

Nigel Nicolson Portrait of a Marriage

V. SACKVILLE-WEST & HAROLD NICOLSON



PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE

by Nigel Nicolson

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To S. A.

P R E F A C E

WHEN MY MOTHER, V. Sackville-West, died in 1962, it was my duty as her executor to go through her personal papers. She was careful about such things, and had filed everything of importance, including all her letters to and from Harold Nicolson during the fifty years of their engagement and marriage, and all her own diaries and the diaries of her mother, Lady Sackville. In the forty pine-wood drawers of a large Italian cupboard I found hundreds of letters from the friends who had meant most to her since her childhood. At the time I read very little, making a mental note that while all the material existed for a full record of her life, it should be allowed to simmer.

I took a final look round her sitting-room in the tower at Sissinghurst (a room I had entered only half a dozen times in the previous thirty years), and came upon a locked Gladstone bag lying in the corner of the little turret room that opens off it. The bag contained something—a tiara in its case, for all I knew—and, having no key, I cut away the leather from around its lock to open it. Inside there was a large notebook in a flexible cover, page after page filled with her neat pencilled script. I carried it to her writing-table and began to read. The first few pages were abortive drafts of a couple of short stories. The sixth page was headed “July 23rd, 1920,” followed by a narrative in the first person that continued for eighty more. I read it through to the end without stirring from her table. It was an autobiography written when she was aged twenty-eight, a confession, an attempt to purge her mind and heart of a love that had possessed her, a love for another woman, Violet Trefusis.

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The simplicity of it, its candour, the extraordinary sequence of events that it unfolded, her implicit plea for forgiveness and compassion, for the strength to resist further temptation, stirred me deeply. I had long known the barest outlines of the story (but not from her) and here was every detail of it, written with scarcely an erasure or correction at a moment when the wound was still fresh and painful. Although her narrative began uncertainly with a rambling account of her childhood, when she came to the heart of her problem it grew in power and intensity, sharpened by a novelist's instinctive variation of mood and speed, almost as if it were not her own experience that she was describing but another's.

I never showed it to my father, although in the first paragraph she wrote that he was the only person whom she could then trust to read it with understanding. My mother's death had shaken him so dreadfully that this reminder of the crisis of their marriage might have increased his misery intolerably, and I feared that he might destroy it, or it him. When I quoted in the Introduction to his published *Diaries* a few innocuous passages from the autobiography describing her childhood at Knole and their early married life, he never asked to see the rest of it. Now I think that I should have shown it to him when the agony of her loss had been transmuted into numb acceptance of it. He might well have agreed with me that this was a document unique in the vast literature of love, and among the most moving pieces that she ever wrote; that far from tarnishing the memory of her, it burnished it; and that one day, perhaps, it should be published.

Let not the reader condemn in ten minutes a decision I have pondered for ten years. In Harold Nicolson's lifetime, and in Violet's, no question of publication could arise. He died in 1968; Violet in 1972. I consulted several people, above all my brother Benedict, and Violet's close friend and literary executor, John N. Phillips, to whom I acknowledge

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my debt for his sympathetic attitude and for copies of certain letters. Both agreed to publication in the form which I suggested. A few of my parents' friends expressed misgivings, but most confirmed my growing conviction that in the 1970's an experience of this kind need no longer be regarded as shameful or unmentionable, for the autobiography was written with profound emotion, and has an integrity and validity of universal significance.

It is the story of two people who married for love and whose love deepened with every passing year, although each was constantly and by mutual consent unfaithful to the other. Both loved people of their own sex, but not exclusively. Their marriage not only survived infidelity, sexual incompatibility and long absences, but it became stronger and finer as a result. Each came to give the other full liberty without inquiry or reproach. Honour was rooted in dishonour. Their marriage succeeded because each found permanent and undiluted happiness only in the company of the other. If their marriage is seen as a harbour, their love affairs were mere ports of call. It was to the harbour that each returned; it was there that both were based.

This book is therefore a panegyric of marriage, although it describes a marriage that was superficially a failure because it was incomplete. They achieved their ideal companionship only after a long struggle, which was still not ended when Vita Sackville-West wrote the last words of her confession, but once achieved it was unalterable and lifelong, and they made of it (as I wrote in the Introduction to my father's *Diaries*, without revealing the extent of their difficulties) the strangest and most successful union that two gifted people have ever enjoyed.

Although V. Sackville-West left no instructions about her autobiography, and as far as I know had never shown it to anyone, I believe that she wrote it with eventual publication in mind. It assumed an audience. She knew

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that I would find it after her death, but did not destroy it. She wrote it as a conscious work of art, in such a way that it would be intelligible to an outsider, and her use of pseudonyms is itself an indication that she expected, even hoped, that other eyes might one day read it, by this device safeguarding the reputation of her friends while risking her own. There are passages in the manuscript suggesting that the writing of it was for her much more than an act of catharsis. She refers to "possible readers" of it. She believes that "the psychology of people like myself will be a matter of interest" when hypocrisy gives place to "a spirit of candour which one hopes will spread with the progress of the world." That time has come now, more than fifty years after she wrote those prophetic words, and I do not believe that she would deplore the revelation of her secret, knowing that it could help and encourage those similarly placed today.

However, to present the autobiography unexplained and without its sequel would do my parents less than justice, for it was written in the eighth year of a marriage that lasted forty-nine. I came to two conclusions: that it should be published as the first, though main, section of the complete story, and that because it is a story so exceptional, it needed confirmation and amplification, for which all the material existed in the Italian cupboard and the files. The events V. Sackville-West recounted could be retold as they appeared to other main actors in the drama—Harold Nicolson, Violet Trefusis, Lady Sackville—and to secondary characters like Rosamund Grosvenor, Denys Trefusis and Orazio Pucci, and in retrospect to myself, her son, who was only three years old when the climax was reached in a hotel at Amiens in February 1920. The contemporary letters and diaries throw a new light on certain incidents and reveal others of which she was ignorant, but they utterly substantiate the truth of what she wrote. Her memory of these cataclysmic events was exact.

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The story is told in five parts, two by her, three by myself. Parts I and III are her autobiography verbatim, altered only by its division into two separated sections (for reasons of balance and intelligibility), and by the substitution of real names for pseudonyms, the latter given only when they first occur. Parts II and IV are my commentaries on it, to which I add essential new facts and quotations from letters and diaries. Part V is the justification of the whole book and its title, for it summarizes the remaining years of her marriage, and shows, particularly in the context of my mother's brief love affairs with Geoffrey Scott and Virginia Woolf, how my parents' love for each other survived all further threats to it, and made out of a non-marriage a marriage that succeeded beyond their dreams. If it does not show that, the book is a betrayal.

Nigel Nicolson
Sissinghurst Castle, Kent
April 1973

ILLUSTRATIONS

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V. Sackville-West in 1918 by William Strang (*Glasgow Art Gallery*)

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Knole, seen from the air (*Aerofilms*)
Victoria Sackville-West (Vita's mother) in 1897
Sir John Murray Scott ("Seery")
Vita and her mother in 1900
Portrait of Vita in 1910 by Laszlo (*Sissinghurst Castle*)
A bust of Lady Sackville by Auguste Rodin (*Musée Rodin*)
Harold Nicolson, Vita, Rosamund Grosvenor and Lord Sackville in July 1913
The wedding of Vita and Harold in the chapel at Knole, October 1, 1913

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Vita in 1919
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Long Barn, near Sevenoaks

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Virginia Woolf at Knole in 1928
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Harold and Vita at Sissinghurst in 1932
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Portrait of a Marriage

P A R T I

by V. Sackville-West

July 23rd, 1920

OF COURSE I have no right whatsoever to write down the truth about my life, involving as it naturally does the lives of so many other people, but I do so urged by a necessity of truth-telling, because there is no living soul who knows the complete truth; here, may be one who knows a section; and there, one who knows another section: but to the whole picture not one is initiated. Having written it down I shall be able to trust no one to read it; there is only one person in whom I have such utter confidence that I would give every line of this confession into his hands, knowing that after wading through this morass—for it is a morass, my life, a bog, a swamp, a deceitful country, with one bright patch in the middle, the patch that is unalterably his—I know that after wading through it all he would emerge holding his estimate of me steadfast. This would be the test of my confidence, from which I would not shrink. I would not give it to *her*—perilous touchstone!, who even in these first score of lines should teach me where truth lies. I *do* know where it lies, but have no strength to grasp it; here am I already in the middle of my infirmities.

I start writing, having spent no consideration upon this

task. Shall I ever complete it? and under what circumstances?, begun as it is, in the margin between a wood and a ripe corn-field, with the faint shadows of grasses and ears of corn falling across my page. Unkernelled nuts hang behind me, along the fringe of the wood; I lie on green bracken, amongst little yellow and magenta wild-flowers whose names I don't know. I lie so close to the ground that my only view is of tall corn, so crisp that in the breeze it stirs with a noise like the rustle of silk. All day I have been in a black temper, but that is soothed away. There is no place, out here, for temper or personality. There is only one personality present: Demeter.

Yesterday I was on the sea in a sailing-boat; it was very rough, and at moments I was extremely frightened, but I wished I wasn't frightened, because theoretically I enjoyed seeing the ship put her nose down into the waves, seeing the spray break over the deck, and then feeling my face all wet and tasting the salt water on my lips. The world of the sea is quite a different world. There is a whole different set of noises—the wash of the waves, the wind in the rigging, the banging of the blocks, the shouts of the crew—and one has a whole different set of wishes and pre-occupations—the wish that the boat would keep still, if only for five minutes, as a rest from the perpetual balancing; the pre-occupation as to whether the wind will get up, or go down, whichever it is; the immense, the overwhelming importance of weather, both as regards one's comfort and one's progress.

I realize that this confession, autobiography, whatever I may call it, must necessarily have for its outstanding fault a lack of all proportion. I have got to trust to a very uncertain memory, and whereas the present bulks enormous, the past is misty. I can't remember much about my childhood, except that I had very long legs and very straight hair, over which Mother used to hurt my feelings and say she couldn't bear to look at me because I was so

ugly. I know that I wasn't a physical coward in those days, because I can remember doing dangerous things on a bicycle and climbing high trees—and yet, stop, I do believe I must have been a coward already, because I can remember thinking a great deal about whether I should be brave the next day when I went out riding, and I was too much fascinated by seeing other people do things which I knew I shouldn't dare to do myself. I never realized this until this moment. Anyway, I wasn't so much of a coward, and I kept my nerves under control, and made a great ideal of being hardy, and as like a boy as possible. I know I was cruel to other children, because I remember stuffing their nostrils with putty and beating a little boy with stinging-nettles, and I lost nearly all my friends in that kind of way, until none of the local children would come to tea with me except those who had acted as my allies and lieutenants.

I don't remember much more about myself as a child than that. I remember more about outside things. I don't remember either my father or mother very vividly at that time, except that Dada used to take me for terribly long walks and talk to me about science, principally Darwin, and I liked him a great deal better than Mother, of whose quick temper I was frightened. I don't even remember thinking her pretty, which she must have been—lovely, even. My impression of her was that I couldn't be rough when she was there, or naughty, and so it was really a great relief when she went away. I remember very vividly terrible scenes between her and Dada—at least, she made the scene, he usually said nothing at all, or very mildly, "Oh, come, dear, is that quite accurate?" Her statements rarely *were* accurate; I realized this very, very slowly, but was incredibly obtuse over it; in fact I didn't really grasp it until a comparatively short time ago. (Evening is coming on, and I shall soon have to stop writing; thank God I am alone tonight.)

When she and Dada went away, I was left alone with Grandpapa. He was very old, and queer, and silent. He hated people, and never spoke to the people who came to the house [Knole]; in fact, if he got the chance he used to go to London for the day when he knew people were coming, and I used to be left alone to entertain them. It amused me later on, when sometimes I was had downstairs to make fourteen, to see him sitting quite mute between two wretched women who were trying to make conversation to him, or else crushing them into silence: "You have lovely gardens here, Lord Northwood [Sackville]." "What do you know about gardens?" he would snap at them. But at the same time he was always shrewd in his estimate of people, and never liked those who were not worthy of liking, or disliked those that were. Mother used to get furious when in about six words he demolished her friends, but Dada used to laugh, and then she turned on *him*. But I suppose she was really very devoted to Grandpapa, in her own way, because underneath everything her ideas of duty are sound, and although the most incomprehensible, she is certainly the most charming, person upon earth, whom I adore.

Grandpapa liked children and believed in fairies. Every night after dinner he used to fill a plate with fruit and put it ready for me to fetch early next morning; he used to put it in a drawer in his sitting-room, labelled Diana's [Vita's] Drawer, in very elaborate lettering in coloured chalks that he had done himself. He always amused himself in shy, secret ways like that; he used to spend hours whittling little bits of wood into queer shapes, and polishing them with sandpaper till the surface was like velvet, and he had a set of little remarks that he invariably made when the occasion turned up: "Nice fresh taste," he used to say over the first asparagus; and "Poor old Cox," whenever anything went wrong with anybody; but I never discovered the origin of that. To go back to the fruit, it was a regular