprott – rebranded as 'Sebastian' when he joined the Apostles – enjoyed a non-exclusive relationship with Keynes from 1920 to 1925. The son of a provincial solicitor, he was less financially comfortable than many of his Oxford equivalents. Elegantly attenuated, with sharp cheekbones and a shock of dark hair, Sebastian was studying moral sciences in the hope of becoming an academic. Friendly and self-effacing, he was quickly absorbed into many Bloomsbury households. Virginia Woolf worried about his skinny frame, his lack of resources, and made sure he was invited to Garsington. Vanessa Bell employed him one summer as a tutor for her children, serving also as a model for herself and Duncan Grant.

Sebastian took a double first and went on to become a Professor of Psychology at the University of Nottingham. Here he began a long-term relationship with a local man called Charles Lovett. It was through Sebastian, and his writer friend Joe Ackerley, that E.M. Forster began to connect more regularly with young gay men from working class backgrounds. Forster found these experiences life-changing, triggering revisions to his novel *Maurice*, and the creation of other work celebrating love between men of different social classes. Although none of this material could be published during Forster's lifetime, due to the looming threat of prosecution, the posthumous impact was considerable.

Dismissed by Lytton as colourless, Cambridge student Angus Davidson made a deeper impression on Duncan Grant, who found him inspiring as a lover and a model, returning to the same subject again and again. Angus sat patiently for portraits in oils, and for intimate drawings of his naked form. When Angus moved into rooms in Heathcote Street near Gordon Square, Duncan covered the walls and furniture with romantic decoration – serenading lovers on a cupboard, giant arum lilies over the fireplace, panels of swirling colour in every alcove.

Angus's rooms were illustrated in *Vogue* and *New Interior Decoration* as examples of Duncan's work, and astute observers would also have noticed Angus's figure appearing both naked and clothed in Duncan's solo exhibition at the Independent Gallery in 1923. In December 1924 the Woolfs took him on as their Assistant at the Hogarth Press, thankful to have found someone so quiet and industrious to rely on.

Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey went to watch student performances by another Cambridge student - the beautiful Dadie Rylands. Duncan Grant designed costumes and stage sets; Cecil Beaton photographed him dressed as the Duchess of Malfi. Woolf offered Dadie a job at the Hogarth Press, and published his first volume of poetry 'Russet and Taffeta', but he decided to return to Cambridge to lecture in English.

Dadie and his artist friend Douglas Davidson rented rooms from Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant at 37 Gordon Square. Dadie and Douglas threw parties at no 37 which spread through the house, crossing the world of stage and cinema, introducing Bloomsbury to film stars such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Evenings out with Dadie could be a roller-coaster ride. On one night he and Lytton started their revels at the Café Royal, went on to Ciro's nightclub, then to various apartments via taxi, drinking champagne en route. On another, they had dinner at the Ivy, then headed to the BBC to watch Dadie give a broadcast, finishing the evening in a pub so Dadie could pick up a soldier.

## Young Relations

Sometimes the connections were closer to home: a few children of Bloomsbury families reached adulthood in the early Twenties. Of these the Stracheys were most noticeable. Julia Strachey, eldest child of Lytton's brother Oliver, would have stood out in any crowd. Virginia Woolf described her as a 'gifted wastrel'<sup>ii</sup>, one of those beautiful young people who seemed to be able to turn their hand to anything but settle at nothing. Julia wrote, acted, and drew with unusual sensitivity, and played jazz piano like a demon. Her father hoped she would make her living as a commercial artist and sent her to study at the Slade. But what Julia really wanted to do was write. Encouraged by Lytton and Carrington, Julia filled notebook after notebook with Proustian descriptions of the world around her. Woolf kept a beady eye on Julia's work and prized her first finished novel out of her hands, complaining that she was a typical Strachey and as slippery as an eel. Julia's *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* was duly published by the Hogarth Press, with a cover drawing of Julia by Duncan Grant.

Uncle Lytton and 'Tante' Carrington fostered a consensually non-monogamous union with the bisexual sculptor Stephen Tomlin. Tommy had dropped out of Oxford to study with established sculptor Frank Dobson. With a busy studio in Fulham, and a growing cohort of willing sitters, Tommy seemed destined for a shining future. The couple married in 1927, moving to Swallowcliffe in Wiltshire. But Tommy lived a life of sensory extremes; when happy his wild excitement was infectious, his energy mesmeric. When sad, he could be plunged into almost fathomless despair. He might be present for weeks, then withdraw in silence to his studio, refusing all contact. Julia accepted Tommy's bisexuality, well aware of his ongoing relationships with many Bloomsbury figures, young and old. She even welcomed one of his male lovers into their home. What she found harder to cope with were his periods of severe depression and frenzied self-reproach.

However erratic his moods, the young sculptor went on to carve the definitive images of Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf. Today many of his pieces are in public collections, displayed at Charleston, Monk's House, Tate, and the National Portrait Gallery. His bust of Woolf stares angrily out from a pedestal in Tavistock Square. Woolf hated being pinned down for sittings, and her furious discontent is etched into the clay, creating an image of haunting potency. It remains her best-known representation.

Julia's cousin John Strachey seemed set to follow the typical family path. Having been embedded in the aesthetic crowd at Oxford, he became a regular at Garsington, before setting up home in London with Eddy Sackville-West. Inspired by the same sense of Bloomsbury rebellion against conventional moral and social practices, John took his activism beyond the personal sphere, and into the political arena. John joined the Labour party, campaigning for his first parliamentary seat in 1924. He became a committed Marxist, editing the *Socialist Review*, and standing on the side of the workers in the General Strike of 1926. The Gordon Square Stracheys took a more personal approach to social change. Their dissent was embodied in individual action, and they never sought a fundamental change to the organisation of their country. John Strachey had grown up in a more revolutionary era, exposed to the siren call of Soviet propaganda, lured by the dream of a socialist utopia. John became a Labour MP in 1929, and his 1932 book 'The Coming Struggle for Power' became one of the UK's most influential Marxist publications.

## Queer Bloomsbury – nurturing a new generation of young creatives

John's radical political beliefs and Tommy's character-revealing sculpture represent interesting touchpoints between the generations; each group had something to learn from the other. Cross-dressing bright young people were as happy to be snapped by Cecil Beaton in broad daylight as they were after dark, and Bloomsbury figures began to embrace the new approach, appearing in popular magazines alongside writers and artists twenty years their junior. Over the next decade, the Oxford and Cambridge graduates transformed into journalists, novelists, poets and party-givers, inviting their seniors to join in the fun. After some agonised wrestling with intellectual snobbery, Virginia Woolf embraced the high fees offered for pieces in *Vogue*. In an equally bold step, Grant and Woolf signed up as founder members of the Gargoyle Club in Soho – which became a centre of bohemian nightlife in the decades that followed – tempted by the idea of club free from rules, where members were encouraged to express themselves freely.

The younger generation promoted and inspired their seniors, propelling them into new types of media, and energising their artistic and literary production. Bloomsbury figures learnt to broadcast on the radio, mix cocktails, dance the Black Bottom and exploit the publicity value of gossip columns. This was the age of the elaborate fancy-dress party, and Bloomsbury loved nothing more than gender-blurring costume. Lytton Strachey and Clive Bell appeared regularly on guest lists in the *Evening Standard*, donning elaborate outfits for events like the Nautical Party or the Circus Party. Woolf accepted almost as many invitations, merrily denouncing her hosts and fellow guests thereafter. She and Lytton adored gossip and sexual intrigue, lending a willing ear to troubled young lovers of varying orientations.

Journalist Raymond Mortimer was one of many to find contact with Bloomsbury a transformative experience. As a smart young man about town, he was soon writing pieces for *New Statesman* and *Vogue*. Slim, dark and attractive,

with a mop of curly hair, Raymond would never be Lytton's idea of a 'beauty', but he cut a dashing figure. Virginia was amused by his tiger-striped sweaters and loud ties, and the curious shape of his inquisitive nose. Ever charming, he was invited everywhere, figuring as often in the social columns as he did in the review pages.

For a few brief years Raymond became what would be described today as a 'social influencer'. Old Bloomsbury was pleased when he reviewed their work, or attended their parties, and Young Bloomsbury turned out in droves for his after-dinner gatherings. His flat in Gordon Place was helpfully located halfway between the Woolf's home in Tavistock Square and the growing cohort in Gordon Square itself. His set of upper rooms became the setting for regular late-night parties. Some were mixed – including his Vogue editor Dorothy Todd and her partner Madge Garland – but the majority were for men only.

Vogue articles mentioned Raymond's bizarre newspaper wallpaper, but they tended not to dwell on his pair of back-lit wig-stands, perched on corner cupboards painted by the surrealist John Banting with naked men and the portraits of male friends. In the adjoining room, murals by Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell show rich red curtains being drawn back to reveal a lush garden filled with fountains, flowers and fruit. The stage was set for amorous interaction on the divan below.

Every now and then Virginia Woolf would stray into one of Raymond's evenings, and the frankness of conversation pops up in her letters and diaries. Images are passed round, relationships discussed, clothing admired. Similar intimacies are shared in correspondence between young and old, male and female, across the group: in letters to Lytton, Dadie Rylands reveals his passion for fellow students, his success with soldiers and sailors; Dora Carrington sends love and lust to Lytton's niece Julia Strachey; Lytton teases Sebastian Sprott for gladdening the eye of male admirers with his taste for rings, décolleté shirts, and Venetian sombreros; Eddy Sackville-West pours out his heart to Lytton's psychoanalyst sister-in-law, Alix Strachey, who returns the favour with tortured accounts of her rejection by lover Nancy Morris

Sexual openness of this type between friends would be impressive in the 2020s, but in the 1920s it was remarkable. Homosexuality remained illegal, and hostile attitudes to lesbian love were whipped up when Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was condemned as an obscene publication in 1928. Bloomsbury provided a supportive environment for queer young people that they were unlikely to find elsewhere. For those who could afford it, mental health care tended to be a traumatic experience: mainstream psychiatry still saw same-sex love as an illness requiring treatment. My heart bleeds for Eddy Sackville-West, who was subjected to an eight-week 'cure' in Germany, involving painful testicular injections. Stephen Tennant spent twelve months of virtual isolation in a psychiatric hospital. Freudian approaches were scarcely more sympathetic: leading British analyst Dr Ernest Jones diagnosed Stephen Tomlin's lover Henrietta Bingham as suffering from sexual inversion with neurotic symptoms, suggesting strategies for displacement. Using Henrietta as a case study for the treatment of 'female homosexuality', Dr Jones was sharing progress reports with Freud in Vienna, and anonymised accounts with the British Psychoanalytical Society. Virginia Woolf took no prisoners with her language, but it was surely far better to feel able to have a robust debate with Virginia or Lytton on sexual terminology than sit in fearful silence ashamed of your unmentionable identity.

Why does this matter to me? Queerness is no longer seen as a mental illness in Britain, but the mistreatment of queer young people persists. Bullying and discrimination lead to alarming rates of depression, self-harm and feelings of suicide. Children and young adults still go to school and university feeling unsafe, their peers using labels they identify with as insults. Trans students are particularly at risk. With queer histories so often silenced, and records destroyed through fear of discrimination or prosecution, sharing stories of positive interaction between the generations takes on a new relevance. Older people play a vital role when they show their support, building confidence, nurturing future talent. I have found much to celebrate in the world of Young Bloomsbury, and in the queer history of my own family.

Lytton Strachey was one of the lucky guests at a party thrown by Virginia Woolf and her sister-in-law Karin Stephen in February 1925. Crowds of 'bright young people' flooded through the doors. Lytton hovered ecstatically amidst a group of Oxford undergraduates, invited specially to capture his attention. Vanessa Bell spent hours talking to bisexual sculptor Stephen Tomlin, who was besieged by admirers from every side. Writing afterwards to her friend Jacques Raverat, Virginia conjured up a perfect vision of queer contentment: young men in white tie and tails waltzing around the room in each other's arms, while young women flirted happily with each other in corners.

Bloomsbury Group houses formed safe spaces for sexual expression – places where men who loved men would meet women who loved women, with little threat of exposure or challenge. Gender non-conformity was to be expected, and age was never seen as a barrier. For a queer young person in the 20s, these homes provided welcome moments of life affirming normality in a generally hostile adult world. Severe legal penalties threatened the unwary. Policemen prowled the streets around Piccadilly looking for signs of 'gross indecency' (lipstick, powder compacts, wide-legged trousers). Tabloid journals like John Bull fulminate against the apparent rise in 'painted boys', deploring male use of perfume and cosmetics, encouraging arrests for anything that looked suspicious. But tall Bloomsbury

houses had their drawing rooms on the first floor, and transgressive parties were safely out of view from the pavements below.

Men who danced with men became a clear target for police enforcement during this period. Plain-clothes officers inveigled their way into clubs and dance halls, seizing clothing and make-up as evidence, and recording what they saw. If you were unlucky enough to have a hostile neighbour, raids could even be made on private homes. A dancer called Bobby Britt was subjected to the full force of the law when officers stormed into his basement flat at 25 Fitzroy Square, arresting everyone present. The police had been watching his home for several days, peering in through the bedroom rooflights, looking for signs of men entering together.

A strange double standard seemed to apply. If found wandering near Piccadilly with a powder compact in his pocket, a young man could be charged with importuning for immoral purposes and sentenced to three months in prison. If invited to an expensive fancy-dress ball, you could smother yourself in makeup and expect your face to appear in the press with little adverse comment, even if you were dressed as a foreign queen or a famous female film star. The context was critical, regardless of social background. Men who enhanced their features on a daily basis were to be suspected of vice, their behaviour a signifier of sexual transgression. Guests transforming themselves to fit the theme of a party were quite another matter.

The Bloomsbury Group reached a high point of fame in the 1920s. Success is always alluring, but this was not the only reason why a group of forty-somethings suddenly appealed so strongly to young men and women in their twenties. There was something else, something more subtle at play. The growing numbers of admirers who gathered like bees round a honey pot were not just seeking celebrity, they were seeking affection. As queer young people they were looking for a place where they could be themselves, amidst adults who would accept them for who they really were. Bloomsbury writers and artists seemed to have defied conventional morality, and lived to tell the tale – faith, fidelity, heterosexuality and patriotism had all been rejected, but without noticeable penalty. Ahead of their time, they had established an open way of living that would not be embraced for another hundred years.

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<sup>i</sup> Lytton Strachey to Roger Senhouse, 4 November 1929. *The Letters of Lytton Strachey*, edited by Paul Levy, Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2005, p 577

<sup>ii</sup> Virginia Woolf 13 December 1924. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume II*, edited by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew MacNeillie, Hogarth Press 1978, p 324

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## Further Reading

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