

NOT CHECKED IN TALKS DEPARTMENT WITH 'AS BROADCAST' SCRIPT

Producer: P.H. Newby

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND 'ORLANDO'

by V. Sackville-West

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I think it was made pretty clear in the recently published extracts from Virginia Woolf's diary that the idea of her book Orlando was inspired by her own strange conception of myself, my family, and ~~Knole~~ my family home. Such things as old families and great houses held a sort of Proustian fascination for her. Not only did she romanticise them - for she was at heart a born romantic - but they satisfied her very acute sense of the continuity of history, English history in particular. These facts having been made clear for all to read in the printed pages of her diary, there can be no reason why I should not now reveal something of the inception of that book and its progress throughout the months she spent writing it, as related in various letters I received from her during that period.

The first letter is dated October 9th 1927 and it startled me considerably.

"Yesterday morning I was in despair. You know that bloody book which Dodie and Leonard extort, drop by drop from my breast? Fiction, or some title to that effect. I couldn't screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands, dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando, a Biography. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas.



I wrote rapidly till twelve. Then I did an hour to fiction. So every morning I am going to write fiction (my own fiction) till twelve; and the other fiction till one. But listen: suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita, and its all about you and ~~the~~ lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind, - heart you have none - suppose there's the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people as the lustre on an oyster shell - suppose, I say, that next October someone says "There's Virginia gone and written a book about Vita," shall you mind? Say yes or no. Your excellence as a subject arises largely from your noble birth - but what's 400 years of nobility, all the same? - and the opportunity thus given for florid descriptive passages in great abundance. Though, I admit, I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd incongruous strands in you; and also, as I told you, it sprung upon me how I could revolutionise biography in a night; and so, if agreeable to you, I would like to toss this up in the air and see what happens. Yet, of course, I may not write another line.

"You will come on Wednesday? You will write now, this instant, a nice humble letter of duty and devotion to me.

"I am reading Knole and the Sackvilles. Dear me, you have a rich dusky attic of a mind. Oh yes, I want very much to see you."

I was not misled by this sudden, urgent desire for my company. I realised that it was the author's form of cupboard love - in other words, I had become "copy".

As we now know, she did write another line; many thousands of other lines. I think she really enjoyed writing this book and that it cost her less agony than many of the others. It represented her high spirits, her sense of humour, and her sense of sheer fun, none of which are very apparent in the extracts we



have been given from her diary. She was excited. Letters poured in. The next one begins, four days later:

"Well, thank God, Vita ain't coming," I said, putting the telegram down with a snort. Why, asked Leonard, looking up from his handkerchief. To which I had no answer ready, but the true one came: Because my nose is red.

"The poor Wolves have been having colds in the head... (Here I omit some irrelevant passages.)

"I am writing at great speed, she goes on. For the third time I begin a sentence, the truth is... The truth is I'm so engulfed in Orlando I can think of nothing else. It has ousted fiction, psychology, and the rest of that odious book completely. Tomorrow I begin the chapter which describes you and Sasha meeting on the ice. I am swarming with ideas... Look here, I must come down and see you, if only to choose some pictures. I want one of a young Sackville, (male) temp. James 1st; another of a young Sackville, (female) temp. George III. Please lend yourself to my little scheme. It will be a little book, about 30,000 words at most, and at my present rate which is feverish (I think of nothing but you all day long in different guises) I shall have it done by Christmas."

She seemed determined to make a short book of it. She must have changed her mind, or else her subject ran away with her, for Orlando ran into something like 90,000 words instead of 30,000.

"Orlando will be a little book, with pictures and a map or two. I make it up in bed at night; as I walk the streets; everywhere. I want to see you in the lamplight, in your emeralds. In fact I have never more wanted to see you than I do now, just to sit and get you to talk and then rapidly and secretly correct certain doubtful points. About your tooth, now, and your temper. Do you grind your tooth at night? Is it true



"that you love giving pain? What and when was your moment of greatest disillusionment? Still, you say you can't come, and my nose is red, so I forgive you.

"This is written 500 words to the minute."

If all that does not exhibit high spirits and the exhilaration of the creative artist in a sustained mood, I should like to be shown a better example.

Then she gets worried. People are pressing her for delivery of the manuscript - typescript. Publishers have heard about a new book by Virginia Woolf:

"The Americans must have the first chapter by May 1st. All your fault. I could write another three volumes easily. Appendices blossom in my head. Oh Vita, Vita, how could you have brought my life to ruin and wasted the fair taper in a sea of grease!"

Then she gets interrupted, the most exacerbating, nerve-racking thing that can happen to any artist carried along on the high neap tide of inspiration:

"Here I am cursing God because I have to go to Reading tomorrow and so cut short my morning's work. You see, when the mind is bent one way, it's physical and moral torture to unbend. The more reeds in the river-bed can take this turn or that; what hurts them is concentration. But then they don't write poems; they don't even write novels, as bad as mine are."

One begins to detect that the inevitable moment is approaching; the moment when the gale of inspiration starts to drop and the ship threatens to become becalmed with the failing wind. Sailing the high seas under a fair, high wind was fine; top sails and gallants were set and filled; one was blown along at a spanking pace. Then comes the agonising effort to puff the barque into the final harbour.

In other words, one must finish one's book.



"This damned Orlando," she writes; "I want to finish it and I can't finish it, and then I wake in the night so excited and have to take a sleeping draught and so spend my day moping. I rather think, too, it's an addled egg, too hasty, too slapdashery, and all over the place... I shall put it into a drawer until May.

"Orlando's bad," she writes, "won't be out, if at all, till the autumn. Oh heavens, what a bore Orlando is, worse in his death than in his life, I think. I'm so tired of him."

And then:

"Did you feel a sort of tug, as if you were being broken, on Saturday last at five minutes to one? That was when you died - or, rather, stopped talking, with three little dots... Now every word will have to be re-written. It's all over the place, incoherent, intolerable, impossible. And I am so sick of it. The question now is, will my feelings for you be changed? I've lived on you all these months. Coming out, what are you really like? Do you exist? Have I made you up?

"I don't want to write another word for months, not a letter even. Do you ever feel words have gone dry in your mind? Your mind like a shape in the dark? You squeeze it, and nothing comes. In October my mind was dripping. That is the only life.

"I am rather depressed. Orlando so bad. Can't write."

Anyhow, she had killed Orlando, or at any rate had stopped him talking, with those three little dots, and had liberated herself from that incubus. She had once referred to him as that Old Man of the Sea. The reviews began to come in. I think the one which gave her most amusement was the one which said "Mrs. Harold Nicolson is the Orlando of Miss Rebecca West's remarkable book of that name." Punch picked that up, with the



comment "Will Mrs. Woolf now become an *Orlanda furiosa*?"

But the reviews were not all favourable. People were puzzled.

"I am sorry that Jack Squire annoyed you," she writes, "but I don't think he ought to. Arnold Bennett will be far worse, so be prepared. The only thing I should mind is that it would make you or Harold think less well of me or Orlando, but it won't will it?"

"The sales were good. We've got to reprint.

"Orlando has now sold 13,000 copies in America; that's the last time I mention him."

It wasn't the last time she mentioned him, as I shall now relate.

I must explain that I had never read one word of Orlando until the day of publication. Apart from the indications in her letters, I had no idea what she was up to. But on the day of publication I received a parcel containing the printed book - which, as you may imagine, I read with unparalleled avidity and curiosity - and also containing the manuscript of Orlando which is today amongst my most treasured possessions. I might add here, that she had gone to the trouble of getting them both specially bound for me in niger leather with the additional detail of my initials on the spine; I put this in, because readers of the extracts from her diary may not have discovered how thoughtful and practical this extremely busy woman could be, with her frail health and the wild genius driving at her all the time, and people pursuing her and wanting to meet her and lionise her... Yet she could find the time to go round to a book-binder and arrange with him for those special bindings for me. Seldom have I been more deeply touched.

I was looking idly through the manuscript one day when



something struck me as unfamiliar and I realised that I had lit upon an entirely unpublished passage. It is this which I propose to read to you now, by way of conclusion. I should explain that the allusion to slipping bank notes under people's plates refers to an ancestor of my own who was in the habit of thus befriending Dryden.

"Here the footman brought in a note from Miss Christina Rossetti to say that she was sorry to find she had a previous engagement. The notepaper was excellent; the style plain; the beginning and ending as simple as could be. 'Dear Lady Orlando... yours sincerely Christina Rossetti.' Couldn't she slip banknotes beneath the plates anymore? And they didn't hang about in waiting rooms? They had houses, it seemed, of their own. Miss Rossetti made no mention (as they used to do) of her Ladyship's great condescension and goodness, nor hint that there was a little place, in the office of the King's Chamberlain, worth two hundred a year, which her brother, etc., (as they used to do). No: Miss Rossetti seemed to expect nothing whatever, and if she happened to be out next Wednesday, out she was. Orlando might call another day. Added to this independence they often had little family trees of their own. Many had been gentry in a small way since the time of Elizabeth. But how did this affect that great object of Orlando's veneration - on which she had spent many thousands in gratuities and pension, which she had sheltered and succoured, which it was the passion of her life herself to practice - Literature? In this she found it hard to give an opinion, for a very long time; for as soon as she had done one book, there were a dozen more on her table. Also, half of them were not books pure and simple but books about books. So that long before she had come by any opinion of her own, she knew that twenty different people thought it the greatest



book and the worst book in the world; that it was possible to hold twenty different opinions; of other people: and these were printed and signed and presumably paid for, she was bound to respect them above her own. So by degrees, she began to change her view of Literature as a wild and vivid flame, now the crags of Scotland, now some quiet English parsonage, flickeringly, indiscriminately; a spirit incalculable and beautiful and venerable; and saw it instead as a portly and respectable gentleman, who never was stupid always telling people what they ought to think; and writing and talking and lecturing and commemorating so that not a day passed without a dinner, or a celebration, or an anniversary. So respectable, so busy, so opulent, as a prosperous and garrulous middle aged gentleman with a flower in his buttonhole. He wrote, he talked, he lectured. He celebrated anniversaries. He commemorated occasions. He presided at dinners. He gave prizes. He was for ever - sometimes she took a ticket and went to a Hall at three o'clock in the afternoon - delivering a series of lectures upon Byron's place in English poetry, and Shelley, Wordsworth, or the Romantic Revival and some such subject, to rows of old people, who nodded, and rows of very young ones who gaped; and heaven knows why - for was it not all very nice and fluent and interesting - what he said about Shelley and Wordsworth, and Byron and the Romantic Revival and she would go into the street, like one who has been half suffocated in folds of dirty plush, and the wind itself seemed to know more about literature than he did, or the old beggar woman, or newspaper placards on the lamp posts. 'My God,' she would wire to Marmaduke, 'My God!' And then going home poured herself out a stiff tumbler of red Spanish wine - for was she not dining with some literary Club or other; where the respectable body would refresh itself after thus doing honour to



the dead, and expect, not a bank note slipped under its plate, but a compliment, all fresh and luscious, popped between its lips? This then was Literature, she concluded, a body. Then, for it was now the day after the dinner, the footman announced that Lady A. was come to fetch her Ladyship.

The two ladies drove in a great yellow barouche hung on springs; all through Kensington and the market garden to Chelsea, where Lady A. who was a daring jolly woman, stout and buxom and of the best blood in England, swore on her oath she would shew Orlando - since Orlando cherished these fellows - her dear Carlyle. The footman descended, and rapped at the old little, shabby door. One of his gigantic raps was enough. Out flew an astonishing apparition:- a woman all eyes and cheek bones and... Be off with you, fool! <sup>l.c.</sup> She screamed, "I'd have you know my Thomas is asleep!"

Even Lady A. was snubbed. She sank back in her carriage mumbling and told the coachman to find out Tennyson's address. It was Faringford, Freshwater, Isle of Wight. They arrived one spring evening with the lilac in bloom. Half way up the carriage drive they encountered an obstacle - a lady in a bath chair. The man was for passing her. But the invalid raised herself. She stretched a frail white hand across the horses noses.

"No further" she said and even the horses quivered.

"My husband is writing a poem." Such was the awfulness of her demeanour that there was nothing for it but to return to London; and when Lady A. proposed to visit Browning in Florence, Swinburne at Putney, or Moredith at Box Hill, Orlando refused; since there could be no doubt that the greater the genius, the more it was sequestered. It could only write if it was enclosed in a sound proof room and protected by a wife. That



was a change too, thought Orlando, comparing Dryden and Tennyson; but genius being inaccessible, she was forced to consort with the writers who managed to write without a trace of it: the Smiles, the Tuppers, the Smiths, the Hemans, the Prossers, their names are legion and all forgotten now, though once claimed immortality, Smith said that Tupper was immortal and once Smiles said that Smith was and once they were very bitter about it; all are forgotten now; and it is only when the shelf creaks a little that we remember their names."