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Leonard Woolf: Still not out of the Jungle? A Review Article

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Christopher Ondaatje, *Woolf in Ceylon: An Imperial Journey in the Shadow of Leonard Woolf* (London: Harper Collins, 2005), pp. 326, i-xiii.

Victoria Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf: A Life* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006), pp. 530, i-xii.

Leonard Woolf (1880-1969) is a significant figure for students of international relations and imperial history for four reasons. First, his report for the Fabian Society on the prevention of war, published in 1916 as *International Government*, was extensively used by the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. It had a major influence on the social and economic provisions of the League of Nations Covenant. It was also the first book to demonstrate that international government, defined loosely as the conduct of international relations according to rules and regulations, was not only practicable, but a good deal of it already existed.

Secondly, Woolf's *The War for Peace* (1940) is the only full length response to E. H. Carr's classic but also highly polemical *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (Carr, 1939). While acknowledging that Carr was a brilliant man with many challenging and insightful things to say about the world political scene,

Woolf felt the book was mischievous, irresponsible and in certain respects plain wrong. A passionate man, Woolf could hardly contain his emotions in responding to Carr's book, and the result is an angry counter-polemic. But it is one that scores a number of direct hits, particularly with regard to the conceptual imprecision of the twin conceptual pillars of Carr's analysis, 'reality' and 'utopia', and the implication of Carr's employment of these terms that anything that succeeds is a manifestation of 'realism' and anything that fails is *ipso facto* utopian. Woolf was a left-liberal progressive, operating in that vague intellectual space between Fabian socialism and New Liberalism.¹ He believed that ideas and ideals mattered in international politics, and detested the implication of Carr's analysis that in the international sphere to have ideals is to court 'utopianism'. What is striking from the point of view of the history of ideas is that, despite their disagreements, both Carr and Woolf were men of the Left. Among other things, they were passionate advocates of a post-nationalist, functionalist, and collectivist world order (Wilson, 2003, pp. 200-07). They believed this would be the almost inevitable outcrop of the devastation of World War Two, and the economic and political chaos of the fiercely nationalist international anarchy that preceded it. They both rejected the nineteenth century assumption of a natural harmony of interests, but subscribed to the twentieth century hope of manufacturing such a harmony via ever-greater social, scientific, technical knowledge (Wilson, 1998). Events were soon to prove them both wrong, and the historically and theoretically minded student is left with some fascinating material for rethinking the question of 'practicality' in international affairs and the broader question of the nature, scope and prospects of progressive change.

Thirdly, in works such as *Economic Imperialism* (1920), *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928), and especially *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1920), Woolf played a major part in the erosion of the intellectual foundations of the British empire. In addition, his extensive research and propaganda work for such bodies as the Labour Party Advisory Committee on Imperial Questions (secretary 1924-45) and the Fabian Colonial Bureau (co-founder with Margaret Cole and Rita Hinden 1940), contributed to the crisis of confidence in empire, its feasibility and ethical foundations, that eventually led to its demise. Importantly, Woolf was one of a small number of critics of empire (whose number include George Orwell and Sir Sydney Olivier), who at one time was employed in running one. Fresh from Cambridge, and the rarefied atmosphere of the Apostles (the Cambridge Conversazione Society, of which G.E. Moore, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey were leading lights), Woolf found himself in Jaffna, Kandy, and Hambantota as a colonial administrator in Ceylon. During his tenure as Assistant Government Agent (AGA), 1908-1911, in the Hambantota District of southern Ceylon, Woolf kept a detailed diary of his activities. Decades later these diaries were published (1962) by the Ceylon Historical Society and The Hogarth Press (which Leonard and his wife Virginia founded in 1917). They provide a remarkable account of the day-to-day workings of one small corner of the British empire in the first decade of the twentieth century, and in their own way throw light on the nature of the imperial project *in toto*. Allied with three *Stories from the East* (1921), his novel *Village in the Jungle* (1913)—undervalued in the pantheon of colonial literature, but now coming into its own as a work of

the first rank—and the second (and best) volume of Woolf's celebrated autobiography, they provide an outstanding resource for students of imperial consciousness and government. One of those involved in bringing Woolf's official diaries into press described *The Village in the Jungle* as 'the best work of creative writing in English on Ceylon.'² Another described it as 'the finest imaginative work based on life in this country...by no means inferior to Forster's *A Passage to India*'.³ In the view of T. J. Barron, in one of the few careful studies of Woolf's experiences in Ceylon, the novel is

one of the finest pieces of social analysis which British Ceylon produced. Its understanding of traditional peasant society is astonishing, its delineation of the process whereby that society succumbs to economic pressure, masterly. All subsequent historical research on the problem in Ceylon has endorsed what Woolf asserts (Baron, 1977, 57-8).

'Pearls and Swine', based on his experiences superintending the Pearl Fishery at Marichchukkaddi on the north-west coast in 1906 (see Glendinning, pp.88-90), and written along with two other stories shortly after he left Ceylon (though not published until 1921), was ranked by one reviewer 'among the best short stories in the world'.⁴

Fourthly, and most generally, Woolf spent a large part of his long life engaged in international relations, and he gave a valuable account of this life in the aforementioned autobiography, especially volumes 3-5. He was never a diplomat, nor a professional politician (though he did stand, unenthusiastically, for Parliament in 1922), but he was a leading (and in some cases founding) member of such bodies as the League of Nations Union, the Labour Party Advisory Committee on International Questions (secretary 1918-45), and the New Fabian Research Bureau. He published extensively on international

issues, including over a dozen books and many hundred articles.⁵ In addition, as director and commissioning editor of the Hogarth Press he was responsible for publishing the work of many radical and liberal figures of the day, J. M. Keynes, H. G. Wells, and J. A. Hobson included.⁶ He pioneered documentary journalism during his editorship in the early 1920s of the *International Review*. Each month this publication included a large section devoted to the publication and review of important international documents. The object was explicitly Wilsonian: to contribute to the new spirit of openness symbolised by the principle of 'open covenants openly arrived at' (thereby furthering popular education and trust in international relations). The journal proved short lived, though the documentary section continued to appear for a while in its successor publication, also edited by Woolf, the *Contemporary Review*. The full story and fate of these path-breaking publications remains untold.

Other noteworthy roles and achievements include the founding in 1931 (with William Robson, a public administration professor at LSE) of the centre-Left journal *Political Quarterly*, and his editorship of it singly or jointly until 1959; and his involvement with the *New Statesman*, from the early pieces he contributed as an aspiring political journalist in the 1910s, to his seat on the board of directors 1942-65. All told, we have in Woolf a fascinating 'Life on the Left', to cite the title of the excellent biography of Woolf's fellow Labour intellectual, Harold Laski (Kramnick and Sheerman, 1993). But of course it was more than a life on the Left, it was an international life on the Left. Most of Woolf's writing and campaigning was informed by and sought to advance a progressive Left-internationalism.⁷ This was rational and reformist in

character, but radical in many of its goals and implications. While Woolf, unlike many Marxist and radical liberal colleagues, recognised the relative permanence of national sovereignty, he also maintained that in the modern interdependent world many aspects of it had become a sham. He saw in the misfit between the (growing interdependent) social and economic organisation of the world and its (stubbornly nationalistic) political organisation, the seeds of many international disagreements and antagonisms (see Wilson, 2003, pp. 44-51). The need, therefore, was to regulate sovereignty, to clip its wings and bring it under some sort of communal control for communal purposes. In this regard Woolf's life on the Left marched in step with his life in avant-garde publishing and his artistic and literary life in Bloomsbury.

Woolf in the Literature

Until recently Leonard Woolf was regarded as the poor relation of Bloomsbury. He was recognised for the contribution he made to nurturing his wife's genius, and nursing her through two periods of near-fatal emotional and mental breakdown—though some feminist authors have derided, and even reviled him for his allegedly domineering approach (see Glendinning, p. 507). His vigorous protection and advancement of Virginia's literary legacy after her death has also been noted. In addition, he received some recognition for his tireless committee work for Left causes and organisations, and for adding some ballast of common sense and sexual restraint to extravagant and promiscuous Bloomsbury. The former British diplomat, Sir Duncan Wilson, penned a competent but uninspiring political biography of Leonard Woolf in 1978. While it served to bring to the attention of the reading public the

diversity and some of the hitherto hidden achievements of Woolf's career, it failed to capture the vitality, the passion, and moral strength of the man.

Another former diplomat, this time American, put things on a much sounder path with an edition of Woolf's letters, published to considerable acclaim in 1990. As well as revealing the breathtaking range of Woolf's activities, and the intelligence he brought to so many of them, this volume also contained a lucid and astute mini-biography in the introductions to each of the six sections of the volume. I added two essays on Leonard Woolf's thought on internationalism and imperialism in 1995, which were later incorporated into a detailed account and assessment of his international thought in 2003. But while this book may have been 'thorough and judicious', as Sir Bernard Crick generously conceded, it was also 'far too academic' to capture the attention of 'general intellectuals' (Crick, 2006, p.501). The literary and personal side of the equation was fortified by two portraits of the marriage and literary partnership of Leonard and Virginia, one for a general readership (Spater and Parsons, 1977) and one for a more specialist—framed in terms of the 'Outsiders' Society' that Virginia advanced in her path-breaking feminist critique of patriarchy and war, *Three Guineas* (Rosenfeld, 2000; V. Woolf, 1991 [1938]). In 2002 the letters between Leonard and the last love of his life, Trekkie Parsons, the wife of Ian Parsons, fellow publisher and director of Chatto and Windus (which took a fifty per cent stake in the Hogarth Press in 1946) were published (Adamson, 2002). Further information and portraits on the literary side of Woolf's life, his relationship with Virginia and the Bloomsbury circle can be found in several recently published memoirs and

introductions to new editions of his books (e.g. Bell, 1995; Nicolson, 2000; Woolf, 2005).

These works have all contributed to bringing Leonard Woolf's life and career out of the shadow of his more illustrious Bloomsbury colleagues, and with Ondaatje's elegant volume on Woolf's relationship with Ceylon, the main aspects of Woolf's career have now received the scholarly attention they deserve. Entrepreneur and publisher turned novelist and biographer, Christopher Ondaatje has produced a book which is part travelogue, part biography, part literary analysis, part photographic essay, part historical sketch, and part reminisces and reflections on his native land. One might think such eclecticism a recipe for disaster, but in the hands of this imaginative yet measured author—much in the spirit of its subject—the book works wonderfully well. Ondaatje in effect uses Woolf's diaries, letters, fictional works, and autobiographies as a vehicle for telling a personal, but also carefully researched story about Sri Lanka/Ceylon—its history, social evolution, culture, religions, and its tragic and terrible ethnic conflict. It vividly shows the passing of an old world (of poverty, unsustainable subsistence micro-economies, repressive social hierarchies, endemic exploitation, everyday cruelty and ignorance), but how the new world (modern, capitalist, increasingly globalised) has not managed to shake off many parts of its shell. Anyone looking for a readable introduction to Sri Lanka should look no further than this—especially if they have an interest in Bloomsbury and twentieth century literature. The exquisitely reproduced photographic prints—both contemporary and historical—and the production quality of this cloth bound

edition add to the pleasure of this valuable contribution to the growing literature on Woolf.

Wanted—A Biography

The one towering omission over the last two decades, however, has been a fully-fledged biography. With the publication of *Leonard Woolf: A Life* this omission has now been rectified—and by an author renowned for her biographies of such demanding subjects as Jonathan Swift, Vita Sackville-West, and Rebecca West. There are many impressive features of Victoria Glendinning's book. First of all, she weaves together the personal and political in Woolf's life with tremendous skill, bringing real depth of understanding to bear, and ample wit. Secondly, the volume is exceptionally well researched. Every aspect of Leonard Woolf's life is covered, even that aspect, which admirers and detractors of Bloomsbury lap up with equal relish, that Woolf himself refused to comment on, except in the most brief and elliptical terms—his sex life and that of Virginia and other Bloomsbury figures. I do not wish to comment extensively on this here, except to say that Leonard Woolf was a passionate man and made a great and fully self-conscious sacrifice in marrying a woman with whom he knew sexual activity would be problematic. When Leonard first started to court Virginia's affections, from his Kachcheri in the jungle⁸, he was well aware that he was now in his thirties, had not found love, and had little prospect of doing so in the confined white society of colonial Ceylon. But the brothels of the Orient had provided him with ample sexual experience. Virginia, only a few years younger, was equally desirous of finding a love-match, but in contrast to her future husband, and as her given name betokened, she was sexually almost completely innocent. Moreover,

she was a highly sensitive woman, aware of her unique gifts of perception and expression (though her first novel was not to appear until 1915, two years after Leonard's), but prone to mental instability and even breakdown under conditions of extreme excitement, emotional turmoil, or mental fatigue. She suffered her first mental breakdown after the death of her father, the eminent Victorian man of letters Sir Leslie Stephen, in 1904.

George Spater and Ian Parsons tellingly entitled their portrait of the Woolf partnership, after Shakespeare,⁹ 'A Marriage of True Minds'. Leonard's love for Virginia, as Glendinning compellingly shows, was passionate and unreserved. But from the outset he knew that while their intellectual and spiritual union would be unusually deep and intimate, their physical union would remain unfulfilled. This is not to say Virginia was a prude—quite the contrary. She was both attracted and repulsed by Leonard's strangeness: his Jewishness, his relatively modest background, his impecuniousness, and his tales from the East of natives, hangings, and prostitutes. She revelled in this and for a while, according to her sister Vanessa, talked of nothing else. As Glendinning so aptly says, Leonard 'captured Virginia's imagination as Othello the Moor. "with all my travel's history"¹⁰ captured Desdemona's' (Glendinning, p.131).

Probably the chief contribution of the biography is to dispel once and for all the myth that the marriage was dysfunctional. Leonard has often been portrayed as the culprit, suffocating Virginia's creativity with his dourness, sexual resentment, and authoritarian behaviour during her bouts of illness.¹¹

Virginia meanwhile has been portrayed as the victim, unable to come to terms with her ambiguous sexuality, emotionally vulnerable, clinging to Leonard for respectability and security. Glendinning demonstrates that these portraits are a gross distortion. The couple quickly became mutually dependent. Their love, demonstrated in the many letters already published before this biography, grew with time rather than diminished. The strict regime Woolf imposed on his wife during her periods of illness was probably necessary, and in any case was a product of advice received from the best medical sources then available (including the King's surgeon). The crudeness of treatment, including prolonged periods of bed rest and solitude, were due not to insensitivity, and certainly not callousness on Leonard's part, but to the crude and uncertain state of knowledge on nervous and mental disorders of that time. Disorders of this kind in intelligent, upper-middle class women, where no obvious material explanation could be found, were especially vulnerable to any number of Victorian prejudices about the female psyche. Rather than bringing about, maybe even willing, Virginia's final demise, Leonard's unqualified love and loyalty to Virginia both as a person and a writer was a necessary ingredient of the maturation of her creative genius. He was the first person to read her newly completed manuscripts. His opinions were always the ones she most trusted and valued.

The brute fact of war was a far greater factor in causing Virginia's final breakdown than anything Leonard ever said or did. In a very real sense if Virginia was a victim of anything she was a victim of war. Having travelled through Germany in 1935 ('hiding Leonard's nose' as Virginia liked to joke)

they had a keen appreciation of the nature of the Nazi regime. They believed their names would be on the list of those (Jews, communists, socialists, intellectuals, and artists) to be rounded-up and shot in the aftermath of a successful German invasion. They agreed they would commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Gestapo. The issue, therefore, was very much on their minds. The days were dark, the horizon darker still, and the air over the South Downs of their beloved Sussex full of the sights and sounds of aerial combat. War, the emotional intensity of completing what was to be her final work (*Between the Acts*, 1941), and the anxiety that always overcame her regarding the critical reception of any new work, were the major causes of Virginia's final descent. As it turned out they were right in their assumptions about the Gestapo: they were listed together on the notorious *Sonderfahndunliste* retrieved from Nazi offices after the war. The fear that impelled them to acquire a prescription for morphia from Virginia's physician brother, Adrian, and induced Leonard to keep a spare can of petrol in the garage (see Glendinning, p.353), was not irrational.

Glendinning's metier is in revealing the nature and significance of Woolf's relationships, and in getting to the core of his complex character (austere and restrained yet deeply passionate; contemplative and rational yet highly obdurate in his opinions). A third great strength of the volume is that it manages to be comprehensive yet balanced in the weight it gives to each of the main phases and facets of Woolf's life. While his relationships with Bloomsbury, and Virginia especially, inevitably take centre stage, his relationship, often troubled, with his parents and his nine siblings are explored

in great detail, along with his schooling at St. Paul's and his undergraduate days at Trinity. More importantly for our (international historical and political) purposes, considerable attention is given to Woolf's career as colonial administrator, political journalist, Fabian social investigator, Labour Party advisor, publisher, and editor. One does not, however, find much analysis of his political and international thought—partly for the reason, no doubt, that this was one aspect of Woolf's career that had been covered in some detail before. Yet to the extent Glendinning does treat this subject she does so in a rather uncritical way, accurately estimating the (considerable) contemporary significance of Woolf's work, but overstating its lasting importance. Few historians of international thought now doubt that Woolf was an important figure in the development of thinking about international relations and organisation in the early twentieth century. His identification of the many different types of international cooperation in existence, and the complex nature of the international social milieu as it had evolved since the industrial revolution, changed the outlook of many observers of the international scene, and directly fed into David Mitrany's 'functionalism' of the 1930s and 40s (see Wilson, 2003, pp.55-60; Osiander, 1998, pp. 409-32). But the books of Woolf that will last well into the twenty-first century and maybe beyond are not his overtly political books but his five volume autobiography and *Village in the Jungle*. His international political works from the sober *International Government* and Swiftian *Empire and Commerce and Africa* to that caustic anti-Carr polemic *The War for Peace* and the universally ignored and hubristically entitled *Principia Politica* (1953) have long been surpassed by a number of works in the professional field of International Relations (IR). They

are not works which teachers of the subject would recommend to students today—apart, that is, from graduate students specialising in the international thought of the period.

The point here is that in seeking to extract Woolf from the shadows of his more illustrious colleagues, and give him some limelight of his own, Glendinning runs the danger of elevating his stature as a political writer and thinker to a level that cannot be sustained. The fact is that the study of international relations (and certainly political theory in which Woolf also dabbled) is now much more methodologically rigorous, epistemologically self-conscious, and empirically more thorough than it was in Woolf's day. While we may mourn the loss of the fluency and accessibility of the golden days of the amateur IR theorist in the 1920s through 1940s, and certainly their desire to reach a broader audience, the fact remains that Woolf did not produce anything on a par with Waltz's *Man, the State and War*, Claude's *Swords into Ploughshares*, Bull's *Anarchical Society*, Jackson's *The Global Covenant*, or Hurrell's *On Global Order*—to cite five of the more accessible works of the post-1945 field dealing with themes dear to Woolf's heart. These works have elevated debate onto an altogether higher plane.¹²

The only other shortcoming in Glendinning's masterful account concerns Woolf's anti-imperialism. Writing half a century after the event, Woolf presented his Ceylon years as a period during which the seeds of his anti-imperialism were firmly sown. He further claimed that growing doubt about the imperial project that led him to resign from the Civil Service and

return home. This account has been accepted by all subsequent students of Leonard Woolf's life and career, and is given further currency by Glendinning (and indeed Ondaatje). Yet in a very real sense Woolf's encounter with imperialism occurred not in Ceylon but in London. His growing anti-imperialism in Ceylon is a *post hoc* construction. There is no evidence in his diaries to suggest that Woolf was seriously troubled by ethical doubts about empire during his time in Ceylon. On the contrary, the available evidence suggests that romantic love not political aversion accounts overwhelmingly for his decision to resign from the colonial service. Resignation was the only route open to him if he was to capture Virginia's hand in marriage. His anti-imperialism was not a product of raw experience but of later political consciousness—or rather, the heightening and radicalisation of his political consciousness in suffragist, Fabian, and Labour circles in the 1910s and 1920s. It was not the raw experience that led to the radicalisation, but rather the radicalisation that led him to reconstruct his experience of the previous decade.

The point is an important one because it shows how deeply entrenched in the decades that straddle the year 1900 was the notion that white men should rule black men and that colonial empire would continue indefinitely. Even those like Woolf, who later became vociferous critics of empire—Beatrice Webb described him as 'an anti-imperialist fanatic' (revealingly in 1926, see Glendinning, p.265)—accepted it in 1900 and even in 1910 as almost a law of nature. A reified social structure if ever there was one!¹³

Anti-Imperialist?

Woolf arrived in Ceylon in November 1904 as a Cadet. In May 1907 he was promoted to Office Assistant, rising to AGA for Hambantota in August 1908. His experiences as chief administrator and sole magistrate for this district of 1,500 square kilometres provided much of the raw material for *Village in the Jungle*. He later described himself on arrival in Ceylon as ‘a very innocent, unconscious imperialist’ (Woolf, 1961, p.25). At the outset he felt ‘rather grand’ being part of the ‘ruling caste in a strange Asiatic country’ (Glendinning, p.77).¹⁴ He never fitted into white society in Ceylon, a small culturally parochial group of administrators, traders and planters (and their bored or somewhat eccentric wives and daughters). In one typically over-the-top letter to Lytton Strachey he described them as ‘the whole stupid degraded circle of degenerates and imbeciles’ (Glendinning, p.81; see also Ondaatje, p.39). Yet behind an authoritarian façade—necessary to make the system work, he felt, in a largely uneducated and superstitious society—he developed a sympathy for and fascination with the native population: their liveness, strangeness, fatalism, and the austerity, simplicity and serenity of the Buddhist faith.¹⁵ There is no question, however, that Woolf was ambitious—indeed an ambitious imperialist. He prided himself on his efficiency, which became over time a ‘dangerous passion’, even a ‘ruthless obsession’ (Glendinning, p.107). He cultivated a ‘strict but fair’ official persona. He took on new challenges with relish and had a supercilious attitude, a by-product of the elitism of Trinity and the Apostles, towards all but his most capable colleagues. Barron describes him as in some ways ‘almost the archetypal

colonial administrator of the early twentieth century' (Baron, 1977, p.48). Spotts describes him as 'a model imperialist' (Woolf, 1990, p.58.) He was hard-working and wholly dedicated to advancement of the people he governed.¹⁶ He was quite sure in his own mind that he would have risen to high office had not something happened, in his evaluation of things, during his period of leave-of-absence, 1911-12.

That something was almost certainly Virginia. True, he was involved in a number of incidents that may have made him think again about his role as a colonial administrator and the merits and demerits of a colonial career. While serving in the north of the island in the early years of his career he was the subject of several complaints from the Jaffna Tamil Association who accused him of humiliating certain of its members. While no doubt guilty of a certain degree of cultural insensitivity in these early years (applying rules strictly without reference to caste and other cultural peculiarities), he flatly denied the most serious allegation: that of flicking with his riding whip the well-known Tamil lawyer, Harry Sanderasekera. According to Glendinning, 'these incidents shook Leonard's confidence and made him seriously doubt whether he wanted to rule over other people' (Glendinning, p.95; see also Ondaatje, pp.104-6). In addition, during his tenure as AGA Woolf had a few scrapes with his superiors. On one occasion he came close to being reported to Colombo by his immediate superior, the Government Agent (GA) of Southern Province, for being over-zealous in his desire to innovate and over-critical of government policy (Glendinning, p.107). It is not clear in Gendenning's account whether the GA's pique was due to jealousy at Woolf's administrative

success (in 1910 he broke all previous records for salt collection—a staple economic activity in Hambantota¹⁷), concern that Woolf's uncompromising methods were unsettling the natives, or dislike of his somewhat supercilious manner. In 1911 Woolf received a reprimand from the Governor (albeit indirectly) concerning the nature and tone of some of his diary entries concerning the GA and official policy. Woolf also suffered from chronic malaria, which would have further sapped his enthusiasm for the East. In Glendinning's estimation, however, Woolf's doubts about his future as a colonial civil servant were not due to these scrapes and setbacks 'but because he had lost all faith in the imperial project' (Glendinning, p.123).

The problem with this view is that it relies entirely on Woolf's autobiographical judgment reached long after the event and after much anti-imperial water had flowed under the bridge. Glendinning offers no evidence by way of corroboration from government documents, or from Woolf's official diaries¹⁸, or from his letters, that at any point before he resigned he had 'lost all faith in the imperial project'. Indeed the independent evidence she produces suggests an altogether more conventional explanation. His letters to Lytton Strachey indicate that from 1909 (i.e. on the eve of turning thirty) his personal future began to play heavily on his mind. His sense of separation from those he conceived as his own kind grew ever-more acute—he spoke of 'not having talked to anyone for four years' (Glendinning, p.114). He began to see marriage as a way out of his own loneliness and unhappiness. In 1909 he had wrote to Strachey that 'marriage is the only way to happiness, to anything settled' (Glendinning, p.120). Indeed, he came close the following year to

proposing to the daughter of a tea-planter. But the idea of marrying Virginia Stephen, first put in Woolf's mind by Strachey during this time, became more and more attractive. There was no doubt some colonial disenchantment, but the evidence suggests that the chief goal of Woolf's period of leave was to acquire a wife, and if at all possible Virginia.

In seeking to culturally rehabilitate Leonard Woolf and elevate his socio-political significance, it is convenient to present him a perspicacious doubter of the merits of imperialism, as someone well ahead of the tide of moral sentiments. But his first major assault on what he sarcastically called (after the Berlin Congress of 1878) the 'blessings of empire' came not in 1910 or 1911 but in 1920, a full nine years after his brother Edgar had introduced him to the Webbs and Fabian socialism (Glendinning, p.128)—which in my view marks the real beginning of his political education. In this connection it is important to note that *The Village in the Jungle* is far from an anti-imperialist text. Glendinning asks the right question about this book: 'is it an anti-imperialist or a paternalistic and imperialist text?' (Glendinning, p.165), but leans strongly toward the former. It is worth recalling, however, that the main white character (one of only two) in the novel, the police magistrate—the 'white Hamadoru' (which the author modelled on himself and his own experiences)—is positively portrayed. Yes, self-absorbed and arrogant; but also sympathetic, reasonable, humane. His authority is portrayed as stemming more from superior knowledge (including knowledge of the jungle) than from raw power. He is also portrayed as contemplative and even mentally courageous—finding himself compelled by his training and values to

look beyond the bare facts of a homicide to the psychological motives and circumstances of the accused (Woolf, 1981 [1913], 110-24, 136-47). The jungle is depicted as savage, ominous, cruel and unrelenting, a metaphor almost for the irrational forces in life.¹⁹ The headmen (Ratemahatmayas), village headmen (Arachchi), and traders and money-lenders (Mudalali) are generally depicted as self-interested, duplicitous, cunning and corrupt. The peasant villagers, relying on the 'chena' slash and burn cultivation, are represented as simple, gullible, superstitious, ignorant, powerless—and capable, like wild animals, of terrible acts when cornered. The point here is that the most appealing characters in the book, the only ones displaying wisdom and compassion, are Europeans—a fact which hardly bears out the claim that the novel is anti-imperialistic. For sure, the central protagonist, Silindu, displays a certain nobility in the way he accepts his fate (hanging, probably, for the cold-blooded murder of his tormentors), and Woolf enlists from the reader a good deal of sympathy for him. But in essence he is a wretched creature enslaved by his ignorance.

Two things should be added. First, the element of paternalism is strong in virtually all Woolf's writings about the colonial world. P. S. Gupta has noted that Woolf's paternalism towards 'backward peoples', 'non-adult races' and 'primitive peoples' (terms all of which Woolf liberally used) long outlived its usefulness and never entirely lost a certain racial tinge (Gupta, 1975, pp.276-8).²⁰ This is why even beyond the publication of *Empire and Commerce in Africa* and his other reputedly 'anti-imperialist' writings one feels uneasy describing him as an anti-imperialist. Woolf wanted change, and by the 1920s

became a proponent of the acceleration of efforts to prepare subject peoples for self-government. But he never abandoned the liberal imperialist belief that superior peoples had a duty to aid the development—social, economic, political and moral—of inferior peoples, and that advancement would take place within established (if reformed) imperial political and administrative structures. Baron is not quite right to say that Woolf ‘behaved impeccably as a colonial official’, but he is right in saying that the characteristic outlook of the service—the government of less advanced peoples for their own good—was ‘driven deep into his consciousness and survived there till his death’ (Baron, 1977, p.49). To the extent that he rejected imperialism he did so not on political or ethical grounds but on aesthetic:

The aesthetic repudiation of imperialism, the belief that white men lived at best unreal, theatrical lives, at worst alienated, grotesque lives in Ceylon, whereas the Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors were totally in harmony with their environment, is a clear and persistent theme in all Woolf’s writings on the East...(Baron, 1977, p.54; see also Ondaatje, pp.36-7).

Secondly, returning to narrower ground, the fact that Woolf got to work on this novel so soon after leaving the Colonial Service supports the further thesis that he resigned in order ‘to devote his time in the United Kingdom to the literary pursuits which had been his main interest from his undergraduate days at Cambridge’.²¹ I have no wish here to support any mono-causal account of Woolf’s decision. Any life-changing decision involves a variety of factors and motives. The point of the foregoing is simply to cast some critical light on the dominant, in some respects convenient, (and Leonard Woolf’s own) explanation.

Conclusion: Disillusioned Imperialist

The only safe conclusion, on the basis of the evidence presented in these volumes, is that by 1910-11 Woolf had lost some faith in the imperial project. No longer an unconscious imperialist, he was becoming a disillusioned imperialist. His disillusion was a product of his youthful enthusiasm and idealism. Far from rejecting the goals of imperialism (those of education and stewardship as enshrined in the most optimistic vision of empire) he was disillusioned by the inefficiency and cynicism with which they were pursued. Such bald statements as 'I resigned because I did not like being an imperialist and ruling people'²² do not ring true. They say more about Woolf's attitude and state of mind in the 1960s than in the 1900s—and of course how he wished to be remembered. Glendinning notes in a typically perceptive passage that as he 'withdrew from political planning for the future [in the 1940s] he ... became involved in the management of the past' (Glendinning, p.402). This she applies to his relationship with the Webbs and especially to Virginia's legacy and reputation. Yet, curiously, she does not apply it to Leonard's writings about his own life and career which began with the publication in 1953 of *Principia Politica*—a set of personal reflections and reminisces about political events and ideas rather than an attempt to identify the principles of politics²³—and continued in earnest with the publication of the first volume of his autobiography in 1960. An area such as imperialism, given Leonard's previous involvement, and the near-revolutionary changes in attitudes towards it during his lifetime, would, one would think, be ripe for such 'management'.

Notes

¹The seminal study of New Liberalism is Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also the important article by Casper Sylvest, 'Continuity and Change in British Liberal Internationalism, c. 1900-1930', *Review of International Studies* 31, 2 (2005). For a valuable recent overview of liberal thinking on international relations see Andrew Williams, *Liberalism and War: The Victors and the Vanquished* (London: Routledge, 2006), esp. chs. 1 & 2.

²'S.D.S.', 'Introduction Part I—Historical', Leonard Woolf, *Diaries in Ceylon 1908-1911*, 3rd edn. (Dehiwala: Tisara Press, 1997), p. vii.

³Mervyn de Silva, 'Introduction Part II—General', *Diaries in Ceylon*, p.xlviii-l. In Spotts' view, *Village in the Jungle* has 'an authenticity ... unequalled even in works by Conrad and Forster' (in Woolf, 1990, p.61).

⁴H. Hamilton Fyfe in the *Daily Mail*, quoted in Glendinning, p.228.

⁵In their meticulous *Leonard Woolf: A Bibliography* (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1992), Leila Luedeking and Michael Edwards list 1,703 items, mostly on international/political subjects, including around 1000 reviews.

⁶The international thought of these figures, long neglected, is now well covered. See David Long, *Towards a New Liberal Internationalism: The International Theory of J. A. Hobson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); John S. Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H. G. Wells* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Donald Markwell, *John Maynard Keynes and International Relations: Economic Paths to War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ Or 'welfare internationalism' to use Hidemi Suganami's more apposite term. See his *The Domestic Analogy and World Order Proposals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸ The term 'Kachcheri' is the only legacy of the brief period of rule by the English East India Company of the Maritime Provinces of Ceylon (1796-98). It is the Hindustani name for revenue collection offices and is still widely used in Sri Lanka to denote government offices. See 'S.D.S.', 'Introduction Part I', *Diaries in Ceylon*, fn.27, p.xxv.

⁹ Sonnet 116: 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments. Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds.'

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act I Scene 3.

¹¹ Glendinning deals with the critics of Woolf's character and his treatment of Virginia in many points of the text—though see esp. the useful bibliographic note p. 507. See also Ondaatje, pp.282-8, whose account is much in line with Glendinning's.

¹² I sought to examine the conceptual, methodological and empirical weaknesses in Woolf's political thought in *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, esp. chs. 4 & 6. For more upbeat assessments see Casper Sylvest, 'Interwar Internationalism, the British Labour Party, and the Historiography of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 48, 2 (2004), esp. pp. 422-28; and Lucian M. Ashworth, *International Relations Theory and the Labour Party: Intellectuals and Policy Making, 1918-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), esp. ch.6.

¹³ Note the verdict of Jan Morris on the British attitude to Empire in Jubilee year (1897): 'The infatuated British people did not greatly concern itself with

the motives of the *Pax Britannica*. It had happened. It was splendid. It was part of that divine order which had made Britain supreme and Victoria sixty years a Queen' (quoted in Ondaatje, p.16). The relative permanence of the British Empire was taken for granted—and not only by Tory diehards—as late as the 1940s (see Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, pp.133-4). In 1926, Woolf's friend on the fringe of Bloomsbury, Harold Nicolson, confessed 'how gloriously and manfully imperial we are!' He declared the following year that imperialism was part of Britain's 'national genius'. By 1942, however, partly due to Woolf's influence, his views had changed. 'Imperialism is dead...and, I hope, buried', he told the House of Commons. See Derek Drinkwater, *Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations: The Practitioner as Theorist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp.63-4.

¹⁴ The Sinhalese, it should be noted, had a rigid caste-system which the British, like the Dutch and Portuguese before them, did little to disturb. On arrival they simply planted themselves on top!

¹⁵ The Buddhist veneration for a life of solitude and contemplation, according to Glendinning, 'chimed with [Woolf's] own dreams of withdrawal' (p.96; see also Ondaatje, pp.162-4). He was not so enamoured with Hinduism and the 'multiplicity of its florid gods, the ugly exuberance of its temples' (p.96). On Woolf's regard for the various peoples of Sri Lanka/Ceylon, including the Arab pearl divers he encountered while serving in Jaffna, see, further, Baron, 'Before the Deluge', esp. pp. 52-4; Wilson, *International Theory of Leonard Woolf*, pp.112-13.

¹⁶ He set out to make his district 'the most efficiently governed in the colony... He was enthralled by the sheer challenge of the work. In devoting himself

completely to the welfare of his people, he was acting in the best tradition of British imperialism' (Spotts in Woolf, 1990, pp.58-9). In 1931 Beatrice Webb described him as 'a saint with very considerable intelligence; a man without vanity or guile, wholly public-spirited'. Quoted in Gendinning, p. 286.

¹⁷ Ondaatje provides a nice overview, pp. 216-8.

¹⁸ Spotts notes (in Woolf, 1990, pp.61-2) that Woolf makes only 'a few fugitive political comments' regarding Ceylon and imperialism in his letters. His conclusion that Woolf was beginning to doubt the moral legitimacy of empire relies, as with Glendinning, on Woolf's autobiographical assertions. I tend to agree with Feuer (though not with his somewhat speculative psychoanalytical framework), that Woolf's 'abrupt metamorphosis into an anti-imperialist was not the outcome of his own imperialist experiences or the consequence of a conviction that he had been doing the devil's work.' Rather it was the outcome of a new psychological (and for Feuer, sexual) dynamic triggered by his renewed intimacy with his Cambridge friends, his relationship with Virginia, and his immersion in radical politics. See Lewis S. Feuer, *Imperialism and the Anti-Imperialist Mind* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986), pp. 154-9. This important work is not cited by either Ondaatje or Glndinning,

¹⁹ Woolf stated in his autobiography that 'the jungle and jungle life are ...horribly ugly and cruel. When I left Ceylon, and wrote *The Village in the Jungle*, that was what obsessed my memory and my imagination and is, in a sense, the theme of the book (Woolf, 1961, p.212). Ondaatje quotes this passage (p.243) but it does not sit comfortably with his prior verdict that *Village* is 'undoubtedly anti-imperialist' (p.239). Ondaatje provides a valuable analysis of Woolf's fiction works (pp.235-61), which mentions but does little to

refute Rajiva Wijesinha's verdict (see p.254) that *Village* is patronising and paternalistic.

²⁰ See also Wilson, 2003, pp.134-5. The fascinating relationship between paternalism and internationalism in early twentieth century political thought is explored by several contributors to David Long and Brian Schmidt (eds.), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005).

²¹ 'S.D.S.', 'Introduction Part I', *Diaries in Ceylon*, p. xxxv.

²² Quoted from the Ceylon Observer (6 March 1960) in *ibid.* fn. 18, p.xix. See also Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, pp.205-8, and Ondaatje pp.274-5.

²³ The book was prominently reviewed, Bertrand Russell, A. J. P. Taylor, Max Beloff, and E. H. Carr among the reviewers. But unlike the first two volumes (Leonard conceived it as Part III of his *After the Deluge*) the reception was hostile. The Oxford philosopher, Stuart Hampshire, hit the nail on the head in describing Woolf as straying 'through the domains of child psychology, animal psychology, anthropology and classical scholarship with the lightest possible equipment and with little reference to any detailed research.' See Glendinning, pp. 412-6.

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