

The other WOOLF

Leonard Woolf (1880-1969) was recently portrayed by the actor Stephen Dillane in the Oscar-winning film *The Hours*. Husband of novelist Virginia, Leonard is usually seen as loyal, solid and companionable. But there was much more to Leonard Woolf, as **Peter Wilson** reveals.

Revealed for a period by some feminists as a dour and authoritarian figure who cramped his wife's genius, Leonard Woolf is also seen as the poor relation of the Bloomsbury Circle – at its margins, very much in the shadow of its more famous luminaries, Forster, Keynes, Strachey, Bell and Fry.

Recently, however, Leonard has begun to be perceived as a figure in his own right. Rather than marginal, he was a central, if less flamboyant, member of Bloomsbury. Indeed, without his shrewd artistic judgment and entrepreneurial skill in the publishing world, and his Cambridge and Fabian connections, this vaunted (for some, loathed) intellectual and artistic coterie might never have achieved its fame.

So who was Leonard Woolf? An undistinguished undergraduate career at Trinity, where most of his time was occupied by the concerns of the Cambridge Conversazione Society (aka 'the Apostles'), was followed by a successful career as a colonial civil servant in Ceylon from 1904 to 1911. He became assistant government agent for the Hambantota district at the age of 27, the youngest person to achieve this rank in the history of the colony. High office beckoned. But within a year or two Woolf's nagging doubts about the value of his imperial role turned into thorough disillusionment. In 1912, without much capital to his name, but benefiting from a handsome win in the Hong Kong sweepstake, he left the service, married Virginia, and embarked at first somewhat precariously on a literary career.

He recorded some of his experiences in Ceylon in the first of many books but one of only two novels, *The Village in the Jungle* (1913). It ranks alongside *Heart of Darkness*, *Passage to India*, and *Burmese Days*, as one of the great fictional explorations of the impact of the West upon the non-Western world. Woolf immersed himself in the traditional life and culture of the island, acquiring fluency in Sinhalese in the process. This enabled him to write a remarkably nuanced and culturally sensitive book. The work is regarded as a classic in Sri Lanka. So, too, is the film of the book made in the 1970s under the title *Beddegama*.

But it is in Woolf's achievements in the political realm that his contribution chiefly resides, and where a long connection with LSE can be found. After a meeting with the Webbs in 1913, Woolf was persuaded to become a member of the Fabian Society and to write for their new, radical political magazine *The New Statesman*. During

the long career in political writing and journalism that ensued, Woolf wrote literally hundreds of articles for this and other left of centre journals (notably *Political Quarterly* which he co-founded and edited for nearly 30 years) and played a central role in the life not only of the Fabian Society but the labour movement as a whole.

In the 1920s and 1930s Woolf was commonly acknowledged as the Fabian 'expert' on international and imperial questions. This status was largely a product of two books. The first was *International Government* (1916). During the height of that catastrophic conflict which became known as the Great War, the Webbs were desperate to find someone who could produce a detailed study of the vast problems of international order that the war laid bare, and how they could be dealt with sensibly. Woolf fitted the bill perfectly.

On accepting the Webbs' commission, Woolf set to work, as he later recounted in his five volume autobiography, 'like a fanatical or dedicated mole', producing a manuscript within 12 months. Much of the research for it was done in the LSE library, then already in the process of establishing itself as a unique resource for research on international questions. The book came to many as a revelation. For Woolf showed not only that international government was practicable but also that a good deal of it already existed. From the Concert of Europe to the Permanent Court of Arbitration, from the Universal Postal Union to the Danube Commission, and from congresses of white slave traffickers to the intriguing International Association for the Rational Destruction of Rats, Woolf demonstrated that a plethora of rules, laws, codes, and numerous institutions to implement them, had sprung up. The root cause of this development he saw as 'our modern, scientific, technical civilisation'.

The second book to establish his expertise was *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920), a work of mammoth proportions – according to his own calculations 166,604 words – and again largely based on facts garnered from the LSE library. Firmly in the British radical tradition, the book argued that imperialism was not only bad for the colonised, but also bad for the colonisers. There was a sense in which self government was better than good government. There was no excuse, however, for the neglect in the fields of health and education in particular that European colonies, including British ones, in varying degrees suffered – at least until the Colonial Development Acts of the 1940s, towards which Woolf's work was an early spur.

This book established Woolf's reputation as a major authority on imperial matters. On the strength of it, Woolf assumed JA Hobson's mantle as Britain's leading anti-imperialist theorist. Though Hobson's *Imperialism: a study* (1902) remains to this day a classic of international political theory while Woolf's book is largely forgotten, it is important to record that Woolf's work was more highly prized at the time by the anti-colonial movement.

Woolf went on to write another 20 or so books on political questions, though none of them achieved the impact of these early works. Perhaps one exception is *The War for Peace* written during his wife's final descent into mental illness in 1940. In all but name it is a reply to EH Carr's broadside against the burgeoning field of IR: *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. Carr condemned progressivist theorists of international cooperation and supporters of the League of Nations such as Woolf as 'utopian'. Woolf shared the morbid Fabian fear of ever having anything he said described as utopian. Not surprisingly, his reply was angry and polemical. But while it successfully landed a number of useful punches, it failed to deliver the knockout blow he desired. Today Carr's book looks balanced and reasonable by comparison. At the time, however, Woolf's reply won a number of plaudits, including one from that most measured of academics, LSE luminary Martin Wight, who advised his students in the 1940s and 50s not to read Carr's tract without Woolf's 'deadly reply' by their side.

Among Woolf's many other achievements can be counted his founding of the landmark Hogarth Press (initially conceived as a therapeutic hobby for his wife); his pioneering of documentary journalism (in his editorship of the *International Review*); his secretaryship for over two decades of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on International Questions and its sister committee on Imperial Questions, bodies which played a vital role in educating a largely insular Labour Party on issues beyond Britain's shores; and the publication (1925) of his innovative *Fear and Politics: a debate at the zoo*, a clear forerunner of Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

But it is in his pioneering study of the types of international cooperation, their causes, and their implications for future world order, that his importance predominantly lies. And without the resources made available to him at the new 'School of Economics', none of that would have been possible. ■



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