


Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West

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The Hon Victoria Mary Sackville-West, Lady Nicolson, CH (9 March 1892 – 2 June 1962), best known as **Vita Sackville-West**, was an English author, poet and gardener. She won the Hawthornden Prize in 1927 and 1933. She was known for her exuberant aristocratic life, her passionate affair with the novelist Virginia Woolf, and Sissinghurst Castle Garden, which she and her husband, Sir Harold Nicolson, created at their estate. This is her biography.

Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West Details

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From Reader Review Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West for online ebook

Jennifer says

I first became aware of Vita Sackville-West years ago when I read a book about Violet Trefusis. I think it would be a good thing to be a bit familiar with the people/era, etc., as this book doesn't offer much background on anyone. It draws heavily on the correspondence of Sackville-West and her family/friends. You do get a good sense of the different facets of her personality. Certainly worth reading.

?? says

It's getting embarrassing, how much I've read about this woman. I find myself starting to dress like her - pearls, breeches, boots, silk shirt, jacket. And she's really a bit awful - such a trail of broken hearts! But I'm also fascinated.

I don't often (ever?) read biographies but I thought this was quite good. It seemed meticulously researched without being weighed down in information - the story moved along quite nicely with a comfortable amount of quotation from letters and works and balancing narrative and analysis.

It doesn't make me want to go read Vita's poetry, because I wasn't very impressed with the excerpts, but I might read Pepita or Challenge.

Ann Feeney says

Vita Sackville-West is one of the most fascinating figures of her time with an emotional life that would strain credulity in fiction. Femme fatale and passionate gardener, adoring wife in an open marriage, and perhaps more in love with her childhood home than with any of her numerous mostly-female lovers, irritating and adored, full of contradictions and yet true to herself, she presents a biographer with tremendous challenges.

Glendinning wisely relies on Sackville-West's copious letters and diaries to speak for their author and avoids the trite arrogance of pop psychology analysis. At most, as in Sackville-West's fascinating relationship with her own mother, Glendinning suggests questions rather than making statements.

The main flaw in this biography, which its author frankly admits, is an almost total separation of Vita Sackville-West's life and her writings. But overall, a gripping story of a turbulent life.

Suzanne Stroh says

After many, many readings, this is still a book I turn to every year. It is on my list of top ten or twenty works of nonfiction written during my lifetime. And it is the best literary biography I've ever read.

To earn that praise from me, a literary biography must be delicately balanced, witty and wise, while never losing its humanity. This is that book in spades.

You can't beat it for sheer entertainment. But *Vita* is also a first class life study. Victoria Glendinning writes with affection for her subject and great insight. Hard to believe it was one of her first full length works.

She worked closely with Vita's son Nigel Nicolson, who had strong views about the legacy left by both his parents, and yet the author stayed objective enough to give an accurate, clear and thoughtful accounting of a very complicated life. The writing is just marvelous. Sentences ring true; paragraphs resonate; chapters read like an adventure story. It all ends too soon.

This book gives the best overall picture of Vita Sackville-West as an extraordinary woman of 20th century letters, an eccentric (and often exasperating) English aristocrat, a popular author who negotiated celebrity since childhood, a passionate poet, an even more passionate (and rampant) lover--whom Glendinning calls "indefensible" and who "left a trail of broken hearts," as another Goodreads reviewer put it--and above all, a master gardener.

Phil says

Glendinning's biography of Vita Sackville West is a stunning achievement. I've awarded it a whole 5 stars because to make a biography this readable while not trivialising, sensationalising or over-dramatising is a real feat. It's clear that while Vita was in the very much the middle ranks of middle-level writers, it's her life that's the true work of art. Born the eldest child of the Sackville-Wests but never to inherit the enormous fantasy playground that's Knole castle and gardens because she was a girl; a highly sexed lesbian who married a gay man and yet settled onto one of the happiest and most settled marriages among her peers; a woman who attracted obsessive sexual and emotional attachments and yet couldn't bring herself to lose contact with her ex-lovers; a woman who yearned whole-heartedly to be a top-notch writer but who is best remembered for the garden she planted at Sissinghurst; snob, iconoclast, trailblazer, ultraconservative, traditionalist, rebel, homebody, wanderlust-suffering, adulteress, loyal wife, poet.

Sackville-West is one of the most fascinating women in an era of fascinating women. This book turns her life into a story more complex, moving, multi-faceted, poignant and imaginative than any of her works of fiction. She recorded her life in the written word and most of what we know of her marriage with Harold Nicholson and her family and army of ex-lovers is told through the written word: her constant diary and her endless letters - from her teenage years, through the exciting "elopement" with Violet Trefusis, from which Harold and Violet's fiancée had to charter a private plane to France and land in a remote field to whisk them back to England from their lovers enclave, through her friendship with the fragile Virginia Woolf and her life on the precarious edge of the Bloomsbury set, through her post-war self-imposed exile at Sissinghurst following her mother's descent into senility and angry dementia, and finally her obsession with the perfect garden: every phase was meticulously recorded by Vita and Harold.

If you have any interest in VSW whatsoever, this is the place to start.

Paul says

Competent and interesting biography of Vita Sackville-West. her garden at Sissinghurst is one of the treasures of the National Trust. The White Garden is stunning. Sackville-West is a fascinating character, born at Knole, one of the largest country houses in England. The only reason she did not inherit it was because she was a woman.

Vita was a poet, novelist, gardener and prolific broadcaster. Her 49 year marriage to Harold Nicholson has been well documented. They had what would now be termed an open marriage; they both had lovers (Harold male and Vita female). Glendinning outlines her many infatuations and two in particular stand out; Violet Trefussis and Virginia Woolf. Vita was very passionate and often moved quickly from one infatuation to another. Throughout all this her marriage survived, even thrived.

Vita was a complex character and not always likeable, becoming more conservative as she grew older. Her argument for euthanasia for "mental defectives" left me rather chilled; however, we create institutions like Winterbourne View and call it progress! She always struggled to be a respected author or poet and never quite seemed to get there, she often had too much else to do and never got on with Edith Sitwell (an aristocratic contemporary and also a poet). I had never realised the figure of Orlando in Virginia Woolf's novel was Vita; it was written at the height of their affair.

A good biography of a complex and contradictory figure who never quite found peace; but Sissinghurst is a treasure.

Nicola Pierce says

I am going to get myself the full set of Glendinning biographies because she is just marvellous. I brought this book away with me for a week in Spain, to celebrate five months of chemo done, and - as much as I loved the hotel, weather etc, - 'Vita' was my top highlight, so much so, that when I finished it, halfway through the week, I began to experience that dull 'end of holiday' feeling. Sadly, I could not get into the second book I brought just because of the brilliance of this one! Highly recommend it!

pdxmaven says

A biography of Vita Sackville-West published in 1983 and one I am sure I read soon thereafter, along with (I was on a roll!) a book of her gardening columns and her son's biography of his parents as well. What is incredible to me is what I did NOT remember of what I read. How Vita and her husband Harold "arranged" their marriage to work (with both having same sex lovers while maintaining their sense, almost entirely via letters, that their marriage was met the penultimate ideal of marriage, with an expectation that jealousy will always be transcended; what it was like to be at that level of English aristocracy/wealth and be able to travel, write and garden but certainly not earn money or parent one's children(!), how disparaging Vita was of middle and lower class folks, how Sissinghurst came to be, how homosexuality was seen in this historical period (she and Harold, in their letters, refer to homosexuality as 'b.s.ness'), etc etc . I did remember that Vita and Virginia Woolf were friends but not much of the complexity and interdependence of the relationship. And at one point, Vita came to London to visit Virginia, and she and Virginia go to visit Dickens' house (page 236), which was just 3 or 4 doors down the street from where I worked when we were living in London. Pretty trippy! The author was determined to cover every affair (and resumption of an old affair), travel here or there, and letters written, so getting through this was quite the slog!

Steven says

"And to think how the ceilings of Long Barn once swayed above us!"

So wrote Vita titillatingly to Virginia Woolf, reminiscing later in life of their love affair. Indeed, if there was anyone who could coax the staid and brilliant Virginia Woolf to passion it was Vita. The very same woman featured as Orlando in Virginia's signature work, a work that epitomizes the dual nature and sexuality of these unique women.

Equally important we learn of the open marriage of Vita and her husband Harold Nicolson. Right under the nose of aristocratic Edwardian society, husband and wife carried on their homosexual affairs while maintaining appearances and nurturing a very real life-long love for one another. And yet it was all almost brought down by Vita's torrid affair with Violet Trefusis, a childhood mate turned lover. Yet they raised two boys themselves, surely cementing their marriage wholly. Later when their eldest son came out to his parents, both were encouraging and supportive. Considering the period of time this can only be described as remarkable and far ahead of their times.

While the importance of this biography, and of Vita's story, cannot be emphasized enough, I wasn't struck with the sense of adventure and adoration for this as others apparently have been. Its pace was steady, even slow at times. I couldn't consider it a page-turner by any means. Yet a lover of biographies and of this era would find this book an important read. I found though that the author never placed Vita in the context of her era. Tell me how unique she was beside her contemporaries. The author never seemed to take a step back and look at the overall picture.

Vita the author and gardener (a big deal in English society) shouldn't be overshadowed by her various proclivities. She was well published and wrote all her life. The gardens and grounds at their home of Sissinghurst is their lasting legacy. Yet while her gardening acumen was made clear, did she weed and plant the gardens herself? Does hiring a gardener, a gardener make you? While the loss of her childhood home Knole hurt her deeply, it wasn't made clear by the author how Vita was any more a victim of inheritance laws than other women. Yet much ado regarding this is made of.

Late in the novel I was struck by and truth be told, offended by the author's words. A trip to South Africa was described and the author says: "Conservative though she was, the sight of apartheid in practiced horrified Vita." As a self-described conservative myself, I can assure you apartheid has no place in conservative thought. It has no place in the politics of left, right or any other. This line only serves to expose the author's bias and ignorance.

Helen says

A good, readable biography which uses many sources such as letters and diaries. The story is of course fairly well-known by now, but how the unusual marriage was managed and how, up to point, discretion was maintained is interesting. Vita's mother if anything is a more colourful character still. Lots of interesting asides, some of which might raise an eyebrow - or perhaps meet with approval in today's cruel climate - such as the suggestion of euthanasia as an alternative to the old age pension for the poor - although, like a lot of conservatively minded people, Vita could be kind to people she actually knew while making sweeping observations about whole classes. The upper-class bed-hopping circles of earlier 20th century England may

have been less extensive than we think, as all of these biographies and diaries seem to overlap at least somewhere. The garden at Sissinghurst sounds like a real legacy to leave, adding it to my list of places I have not been to and would like to see.

Melanie Williams says

Competent and readable

Laura says

I could read this book every week and still be inspired. Huge influence on my life.

Kelly says

Pick one:

- 1) A queen
- 2) English Country Gent- JA's heroines, eat your heart out
- 3) The Wandering Child
- 4) Lover of Women
- 5) Lover of Men
- 6) The Mysterious, Distant Lord of the Manor
- 6) Get Off My Lawn Recluse
- 7) Heathcliff, But Better
- 8) Mother

... have you picked one?

... If you answer to that was "No!" then you should read this book. You and Vita are likely to get along very well. Vita was all and none of these things at various points in her life, which was fascinating from beginning to the end. True, she did have certain advantages in her story that gave her more of a start than some others: Vita was born at Knole, an enormous old castle that looks like a whole village in one building, to the son and heir of the house, Lionel Sackville and his wife Victoria Sackville-West. Her father was a handsome young romantic blade, her mother was an enthralling termagant, conducting all her relationships like love affairs (something Vita would pick up from her)- she was also her husband's first cousin- the illegitimate daughter of Lord Sackville's diplomat brother and his Spanish flamenco dancer mistress, Pepita. Victoria served as his hostess while he was posted to Washington, and made a great success of it against all odds. Unfortunately, she and her husband fell out of love with each other within a few years of their marriage- the relationship was full of raging and storming and walkouts, with the blanks filled in with parties.... with little Vita left alone to stare.

If I were Vita, I would have written a different story for myself, too. Which is exactly what Vita proceeded to do for the rest of her life- she wrote and lived out very different lives, trying them on for size. She started

with the documents and objects that recorded the lives of her ancestors “the records of centuries of Sackvilles- letters, wills, marriage settlements, accounts, menus, diaries, glass, plate and armour”- she played on the rocking horse of the fourth Duke of Dorset, fell in love with her dashing ancestor Edward Sackville, found trunks whose locks had been broken by Roundheads- and put it all into histories, novels, plays and poems. She spent her (lonely, significantly) childhood and adolescence building for herself fully realized, different worlds, over and over again. The creation was near constant- she always needed to be immersed in some sort of story.

She needn't have worried about that. As she grew older, it seemed somehow that most of the people who knew her projected some sort of fantasy onto her. It's hard to pin down what it was about her, but everyone seemed to have an image of her that they could describe in detail, from childhood friends to vague dinner party acquaintances. But what really struck me was how often she seemed to just fall into these fantasies, seduced by seeing herself in an image or a story without really thinking very much about how it suited her (her husband Harold often accused her of “drifting into things” without thinking about the consequences- he was very often right). These fantasies allowed Vita a crucial link between the romanticized worlds she had created for herself at Knole to get through her childhood and the Real Life she was about to enter. It's just fascinating to watch the mix of fantasy and reality in her relationships. For instance, Rosamund Grosvenor, a proper and clean young lady, cast Vita in the mold of her Spanish grandmother and addressed her as “Carmen” or “Princess”, writing to her that: “it is a good thing you are living in a civilized time because there is no knowing what you might not do if anything aroused your Spanish blood...,” or Mary Campbell, one of her later lovers, escaping from an abusive, alcoholic husband, who appealed to Vita as her “St. Anne, her Demeter, lover, mother, everything in women that I most need and love,” People gave Vita incredibly tall orders to live up to.

But none so much as Violet Trefusis, the one woman who nearly convinced Vita to consider the entire real world well lost. A mesmerizing whirlwind of a person herself, she fell in love with Vita when they were teenagers. Vita, however, fell in love with Harold Nicolson, rather against her will. For the first time in her life, was very anchored to the every day round of life by her life with him, his career, their marriage and children. At that point in her life, Vita believed in total commitment- in playing her roles to the hilt, like one of the characters in her novel. There was no halvesies with her. Then Harold informed her of his homosexual relationships- and the sexual nature of them (he had no choice- he had a venereal disease and she needed to get tested)- and it seems like when she found out that she was not everything to Harold, all of the other stories inside her came rushing out again. Violet was right there waiting. Vita still didn't believe in halvesies- they had a violent, raging, crazy, out of control love affair that went on for four years- during this time Vita went entirely the other way, wrapping herself up entirely in her fantasies, showing them off in the real world: she walked around in public and attended dances as a man, “Julian,” which is how Violet addressed her. It was only very gradually and painfully that Vita realized that she could not live entirely inside her fantasy, that there were in fact other sides to her than the “rackety” bit that enjoyed thumbing his (always his) nose at convention and spitting upon responsibility- something Violet never accepted. But there was more to Vita than what Violet saw of her- there was always more to Vita, something that the image could never quite capture (as Virginia Woolf found out later creating her likeness in *Orlando*- everyone said it was the perfect likeness, Vita herself fell in love with it “a new form of narcissism” as she herself said- but Vita could never love Virginia the same way after it was published).

I adore this woman for both her passion and for the balance that she found- managing to ultimately live her life in a way that honored all parts of her in turn, and doing her very best to maintain her “self” in the face of everyone and everything that wanted to categorize her and make her stay as the one part of her that *they* wanted- only *she* chose who she wanted to be that day. She was even capable of being different people to the same person. One of the many things that fascinated me about her was the complex code that seemed to

develop in her relationships, especially as she grew older- especially in her letters. In print, she had codes and keys with people, telling them who they were addressing at that moment, as they told her who they wanted to speak to. Her most intimate letters spoke of herself and her correspondent in the third person, as if they were characters in one of her stories- characters that changed throughout their lives. Some wonderful examples: She and Harold spoke of each other as, “the Mars” all through their lives, (Sackville family word for children) she called him “Hadji”, during their years as lovers, she called Virginia Woolf “Potto” (a man) and spoke of herself as Orlando or “Towser” (a dog image-usually used when she was apologizing to Virginia for something), Violet was “Lushka” she was “Julian” or “Mitya.” One of the more touching moments in her correspondence happens in 1940, at a moment where invasion seemed imminent and Vita was at the end of her rope. She wrote to Violet again then, for the first time in twenty years, saying that she will come to her if ever she needs her and signs her name, again for the first time in twenty years, as Mitya. She would never have said most of these things out loud- in fact her in the flesh interactions with her correspondents were often awkward, distant, never approaching the intimacy of print. If they did, they were unlikely to last for long. Vita called them, after Violet, her beguins, brief interludes that she needed, but which she would soon end and then return to Harold. (Virginia Woolf was the only exception to this rule.)

The flip side of the coin of this woman with the complex, intense and ever changing relationships was the woman with an intense need for solitude- the hermit. It is this side of her that I adored even more than the fascinating aristocratic images of her that most were fascinated with. She wrote, starting even at a very young age, of how people chipped away at her- how interacting with them took and took from her and gave her nothing back. Every little social engagement, visitor, or even time with her children was time away from living the life she wanted to live. Harold didn’t like this part of her- he needed to see her as essentially motherly, warm, loving, good. I think it was this part of her that inspired the other thing that made her famous: her gardening. She and Harold bought Sissinghurst, a run down old castle complex and grounds, in 1930- they spent the rest of their lives turning it into one of the most famous gardens in England- Vita had a long running column on gardening, frequently gave talks on the BBC about it (these soon outstripped those on literature). Some might see this as her giving up or giving in- which isn’t true. She continued to create fiction all her life- her gardening expressed so many other things about her. Some of my favorite pictures of her in the book were those of her as a rugged old lady with her Wellies on and a cigarette in her hand, looking totally confident- Mistress Of All She Surveys at last- the way she never could be at Knole, in any of Harold’s Foreign Office postings (she hated them), in Bloomsbury, or even at smart parties of her upper class friends.

I identify with her for so many reasons: she was never quite smart enough for her smart friends (Virginia called her dumb or too traditional on several occasions), her family found her “slow” or illogical a lot of the time, she was a lonely girl who grew up into a longing for loneliness woman, she very inconveniently found a man she couldn’t live without even while she had so many other things she couldn’t live without doing, managed to be both a mother and have a career, she did *not* follow Harold’s drum to his various diplomatic postings- only visiting him and making what she could of it, using it for her own ends, even, her motherly side and her rackety side, her insecurity and her distant side, her intense need for solitude, and her lifelong, dogged pursuit of finding herself.

I think everything I’m saying here, everything I admire really boils down to this: “*God damn this energy, and thank God for it!*” She wrote that to Virginia, right after she finished writing *Passenger to Teheran* (her book about her first visit to Persia, one of Harold’s postings). She was so self aware of how harmful her passions could be, and just as aware that she could never give them up. She found a way to deal with life so that she could live out that paradox every day.

How many people manage to do that?

Virginia called Vita "a real woman." Of course, leave it to her to find the best way of saying in three words what I've just written your ears off (if I can murder a metaphor) to say. Yeah. That's it. Thanks, Virginia.

(As an addendum to this review, I should probably note that the biography itself is not five star. My reasons: Glendinning has very definite opinions about Vita's actions and those of the people around her-she dismisses Violet as a "damaging and damaged young woman" for instance-, and she allows her prose to be infected by the archaic style of her subjects. Both of these things are incredibly annoying. But I do think she also gave me enough stellar information to argue with her if I chose, so that's fine. Five stars for the story and the person, probably more like 4 for the book itself.)

Jennifer says

Another perpetual re- read for me.

Fiona says

Sticking with my resolve to read as many biographies about Edwardian and early 20th Century upper class women as I can this year, I was not disappointed with Victoria Glendinning's biography of Vita Sackville-West from the point of view of exhaustive research and detail. This is a story about another highly sexed bed-hopping titled and privileged Brit who just so happened to be a lesbian, married to a terribly nice man (a diplomat) who happened to be gay. Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicholson probably had the most documented marriage in history, so Glendinning's task was most probably made easier because of this. It just got so interminably dull reading about how many times Vita fell inlove with women, complicating everyone's life, fell out of love with women, further complicating everyone's life ad infinitum. For her whole bloody life. Her love affair with Virginia Woolf is interesting because it inspired her to write Orlando based on Sackville-West. Her affair with Violet Trefusis I think was more interesting however. Nicholson's affairs with "boys" seemed far less complicated for a reason I failed to glean. I did appreciate Sackville-West's very honest self assessment that she was highly sexed. It seemed to allow her the largesse she needed to misbehave whenever she felt like it. Generally speaking, why the middle classes are so squeamish about morals I have no idea. The upper classes seemingly share no similar constraints on their wants and lusts, based on my reading of various biographies over the last few months. In retrospect I've decided that this biography would have been far more interesting if Glendinning had concentrated more on the wonderful garden Vita and Harold built at Sissinghurst than their sexual peca-dillos. But it might not have sold as much copy...
