

In 2003 the British Library purchased the manuscripts of *The Charleston Bulletin* and, a decade later, it launched this attractive edition of a selection of special issues or supplements to the daily *Bulletin*. Ninety years ago Vanessa and Clive Bell's sons, Julian, aged fifteen, and Quentin Bell, thirteen, began to create their family newspaper. Quentin took the lead in the enterprise as he explains in the Afterword to his aunt Virginia Woolf's *The Widow and the Parrot*: 'I made all the illustrations and most of the other matter. From time to time my brother got bored and stopped work. I carried on reporting and inventing the news as best I could until he, exasperated by my spelling, my handwriting, my grammar etc, would take over again. Thus it happened that I asked for a contribution from my aunt Virginia' (1). The enthusiastic participation of his aunt, who was by now a celebrated writer, explains why this book is now being published.

The book is over 130 pages long, clearly printed on good quality paper and it is reasonably priced at £12.99. It includes eight black and white photographs and forty illustrations that have been carefully reproduced in authentic colour. The original collection at the British Library comprises many variously-sized pages with lots of white space on each. Inevitably compromise had to be made to compress irregular manuscripts into a neat, conventional, uniform book. The manuscript of *The Dunciad* edition, for instance, is 415 x 263 mm but here the images of that edition are reproduced as 140 x 110 mm on pages that are 210 x 130 mm.

The Charleston Bulletin Supplements were produced between 1923-27. This was a fertile period for Woolf during which she wrote her manifesto on modern prose, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1923); the first series of *The Common Reader* (1925); *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as well as her diaries, letters and professional journalism. Virginia concurrently took great delight in the more light-hearted task of collaborating with her nephews. Much of the pleasure of these documents derives from their amateur quality. The hasty copy with its unchecked spelling errors and slapdash presentation appears refreshingly spontaneous.

Another pleasure comes from sneaking a peek at the secret lives of those who inhabited Charleston (Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant), those who visited them including their Sussex neighbours. Uninitiated readers might blink and miss the sly gibes about these characters; no-one escapes sharp inspection. In passing we observe Maynard Keynes' meanness; Roger Fry's 'formidable, grisly, grumpy, grouselly, ill-temper' (65); Mary Hutchinson stealing Leonard Woolf's Bible; Yeats 'grinding his teeth, & stamping his feet' (98) and Lady Ottoline Morrell described as 'The Hag of the House' (101). Elliptical, inscrutable allusions are made. The text is fragmented so that we are given glimpses of potential stories but much is left tantalizingly undeveloped. We start reading an episode thinking that it must be true but midway the mood often changes and suddenly we are in an absurd, surreal world. The editor Claudia Olk has cross-referenced letters, diaries and biographies about those involved to provide valuable context. Her concise Biographical Notes usefully explain various liaisons and connections. The editorial apparatus is well done and thorough, although, as Olk acknowledges, some references to places, links or characters are yet to be identified. Some of the indirect references and in-jokes might only have been truly understandable to those living at Charleston at the time. This was a newspaper made for a private audience and, in that respect, it is exclusive.

Quentin wrote that *The Charleston Bulletin* 'consciously imitated the early efforts at journalism of my Aunt Virginia and her siblings' (3). Julian was 'The Editor' and Quentin was 'The Illustrator' (124). This recalls the Stephen children's roles in their own family newspaper, the *Hyde Park Gate News* (1891-95) where Virginia was 'The Author' and Vanessa 'The Editor'. Thoby Stephen began to work on *Hyde Park Gate News* but became less active as time wore on, just as, in this later generation, Julian lost interest in the work as it progressed. Virginia seems to have been responsible for many of the creative ideas in the Stephen children's newspaper whereas Vanessa was involved in the physical and aesthetic aspects of the text; many of the later entries are in her rounded, neat handwriting. It is possible that Virginia dictated to Vanessa when they were children working on the earlier newspaper; we are told in the notes to these Supplements that Virginia dictated to Quentin, Vanessa's son and replacement collaborator. The similarity in this process is intriguing and may explain why Virginia was so pleased to be involved. Perhaps working with Quentin helped her recapture that lost childhood time? In the Preface Professor David Bradshaw wonders if there was 'something nostalgic at play in her readiness to write these sketches with her nephew?' She may have been trying 'to rekindle the mood of the Hyde Park newspaper' (viii).

There is another possibility. Vanessa has been substituted by her son; Virginia is at liberty to work in league with Quentin. Both relish the experience of teasing his mother. Perhaps Virginia's pleasure in this new close conspiracy comes from drawing attention to her sister's foibles and inadequacies. Many of the Supplements gently undermine Nessa. 'VIRGINIA AND QUENTIN', as they signed themselves, must have enjoyed making fun of Vanessa, her husband, Clive, and Duncan Grant, her lover. In a 1928 letter to Quentin, his aunt admires his 'abandonment to devilry and ribaldry'; she advises him to give up a career in painting, that, in future, he should write instead: 'Think how many things are impossible to paint; giving pain to the Keynes', making fun of one's aunts, telling libidinous stories, making mischief' (2-3). Olk points out the 'mock-rivalry between the arts

¹ Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell with Thoby Stephen, *Hyde Park Gate News, the Stephen Family Newspaper*, ed. Gill Lowe (London: Hesperus, 2005).

of writing and painting' (2) in the relationship between Quentin and his aunt. This brings to mind the same creative competition between Vanessa and Virginia when they were young women.

The first 1923 'SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT XMAS NUMBER', 'written by Virginia Woolf', features twenty scenes from Vanessa Bell's life. A note tells us that this was 'dictated by Virginia Woolf, pictures and spelling by Quentin Bell' (18). The messy, childish handwriting is set before and after a central picture showing the most dramatic element of an event in Vanessa's life. Each page has a scene number as a title and is bordered with spots and swirls. An amusing, frequently sardonic comment about the episode being shown often appears after the illustration, like the delayed punch line of a joke. The pictures are cartoonish: roughly done, animated and playful. In 'Scene no. 1 in the Life of Mrs Bell' we read: 'She ate her red beads in mistake for her porridge' (20). Vanessa is depicted as a blue-beribboned child sitting at table in a high chair, munching red beads, her spoon and fork falling to the ground. Old nurse Lugton is seen comically leaping through the air, arms outstretched, ninja-style, in an heroic attempt to protect her charge but, Quentin has written, 'though violent' she was 'too late. Nessa ate six'.

Roger Fry described the *Bulletin* as containing 'a fantastic version of the daily events, generally very much to Vanessa's discredit' (8). In Scene 10 she washes her hands 'in a turkish wel and seein if her ring...' here the text halts to show an illustration of the scene. Underneath this pictorial break the writing continues, 'will float' only to conclude, dryly, 'they do not' (30). Vanessa's naivety, carelessness and haphazardness become thematic as the effect of these entries accumulate. Her sufferings and losses are serial: a bee enters her eardrum; the politician Austen Chamberlain extracts it with a buttonhook (28). Nessa is absent-minded and purportedly loses ten pairs of spectacles in a week but they later find six pairs 'firmly imbedded in her hair' (34). As in *Hyde Park Gate News* she loses her umbrella (23, 34). She says unintentionally amusing things, muddling proverbs in a malapropistic manner. On her wedding day Sam, the chauffeur, 'a hypocritical sneering leering dastardly beast', 'lost his way like a needle in a camels eye' so that she got to Paddington an hour and a half late' (28).

The second supplement is a mocking homage to Lytton's Strachey's own irreverent *Eminent Victorians*. Vanessa's servant Trisy is described in 'Eminent Charlestonions' as merrily tossing 'dozens & dozens & dozens of pancakes' '20 times high up over the skyline'. The next entry changes the tone, becoming alliteratively grotesque: 'But her porridge was a very different affair. This was costive close & crusty. It dolloped out of a black pan in lumps of mortar. It stank; it stuck' (49). Trisy is pictured, back braced, black pan upended, battling to release a mass of hard yellow matter. Now the handwriting is Virginia's, tightly packed into margins inked on the edge of the paper. The illustrations have now become more colourful, bolder in style, with greater authority on the page than the writing. The lively sketches of figures evoke those by Edward Ardizzone in children's books such as Christianna Brand's *Nurse Matilda* and Noel Langley's *The Land of Green Ginger*. The subversive 'nonsense' quality is also reminiscent of Edward Lear's work; Quentin's figures share the same deadpan faces and fleet force. There is often a similar ironic disjunction between the words on the page and the accompanying images.

Pope's mock-heroic *The Dunciad* is used as the model to ridicule Duncan Grant's bohemian distractedness. Duncan comes from Rangoon 'to convert the people of Bloomsbury to walking the streets in a blanket' (77). He paints a decomposing melon, sets fire to his pockets and then to the Charleston pond, destroying a long list of aquatic creatures. Whilst dining with Lady Cunard, footmen pick out from his hair 'straws, dandelions, small field mice, rats' eggs, clouded yellow butterflies, nettles, darnocks, fossils, & other small field objects' (80). *The Messiah* is a Biblical epic tinged with Greek tragedy. In a series of vignettes about Clive Bell starting with 'THE NATIVITY', gravitas, affectation and arrogance are constantly knocked down. There is a picture of Clive Bell 'confronted with two heroines', 'THE TWO MISS STEPHENS' (91). His crinkled ginger hair flows behind him and he carries a huge copy of Keats. Intriguingly, the sisters appear to merge into one figure, as if they shared an identity.

Heterogeneous ideas are yoked together to create a mash-up of visual and conceptual madness. The mundane is enlivened by slapstick and the bizarre; the ordinary is made extraordinary. Things seem permanently to be under threat of demolition. In 'The Life and Death of a Studio' there is a mock-tragic illustration: 'CONTEMPLATION OF RUINS'. 'Mr. Grant and Mrs Bell' stand in mourning at opposite ends of the smoking ruins of the old studio at Charleston; 'tears drop on the hissing ashes; the bones of the cow alone remain to mark the grave of so much—stink' (69). The ongoing competition between the households at Charleston and Rodmell is symbolised by the vehicles they drive and illustrated by the cars in bumper-to-bumper confrontation. The 'great rivalry' is dramatised in an implausible race where the Bells' Renault and the Woolfs' Singer drive through London in opposite directions:

'Mrs. Woolf knocked a boy off his bicycle.

Mrs. Bell killed a cat.

The less said the better' (13).

Bloomsbury completists will buy this book; those who love Charleston and the work of Woolf and Bell will find it captivating. What communicates here is an approach to life marked by resilience and childlike joy. This provides useful yeast to the often dominating versions of Woolf as a tragic depressive. Quentin Bell's 1972 two-part biography is his later testimony to the affection he had for the aunt he knew to be excellent company: warm and witty. *The Charleston Bulletin Supplements* is frequently hilarious and richly rewarding.

Gill Lowe