**Strachey, Giles Lytton** (1880-1932)

Lytton Strachey was a literary critic and biographer who changed the art of life-writing. He was elected to the Apostles at Cambridge and formed lifelong friendships with Clive Bell, John Maynard Keynes, Thoby Stephen, Leonard Woolf, and other future members of the Bloomsbury Group. At the end of a period of literary apprenticeship, he published his first book, Landmarks in French Literature (1910). At this time he experienced what he called a “spiritual revolution,” which resulted in his wholehearted rejection of the Philistinism, imperialism, and evangelicalism that, from his perspective, had characterized the Victorian age. During the Great War he was a conscientious objector.

In the final months of the war he published Eminent Victorians (1918). His best known and most enduring work, this collection of four satirical portraits transformed the craft of biography by combining psychological perspicuity with a definite, and typically irreverent, point of view. This is biography not as Life-and-Letters panegyric, nor even as objective chronicle, but as argument. In subsequent years, he refined his biographical methods in two full-length works. Queen Victoria (1921), which won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography, adopted a slightly less mocking tone toward this most eminent Victorian, while Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History (1928)--published in the same year as his friend Virginia Woolf’s biographical experiment Orlando--expanded the possibilities of the genre by deliberately applying psychoanalytic insights to his subjects’ motives. (Freud himself thought Strachey was the first to do this successfully. It is notable, in this connection, that Freud’s English translator was Strachey’s younger brother James, whose complete edition of Freud’s works was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press). Strachey’s final book, Portraits in Miniature, appeared in 1931, months before his death.

Strachey’s life, and especially his complex sexuality, has possessed an appeal as enduring as his works. Resolutely “queer,” he enjoyed several intense intimate relationships with men, including Duncan Grant and, in Strachey’s final years, the translator and publisher Roger Senhouse, with whom he shared a robust predilection for historical role-play (one of their experiments involved Strachey’s being crucified). He also lived, for the final fifteen years of his life, in a richly satisfying but complicated domestic relationship in two country houses with the painter Dora Carrington and a series of partners on both sides. The unusual relationship between these artists was the subject of Christopher Hampton’s 1995 feature film, Carrington, itself based on Michael Holroyd’s biographies of Strachey, which remain the best sources of information about his life and works.

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