

Bloomsbury Day Report

‘Bloomsbury Day: A Celebration of Bloomsbury Past and Present’, which took place at UCL on 12th March 2010, attracted an audience close to three hundred. The event, funded by a Beacon Bursary awarded by the UCL Public Engagement Unit, showcased some of the work carried within the scope of the Leverhulme-funded ‘Bloomsbury Project’. ‘Bloomsbury Day’ enabled UCL staff, students, alumni, and members from a wide range of Bloomsbury institutions such as the Camden History Society, the Swedenborg Society, Dr Williams’s Library and the Mary Ward Centre, to become better acquainted with the project and exchange ideas about the evolution and representations of Bloomsbury.

The first session of the event vividly demonstrated that, long before its association with the Bloomsbury Group, Bloomsbury was host to an astonishing variety of thinkers. Rosemary Ashton, Director of the Bloomsbury Project, began by welcoming the diverse audience, and conveyed the impressive breadth of the project, which seeks above all to uncover the many ways in which Bloomsbury evolved in the nineteenth century from an inhospitable territory into an enclave of reform and innovation.

In ‘Encountering the Bloomsbury barrister’s wife’, Matthew Ingleby (UCL English) explored how Victorian fiction illustrates these shifts in Bloomsbury’s status. Nineteenth-century Bloomsbury became a haven for middle-class lawyers, and the paper effectively argued how depictions of the often shrill and dissatisfied barrister’s wife in novels by Bulwer Lytton, Trollope and Mary Braddon reveal the contemporary eagerness to pin down Bloomsbury’s gender and class identity.

Caroline Dakers (Central St Martins) followed with a portrait of the architect-designer John Buonarotti Papworth, who lived in Bloomsbury and studied architectural styles in the British Museum.

Richard Dennis (UCL Geography) brought further evidence of the Bloomsbury Project’s compelling interdisciplinary nature by scrutinizing George Gissing’s representations of Bloomsbury through a geographer’s lens. The British Museum acted as a magnet for Gissing and many of his characters, who negotiate complex private relationships and personal ambitions in and around the building’s very public walls. Gissing himself lived at various Bloomsbury addresses and, as Dennis stressed, was alert to the heterogeneity of the area, where ‘questionable characters’ jostled with luminaries of the age.

The British Museum was home to an even more ‘questionable character’ in the shape of a mummy lid, as Roger Luckhurst (Birkbeck) divulged in his lively account of ‘Spiritualist Bloomsbury’. The cursed lid brought doom to its first acquirer, T. Douglas Murray, and hopes that the Museum walls had neutralized its power vanished when a journalist recording the artefact’s history also met an unpleasant end. Revelations of occurrences around Bloomsbury (including a spiritualist session during which a Mrs Guppy found herself transported from Highbury Hill to Lamb’s Conduit Street in the midst of compiling her shopping list) shed further light on the unexpected paths taken by some of Bloomsbury’s innovators.

A second session, chaired by John Sutherland (UCL), brought the discussion of Bloomsbury into the twentieth century. The novelists and alumni David Lodge and Lynne Truss shared with the audience ways in which Bloomsbury’s most famous resident, Virginia Woolf, had influenced their work. David Lodge, who has written extensively on Woolf in his literary criticism and pastiched her style in *The British*

Museum is Falling Down (1965), spoke about some of the works by Woolf which he has found most fruitful for his on writing.

The anxiety of influence was the subject of Lynne Truss's talk. Truss hit upon the idea for *Tennyson's Gift* (1996), which depicts the Great Men (and some Great Women) who assembled around Tennyson on the Isle of Wight, before discovering, much to her dismay, the existence of Woolf's comic play 'Freshwater'. Despite having postponed reading the play until her own novel was completed, Truss was amazed to find that many of Woolf's iconoclastic ideas had also found their way in her own work. The panel as a whole paid a humorous and engaging tribute to Woolf's power.

Established and emerging poets also testified to Bloomsbury's continuing power to inspire. Mark Ford (UCL) read 'Ravished', a poem commissioned for the event. The poem, with nods to previous writers including Coleridge and T. S. Eliot (who worked in Bloomsbury for the publisher Faber and Faber), remembered a last meeting with a friend and fellow poet in one of Bloomsbury's pubs. The poets and alumni Oliver Hazzard and Declan Ryan kept the room absorbed with selections from their work, including several poems written while they were students in the UCL English Department, many of these also set, or written, in local pubs.

'Bloomsbury Day' concluded with a reception, during which audience members were able to pursue the many themes so impressively introduced by the speakers. The reception provided an opportunity to visit an exhibition, 'Innovators and Educators: UCL and Bloomsbury in the 19th Century', currently held in the main library, which displays a selection of Bloomsbury-related material taken from the UCL Special Collections. Audience members were also able to discover the development site of the Bloomsbury Project, where entries for institutions such as the Foundling Hospital, individuals including Lord Brougham, and detailed accounts of streets such as Gower Street can be consulted. Finally, the reception gave attendees the chance to convey their warm thanks to Rosemary Ashton, assisted by Deborah Colville, Kathryn Metzenthin, Anita Garfoot and Clare Szembek, for putting together such a highly successful event.

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