

## RUSH PRINT PASTICHERIE

Victoria Glendinning. *Leonard Woolf: A Life*. London and New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006. 530 pp. \$30.00 hard cover.

*Reviewed by Janet M. Manson, Warren Wilson College*

Popular writer Victoria Glendinning has given us the longest personal biography of Leonard Woolf to date. She is much indebted to Duncan Wilson's more focused *Leonard Woolf: A Political Biography* and to Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf*. Sorting through a fraction of the enormous amount of material by and about Leonard Woolf, Glendinning has demonstrated, again, that his life and work is among the most fascinating of the modern period.

Glendinning uses her journalist's sensibilities to place Leonard's early life within the context of Jewish middle-class life in Victorian England. Even though she gives us a glimpse into that life, we do not get much of a sense of Leonard in the first couple of chapters. It is not clear why she prefers to draw on impressionistic accounts of Woolf's early life rather than drawing more directly from his highly acclaimed, multivolume autobiography that is indispensable to our understanding of the period and the man. At one point, for example, Compton Mackenzie's impressions of St. Paul's Preparatory School are mingled with Woolf's, thus focusing the reader's attention to life at the school rather than how Woolf's life and work were shaped by his education there (27-31). Woolf's classical education at St. Paul's enabled him to earn a scholarship at Cambridge. She also overlooks the fact that his competence at sports and his geniality made his life there more pleasant than that of a few of his classmates who were ostracized because they were "swots" or intellectuals. (*Sowing* 88-94.) In fact, these skills also served Woolf well at other times, for example, during his tenure as a civil servant in Ceylon. Moreover, a closer reading of the autobiographies could have saved Glendinning and Simon and Schuster from inaccuracies such as the fact that Leonard's father, Sidney, was a Q. C. (Queen's Counsel) at age 40 rather than 45 as she reports (9; cf. *Sowing* 45). Sadly, this kind of lapse does not inspire the reader's confidence in Glendinning's account and sends the scholar to her bookshelves for more reliable accounts that Glendinning has overlooked in her rush to print.

When Glendinning traces Leonard's footsteps through Cambridge, her focus becomes one of friendships—the lads at Cambridge—rather than dealing with Leonard's intellectual development within a close-knit circle that creates a dynamic intellectual movement. A close reading of S. P. Rosenbaum's two-volume history of the Bloomsbury Group, *Victorian Bloomsbury* and *Edwardian Bloomsbury*, alongside archival and other materials that Glendinning sometimes uses to good effect, would have given us better insights into Leonard's life as he formed life-long friendships, including his relationship with Virginia. However, Glendinning does shed some light on the very complex relationship between Leonard and Lytton Strachey. She illustrates, for example, how closely they relied on one another for support at critical times in their lives. In this case, she gleans much valuable information from the Leonard Woolf-Lytton Strachey correspondence including the collection at the University of Texas (57). But her documentation of sources is spotty at best, which unfortunately makes the biography of little use to careful readers.

Even though she places Leonard and his family within the context of Jewish middle-class life, Glendinning struggles to get Leonard's Jewish identity right. Certainly, a number of scholars have observed that his relationship with his family was complicated, to say the least. She does catalogue some of Leonard's acts of love and kindness toward

his mother, brothers, sisters, and other relatives (133, 275, and 343 for example). But the fact that he was a secular Jew who shared some of his views on class and race in published works makes it difficult for Glendinning and others to characterize his Jewishness. Leonard's second novel, *Wise Virgins* (Glendinning 126, 130-31), poses many of the same problems for her that it does for other writers because some of the main characters share many of the traits that Woolf and Stephen family members do. Ian Parsons, in his introduction to *Wise Virgins*, and Jean Moorcroft Wilson, in *Leonard Woolf, Pivot or Outsider of Bloomsbury* (especially 4-10), help us sort out some of Leonard's attitudes toward class and race. Drawing on their considerable knowledge of Woolf and his work, Parsons and Wilson conclude that distinctions between the upper and middle classes is a major theme of the novel that is set at a time when anti-Semitism was prevalent in British society. Wilson deals more directly with Leonard's sensitivities to class and race when he wrote the novel. She provides us with a portrait of Leonard who had only recently returned from Ceylonese colonial society to a very different British society than the one he had left in 1904. Moreover, his family and friends had gotten along without him for seven years. Wilson observes that Leonard, like *Wise Virgins* protagonist Harry Davis, was an outsider (5). Certainly, Woolf's experiences as a colonial administrator set him apart from friends, except E. M. (Morgan) Forster who served in India, and from family. Whereas Wilson deals with how Leonard's marriage to Virginia changed his relationship with their friends and family, Glendinning focuses on the more intimate aspects of the marriage. Both agree that he remained an outsider in some ways.

Glendinning does provide us with some memorable and sometimes poignant sketches of Leonard; however, we do not often see the Leonard we know through his writings and his marriage to Virginia. About half way through the book—during the 1930s—Glendinning shows us how tenderly he manages one of Virginia's excitable moods. This one arose during a discussion with Leonard Woolf and John Lehman about *Flush*. "She soon became so carried away and almost hysterical with laughter, that she was red in the face and tears were streaming down her cheeks before Leonard led her off, incapable of going on" (294). Here, as is often the case, Glendinning focuses our attention on Virginia rather than Leonard. So we learn little of his work as a writer, editor, publisher, and political activist for liberal causes. Instead, Glendinning provides us with a pastiche of sketches of Leonard's relationships with Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Margaret and G. D. H. Cole, Kingsley Martin, and others. For example, Glendinning characterizes a disagreement between Leonard and Kingsley over Chinese policies in the 1960s as an "altercation" with very little context for it (456-57). We gather that the "altercation" was, in part, related to Woolf's views on communism, an issue that Glendinning acknowledges divided the British left (296-97). Yet she only superficially deals with Leonard's views on communism (231). Moreover, she does not deal with Leonard's and the Webbs' differences over communism or how this affected the relationship between Leonard and the Webbs.

Glendinning defines Leonard's last love, Trekkie Parsons, in terms of her relationships with the men in her life, primarily Leonard. But we see her as little more than his devoted care-giver during the last months of his life. Here, Glendinning might have used more effectively *Love Letters: Leonard Woolf & Trekkie Richie Parsons 1941-1968* to provide us with greater insight into Leonard's and Trekkie's relationship and how it affected their professional as well as personal lives.

Clearly, Glendinning has demonstrated that we still have much to learn about Leonard Woolf, both the man and his work.

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