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Book review:

Bloomsbury's Outsider: A Life of David Garnett
by Sarah Knights

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Bloomsbury's Outsider: A Life of David Garnett by Sarah Knights

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Reviewed by D.M. Mitchell

David Garnett was born in 1892, into the heart of the late nineteenth-century progressive intelligentsia. His remarkable parents, Edward and Constance, were closely connected with the radical movements of their time. They gave their son considerable autonomy and respect, and when he was only ten, Constance took him with her to Russia, where he met her revolutionary friends and acted as an unwilling courier for some of their clandestine activities. He followed this up as a young student at London Tutorial College by becoming briefly and riskily involved in the underground schemes of a group of Indian nationalists.

He began writing seriously in the 1920s. His first book, *Lady Into Fox* (1922), was immediately successful. More substantial fictions followed, written in a then current neo-Augustan mode of clarity and detachment, and sharing something of the atmosphere of *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. *No Love* (1929), which has autobiographical elements, is probably the most deeply felt of these novels. He also wrote a delightful diary, *A Rabbit in the Air* (1932), about learning to fly. His later writings after the Second World War slipped somewhat into conventionality and self-indulgence, but he remained an exemplary editor, notably of the novels of Thomas Love Peacock in 1948 and of Dora Carrington's letters and diaries as late as 1970.

Garnett's three volumes of autobiography, published between 1953 and 1962, are an exception to this trajectory of relative decline. In these the rather mannered restraint of his earlier writing has developed a suppleness and ease that allows him to write clearly and unaffectedly about his former self. The pages in the second volume, *The Flowers*

of the Forest, about his work with the Quakers in France in 1915, are memorable and moving, and very much worth revisiting in these days of somewhat triumphalist '14–18' commemoration. To be a pacifist and a conscientious objector in World War I took a good deal of pluck. Garnett was supported by his friends and his traditions, but his courage and integrity cannot be doubted.

Sarah Knights's book gives us the picture of a talented young man with a great deal of 'Tiggerish' charm and energy, serious when he had to be and deeply influenced by the radical views of his parents' circles, a young man who gradually mutates into a rather conventional and self-indulgent would-be squire, never quite enough at ease with his newer self to abandon his earlier positions, nor quite able to bring his personal life into manageable shape. His life and work might not merit such a substantial and comprehensive biography as this one, were it not for his central and far from 'outsiderly' role in the best-known of Bloomsbury's betrayals, the lies told to Angelica Bell about her parentage. As is now well known, she grew up believing that she was Clive Bell's daughter, and only learnt that her real father was Duncan Grant the year before her marriage to David Garnett, Grant's former lover. It was a lastingly painful revelation for everybody involved and has led many to look sceptically at Bloomsbury's higher ethical and moral claims on its own behalf. It seems that Garnett was passionately bisexual as a young man, but it is not clear whether he remained so after his marriages to Ray Marshall and then Angelica Bell, to both of whom he was unfaithful with other women.

In this situation David Garnett was anything but the 'Bloomsbury Outsider' of Sarah Knights's subtitle. If we understand 'Bloomsbury' as essentially the two Stephen sisters and the network of their closest relationships, then somebody who is both the husband of Vanessa's daughter and the cherished former lover of her lifelong companion hardly seems marginal. Moreover, Garnett can be understood not as marginal but as a precursor, in the light of the milieu in which he grew up and where his values were formed. George Eliot's Mordecai remarks in *Daniel Deronda* that 'I speak not as an ignorant dreamer – as one bred up in the inland valleys, thinking ancient thoughts anew, and not knowing them ancient' (Chapter XL). The young people from Kensington who crossed London in 1907 to find a new way of life were in this sense unwittingly provincial in their relation to their radical forerunners of the 1880s. In that magical decade earlier experiments in living and feeling came together with progressive political ideas to produce exceptionally creative movements in which everything was

capable of being re-invented: anarchism and vegetarianism; sandals and same-sex relations; rights for women, for children, for all minorities. The call for such rights moved from the margins to the centre of social thought and practice; personal and political merged as almost never before. Bloomsbury domesticated these movements and gave them style. But for Garnett this was all familiar stuff, the air he had always breathed – and his first encounters with Bloomsbury were therefore not significantly emancipatory. He knew it all already: the values they believed themselves to be inventing were already his.

‘Bloomsbury’ has given us one great novelist, one outstandingly original and still influential political economist and a host of lesser lights, some of whom would fade from sight without their link to the idea of the group. Garnett can still shine with his own light and is well worth reading for his own sake. The early novellas keep their freshness and charm and the autobiographies are an impressive and original contribution to the cultural history of a world whose boundaries include Bloomsbury and extend well beyond it.