Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962)

Lived at Sissinghurst, Knole, Long Barn

The autumn bonfire smokes across the woods

And reddens in the water of the moat;

As red within the water burns the scythe

And the moon dwindled to her gibbous tithe

Follows the sunken sun afloat.

‘Sissinghurst’, 1930.

Sackville-West is perhaps best known today as a gardener, for her unconventional marriage to Harold Nicolson, and as the inspiration for Orlando, Virginia Woolf’s time travelling, gender fluid, eponymous character. She was though a prolific and versatile writer herself - a celebrated poet (a candidate for the post of Poet Laureate in 1948) and author of fourteen novels, with those published in the 1930s proving both critically and commercially successful. Her poetry was unapologetically traditional in form, and her fiction too was largely traditional but with a distinctly poetic style.

She was the only child of Lord and Lady Sackville-West, born at the family’s ancestral home, Knole in Sevenoaks. She had a fairly solitary childhood at Knole, and it was here that she developed her deep love of the Kent countryside, both for its natural beauty and the traditions it inspired. As a female she was not able to inherit Knole, and she considered this the great tragedy of her life, writing thirty years later that ‘Knole should have been mine, mine, mine. We were meant for each other’[[1]](#footnote-1). Her prize-winning poem *The Land* (seen as a riposte to [T S Eliot]( 20c/20c-eliot-biography)’s *The Wasteland*) is an homage to Knole, which provides the background to \_*The Edwardians\_,* her satirical portrait of the aristocracy on the brink of change in 1905.

She married Harold Nicolson in 1913, when he was a junior diplomat, and they lived first in Constantinople, moving back to England in 1914 for the birth of their first son, Benedict. In 1915 the Nicolsons bought Long Barn, a house near Knole, where they established their first English garden, and they moved again in 1930, buying Sissinghurst Castle for £12,375. At Sissinghurst, they created a family home and the now world-famous garden among the ruins of a once magnificent Elizabethan manor house. Sissinghurst is the subject of Sackville-West’s poems ‘Sissinghurst’ (1930) and *The Garden* (1946) and is precisely described as background to her novel \_*Family History\_*.

The Nicolsons had a famously open marriage, with both enjoying many same sex relationships. As she grew older, Sackville-West increasingly withdrew from society but she continued to entertain lovers and other guests at Sissinghurst, including [Christopher St John]( 20c/20c-st-john-biography) (partner of [Ellen Terry]( 20c/20c-terry-biography)’s daughter [Edith Craig](20c/20c-craig-biography) ).

Sackville-West died at Sissinghurst in 1962 and her ashes are interred in the family crypt at Withyham, Sussex. Her husband and two sons are buried at Trinity Church, overlooking the Sissinghurst estate.

Both Sissinghurst and Knole are now owned by the National Trust. (<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/>)

Long Barn is privately owned but occasionally opened to the public for charity. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Barn>)

Article by Clare Nursey

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1. Nicolson. *Letters* 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)