

THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP

The Bloomsbury Group was an early 20th century social circle of culturally influential Londoners who lived, worked and socialised in Bloomsbury.

This blue plaque commemorates some of the most famous members of the group. They were known for their bohemian lifestyles and non-traditional attitudes to sexuality and monogamy. In a witty reference to the area's urban design, American writer and critic Dorothy Parker quipped that the Bloomsbury Group 'lived in squares...and loved in triangles.'

Perhaps the most well-known queer relationship between members of the group unfolded from 1922, when the writer Virginia Woolf met renowned gardener and writer Vita Sackville-West.

Neither woman's husband was shocked by the affair. According to Virginia Woolf, her husband Leonard considered the relationship 'rather a bore...but not enough to worry him.'

In a letter to her husband, diplomat and politician Sir Harold Nicolson, Vita wrote that her sexual relationship with Virginia was consummated only twice. However, Virginia and Vita's romantic connection continued into the early 1930s and their relationship was one of profound personal and cultural significance. Letters between them reflect the passion they shared: 'I am reduced to a thing that wants Virginia,' Vita wrote to her lover in 1926. 'You have broken down my defences. And I really don't resent it.'

Literary scholar Louise DeSalvo observes that both women reached their artistic peaks while they were together. As a result of the frequent travels of Sackville-West, themes of longing permeate Woolf's 1927 book, 'To The Lighthouse'. Sackville-West's cross-dressing as Julian also inspired one of Virginia Woolf's most famous books, 'Orlando: A Biography'. Published in 1928, Orlando's protagonist evolves from hero to heroine during the course of the novel.

Given the laws and attitudes of the time, Woolf's Orlando was lucky to escape censorship. Another book published that year, Radclyffe Hall's 'Well of Loneliness' was not so lucky. Featuring gender-bending characters, 'Well of Loneliness' was judged obscene by English courts who objected to depictions of what was described as 'unnatural practices between woman'.

On stage and screen, the role of Orlando has often been played by gender nonconforming actors. In 1992 the film adaptation starred Tilda Swinton, an actor celebrated for her androgyny who has described gender as a 'transformative possibility.' In 2022, London's National theatre hosted a stage production of Orlando, starring Emma Corrin, a queer and non-binary actor. Woolf's novel was also used as

a lens to explore the modern struggles of trans people by philosopher Paul B. Preciado in his 2023 film 'Orlando: My Political Biography'.

Woolf is celebrated as a bisexual icon, and as a writer of modernist literature and essays who took a progressive approach to gender and sexuality. However, this heroic status is complicated by her eugenicist comments about disability – comments which evoke UCL's historic role within the eugenics movement.

The economist John Maynard Keynes, born in 1883, is best remembered for Keynesian economics, a system of deficit finance. Keynes moved into 46 Gordon Square, near UCL's main campus, as a tenant of Clive Bell. Bell was an art critic, and his wife Vanessa Bell was a painter and the sister of Virginia Woolf.

In 1918, Keynes took over the lease at 46 Gordon Square, and lived there until his death in 1946. He was married in 1925 to the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova. This marriage marked the end of a 24-year period during which Keynes kept meticulous records of his varied sexual encounters.

From 1901 until 1925, Keynes applied his economist's precision to detailed accounts of adventurous sexual activities. The records he kept described his penchant for cruising, 'rent boys', threesomes and even foursomes.

Keynes' extensive lists use language, including terms that would not be acceptable now. Some of the individuals described in Keynes's diaries include:

- 'The Stable Boy of Park Lane'
- 'The Swede of The National Gallery'
- 'The Soldier of the Baths'
- 'The French Conscript'
- 'The Blackmailer'
- 'Sixteen-year-old under Etna'
- 'Lift Boy of Vauxhall', and
- 'Grand Duke Cyril of the Paris Baths'

Keynes also enjoyed longer, more involved affairs. These included the artist and Bloomsbury Group member Duncan Grant, who was also the lover of the biographer, historian and critic Lytton Strachey.

Strachey was a prominent member of the group and was himself in an open relationship with painter Dora Carrington. When he found out about Grant's relationship with Keynes, he bitchily responded, 'Oh heaven! Heaven! The thought recoils, and I find myself shrieking and raving.'

Duncan Grant's sexual partners were mainly men. He also fathered a child with his fellow artist Vanessa Bell, and lived with her at Charleston, an East Sussex farmhouse that is now open to the public.

Grant was open about his sexuality. His mantra, 'never be ashamed', is reflected in the homoeroticism depicted in his art. His painting 'Bathing' draws inspiration from Michaelangelo's male nudes and Hyde Park's Serpentine, a recreational lake that's strongly associated with gay culture. Another of his paintings, 'Bathers by The Pond', portrays several of Grant's lovers – including Keynes – at the Charleston farmhouse.

Writer, critic and researcher Rianna Jade Parker has explored how the Bloomsbury Group was 'more racially mixed than is commonly accepted', despite the group being 'traditionally understood as white and privileged'. For example, Vita Sackville-West is typically represented as white and aristocratic, despite her Romani heritage.

We can also look to Patrick Nelson, who migrated to England from Jamaica and formed a personal and professional relationship with Duncan Grant. It's presumed that the two lovers met at either the Shim Sham Club or Café Royal, venues that were known for their queer clientele.

Other than working on the docks in the East End, which was one of the epicentres of Britain's imperial economy, employment and housing opportunities for Black Londoners were limited. Like many others from London's growing Black and Asian communities in the interwar period, Patrick Nelson sat as a model for painters and artists, including Grant.

As a result, it's impossible to separate the eroticising and exoticising of these unnamed Black models from the uneven interpersonal power dynamics created by the geopolitical conditions of the time.

Nelson was one of very few queer Jamaican sitters during this time. Grant names Nelson in his work, and their attraction and connection seems to have been reciprocal. In 1938, Nelson wrote a letter to Grant, saying:

'I wish we could once again be intimate and once more enjoy life – do you think the days gone by will ever come again? We must hope.'

Yet, as Parker suggests, it is 'still worth questioning to what extent Grant's racialised, homoerotic desire delineated his art.'

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