

ELIZABETH FRENCH BOYD: Bloomsbury Heritage, Their Mothers and Their Aunts, (Taplinger, 1976), \$10.50.

Two kinds of readers will be attracted by the double title of Elizabeth French Boyd's Bloomsbury Heritage, Their Mothers and Their Aunts. The first will no doubt remember Leonard Woolf's remarks in the first volume of his autobiography:

The Strachey and Stephen families both belonged to a social class or caste of a remarkable and peculiar kind which established itself as a powerful section of the ruling class in Britain in the nineteenth century. It was an intellectual aristocracy of the middle class, the nearest equivalent being the French eighteenth-century noblesse de robe.

And they will ask themselves whether this kind of intellectual tradition did not make those Thursday evening talks at the Stephens' house in Gordon Square both much more natural and much less accidental than they would have been to a group of young men and women without their background. Such readers, then, will be interested to see what kind of light can be shed upon the privileged intellectual position which at least some of the members of the Bloomsbury group inherited from their near relations.

A second group of readers will be attracted by what might seem to be the feminism of Mrs. Boyd's approach to her subject. For Bloomsbury Heritage is, after all, a study of women, the women who stood behind the men and women who made up the Bloomsbury group. Such readers will no doubt expect to find additional evidence supporting Carolyn Heilbrun's thesis in Toward A Recognition of Androgyny of the importance of the feminine and feminist influences upon the

group. In any case, they will be prepared to be grateful for a closer look at some of the Victorian mothers and aunts whose position as women prevented them from becoming "eminent."

Both groups of readers, however, will be greatly disappointed by Mrs. Boyd's book. For though there are occasional gestures towards something more rigorous, Bloomsbury Heritage remains largely a collection of discrete and rather superficial biographical sketches—one is tempted to call them mini-memoirs because they seem so Victorian—of women whose only documented relation to Bloomsbury and its ethos is one of blood. This is, of course, particularly true of the opening chapter on the seven "famous" Pattle sisters, only one of whom (Maria, who became the Stephens' maternal grandmother) is likely to have been known personally by members of the Bloomsbury group. But it is, alas, also true of chapters devoted to Julia Jackson (Mrs. Leslie Stephen), Jane Grant (Lady Strachey), and Mary Warre-Cornish (Mrs. Desmond MacCarthy) where influence is surely demonstrable. In what is probably the most disappointing chapter in the book, on Julia Jackson, we are treated to the usual stories of her beauty, her sorrow, her selflessness, and we are told that the portrait of her as Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse is a fair recreation of Julia and her Pattle heritage, but we are never once invited to consider what would seem to be the obvious question--to what extent the memory of Julia and her values affected the values of the Bloomsbury group.

A similar lack of point vitiates the portraits of Lady Strachey and Molly MacCarthy. For though Virginia Woolf once described Lady Strachey as one of those great Victorian women who seem to be "cast on a larger scale, and made

of more massive material than the women of today," Mrs. Boyd never asks what such a powerful woman might have contributed to the formation of the author of "Florence Nightingale," Queen Victoria, and Elizabeth and Essex. And though Molly MacCarthy is introduced along with Annie Thackeray Ritchie as representing "the more conservative and religiously orthodox" influences on the Bloomsbury group, we are once again left to guess how such impulses might have been felt within the group itself.

Annie Ritchie or "Aunt Annie" as the Bloomsbury generation called her is the focus of Mrs. Boyd's best, and perhaps only satisfactory, chapter. For it is only here that we are not inundated with the relations of births, deaths, and the roll calls of garden parties, and can concentrate upon the character and influence of one complex and irrepressible woman. And Mrs. Boyd is quite right to see Annie Thackeray as an importance influence. For in a passage like the following which Mrs. Boyd quotes from Annie's novel, Mrs. Dymond, we can clearly see something of the Bloomsbury sensibility which was to operate so powerfully through the work of Virginia Woolf.

There is a feeling which comes home to most of us at one time or another; philosophers try to explain it, poets to write it down, only musicians can make it into music, it is like a horizon to the present—a sense of the suggestion of life beyond its actual dim and rough shapings. This feeling gives a meaning to old stones and fluttering rags, to the heaps and holes on the surface of the earth, to the sad and

common things as well as to those which are brilliant and successful.

But even in the portrait of Annie Thackeray we notice a curious conservatism about the kinds of facts which are admissible in Mrs. Boyd's portraits. For instance, we are told that soon after the births of Annie and Minny, "it became necessary for Mrs. Thackeray to live apart from her family in the country." What we are not told is that Mrs. Thackeray went mad. Similarly, in the portrayal of Annie we can be told of her anger, her rage at being talked down to by men, but we must be immediately reassured that this "darker, more troubled side of her character was more noticeable to her, probably, than to others, even in her own family." For her father always described her as "a perfect well spring of happiness in herself." Nor are these the only instances of a kind of reticence and protectiveness in Mrs. Boyd's treatment of her subjects. In all the portraits of these Victorian women there seems to be the same determination not to probe too deeply, not to uncover unpleasant facts. And indeed it is this "official" stance as much anything which makes Bloomsbury Heritage rather boring reading.

Once we recognize the essential conservatism of Mrs. Boyd's point of view, however, we can understand why the actual Bloomsbury members tend to get lost in the portrayal of their heritage. For her real aim is, in effect, to deny the vigor and originality of the Bloomsbury group by absorbing it into an older movement. From the standpoint of their elders, Mrs. Boyd remarks, "twentieth century Bloomsbury members might be viewed almost patronizingly, as merely

living up in their own way to the family traditions of genius and talent, power and service, creation and distinction." But as most readers will, I think, agree, Bloomsbury is not so easily domesticated. And perhaps the best parable of their relation to their mothers and aunts can be found in Annie Thackeray's reply to Ibsen's sententious remark about "the young generation knocking at the door." "But, alas," she said, "they never knock."

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