

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**S. P. Rosenbaum, *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club*,  
edited by James M. Haule, hardback, 216 pages, New York:  
Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. ISBN: 978-1137360359;  
US \$32, £20.**

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*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11 Number 2 (Autumn 2014)

S. P. Rosenbaum, whose scholarship has probed the cultural history of Bloomsbury more than anyone else's, leaves us with this final contribution, following his death in 2012. Its ideal companion is his *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism*, which he revised to include additional content in 1995. Undoubtedly this would have been expanded further following the research for the present book. The appearance in print of *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club* is owing to the efforts of his widow, scholar Naomi Black, and especially its editor, James M. Haule. As explained in Haule's introduction, Rosenbaum's work on the five chapters that treat the early years of the Club (1920–28) was nearly complete at the time of his death. Though there are only a little over two pages of his planned sixth chapter on Virginia Woolf's 1928 essay, 'Old Bloomsbury', some of what he would have had to say can be found in a late paper written for an academic conference, titled 'Virginia Woolf among the Apostles', which is included in an appendix. Haule does not interpret the work in his introduction, but instead reiterates Rosenbaum's stated intentions. The author is concerned not just with the memoirs that members of the Club presented at its occasional meetings, but also with their broader connections to the genre and to one another. His range expands to additional memoirs by the members of the group, works in other genres they were publishing at the time they were involved in the Club, and even memoirs by an older generation of their families.

Molly McCarthy convened the first meeting of the Bloomsbury Memoir Club early in 1920. She was working on her own memoir, but also wanted to encourage her

husband, critic Desmond McCarthy, to work on his writing. Those who received invitations were connected by kinship, marriage or the men's connections to Cambridge University—particularly the discussion group known as the Apostles. The original members included the McCarthys, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey and Maynard Keynes. E. M. Forster was soon added. The group survived with replenished membership, meeting off and on, until the death of Clive Bell in 1964. Rosenbaum encourages us to view the history of the Memoir Club as an on-going conversation among friends who took up topics of shared interest, rather than shared ideology. A presentation at one meeting might encourage memoirs along a similar line at the next and topics evolved over the years. Their intimacy encouraged the use of both humour and irony and allowed them to leave many personal things unsaid. Explaining such gaps is part of Rosenbaum's task.

Lacking records of the Memoir Club's approximately 60 meetings over the years, Rosenbaum collected evidence from members' autobiographical writings, one of his best sources being Virginia Woolf's readily accessed reactions in her diaries and letters. A very valuable appendix, 'A List of Memoir Club Papers', compiled by both Haule and Rosenbaum, includes all of the known surviving memoirs, both published and unpublished. He is able to provide more accurate dating of many of the presentations.

While Rosenbaum occasionally refers to biographies of the figures he is discussing, he makes almost no specific reference to other scholarship dealing with the memoirs. This becomes regrettable when he offers general refutations of others' views of such controversial topics as Woolf's presentation of her girlhood experiences of sexual abuse. Wishing to make a case for Woolf's use of 'humour', reaching a 'comic climax' in the memoir '22 Hyde Park Gate', he dismisses Woolf's ultimate description of her half-brother George as his two sisters' 'lover'. It would seem that anything short of copulation does not qualify George as an abuser in his estimation. Thus, working his own humour off the term 'climax', Rosenbaum further summons Woolf's early statement in the memoir that her half-sister Stella's husband had reported to her that George 'lived...in complete chastity until his marriage' (76). A supposed recent upsurge of sexual abuse denial, spurred by a remark by Francis Spaulding in the guide to 'Virginia Woolf: Art, Life and Vision' at the National Portrait Gallery, has been a topic of discussion on the Virginia Woolf list-serve. Rosenbaum's denial in *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club* has been offered in support of the trend. Nuanced positions, sensitive to the difficulty and complexity of testimony and aware of casual Victorian attitudes toward incest, continue to emerge.

Rosenbaum has clear interests in 'Old Bloomsbury' and the ambience of the all-male institution of the Apostles, and these receive abundant attention in the book. He is sensitive to the masculine gender imbalance of the Memoir Club. What will prove fresh for a number of readers is his treatment in Chapter 2, 'Ancestral Voices, Cambridge Conversations', of women's memoirs attached in one way or another to the group. Among the ancestors (a relation of both Virginia Woolf and Molly McCarthy) is 'Aunt Annie' (Anne Thackeray Ritchie), whose reminiscences of famous Victorians

impressed Woolf for their renditions of mood, places and people. Rosenbaum focuses upon their combination of humour and sympathy and suggests that her style may have influenced McCarthy's memoir of her childhood. He brings forth additional influential aunts and mothers for other members of the group. Notable among these is E. M. Forster's great aunt, Marianne Thornton, whose biography he wrote. Maynard Keynes' mother, Florence Ada Keynes, published her memoirs after his death, but by mentioning her, Rosenbaum can present a woman distinguished by her education and activism. Lytton Strachey's mother, Jane Maria Strachey, wrote her memoirs very late in life, while the memoir club was first meeting, and Leonard Woolf saw to their publication. Rosenbaum describes their variable content and vigour, including both imperialist and suffragist attitudes. Lady Strachey's editing of the journals of her aunt, Elizabeth Grant, provides valuable pre-Victorian social documentation of the highland life she was born to, as well as eventful stays in London, Oxford, Holland and India, where she met and married an Irishman.

Chapter 4: 'Private and Public Affairs: 1921–22' is of considerable interest. It acquaints readers with the content of memoirs delivered by club members. Perhaps most interesting among these are the memoirs delivered by Maynard Keynes and E. M. Forster—Keynes for giving a personal side to the peace negotiations he participated in at the close of World War I, Forster for humorously and apologetically describing his relationship to his own books. A second Forster memoir, derived from his brief posting as temporary secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior in India, offers a complex, variously affectionate situation Rosenbaum carefully explicates. Vanessa Bell's memoir of a maid who goes mad adds a chapter to the study of Bloomsbury's relationship to its servants. Chapter 5 was intended to fill a lengthy hiatus in meetings of the club, largely reporting on its member's writings in the interim, much of these related to memoir. Most amusing among these are biographical collaborations between Virginia Woolf and her nephew, Quentin Bell, put out by the family's newspaper, sequentially named *Charleston* and *The New Bulletin*. Scholars will find a real resource and fine leads for future scholarship in Rosenbaum's final contribution to his study of the culture of Bloomsbury.

### **To Cite this Article**

Bonnie Kime Scott, 'Review of: *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 2 (Autumn 2014): 83–85. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2014/scott.pdf>.