

The Laurie Lee Lecture: Cheltenham Festival 2010

SECRETS

By

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My latest book, called *A Book of Secrets* is the third and final volume of a series which began with *Basil Street Blues* (1999) in which I wrote about my years at school, in the army (as a National Serviceman) and as an articled clerk who alas never completed his articles. The book charted my erratic course towards becoming a biographer. I was, it seemed, unemployable and eventually obliged to employ myself. A risky business. The second volume, *Mosaic* (2004), turned out to be an experiment in two forms of retrieval, exercising the powers of research and of memory, the one stimulating the other, as I attempted to recover and re-create the stories of my grandfather's wayward mistress who had gone a long way to bankrupting the family and

also an early love-affair of my own which to some extent changed the direction of my life. These two books mix biography with autobiography as I seek invisibility behind the subjects I am trying to bring alive on the page.

My new volume, *A Book of Secrets*, is also a combination of biography and autobiography in which I play the amateur detective, the anxious traveller and an observer whose natural place lies between the lines of the narrative but who surfaces in the story from time to time - often, for some reason, in comic episodes. I had no intention of being present at all, but was drawn into the narrative by two women: the women to whom this book is dedicated and about whom I will say something later.

So here, to my surprise, is a trilogy – a trilogy in two volumes since the publishers, responding perhaps to the recession, have miraculously relaunched my first two books as a single new paperback which, they assure me, is a bargain (two for the price of one). I am anxious to pass this news on to you. *Basil Street Blues* found its way into the music department of

several bookstores and *Mosaic* was to be discovered in the art department. I expect to see this new book of secrets lurking on the shelves devoted to espionage and I am hoping this will intensify its sales.

To introduce these books I had better begin by re-introducing myself – my earlier self who wrote the paperback. Unlike most of you I never went to a university. But of course I was unable to avoid all schooling. At school I learnt physics, geometry, algebra, a little Latin, less Greek: in short all those subjects about which I now know nothing. After this followed two years in a lawyers' office from which, as a writer, I retained for many years some knowledge of the law of bankruptcy and an apprehension of libel. My two years in the army had, it now seems to me, some of the qualities of Gothic fiction. I wanted to be a paid-and-published writer, but breaking into the literary world wasn't easy – especially if you lived, as I did, at a place called Maidenhead Thicket.

There is no reference, so far as I know, in any great novels, plays or poems of the past to Maidenhead Thicket. Nothing in

Chaucer, Jane Austen, certainly not Tolstoy, not even the Eliots, Tom and George. Only recently have I found out that Hugh Lofting (the creator of *Dr Dolittle*) and Nick Hornby (author of *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity*) also spent some of their early years in Maidenhead. Together we cover a good range of literature though it is probably too late to us to be called, in Bloomsbury style, “The Maidenhead Group” (and probably too misleading also).

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now: I am an only child and I am one- hundred-and-fifty years old, having two birthdays each year (one for my mother, the other for my father – my birthday being one of the many things about which they could not agree). I lived at Maidenhead with my grandparents and an aunt. This was partly because of the war - the Second World War not the First (despite my great age) – and partly because my parents separated during the war and were soon afterwards divorced. It was at Maidenhead that I learnt to love books. They became my companions, my friends – while the

local public library was my principal place of education in those days.

Why was it that I never went to a university? My father was eager for me to go. He was finding it very difficult to come to terms with post-war Britain and was anxious that I should not make the mistakes he had made. The future, he believed, belonged to the sciences. He insisted that I specialise at school in mathematics, physics and chemistry. He was, in a sense, ahead of his time. He saw universities then as the government sees them to-day: rather as a mint for “making money” – what he called financial security and what is now called wealth creation (with value added). But I had no natural gift for mathematics or algebra and was becoming increasingly at a loss in the mysterious world of numbers, equations and isolated letters such as  $X$  – what was  $X$ ? I was blind to the beauty of these subjects. So we argued late into the night, my father and I, and both of us went to bed feeling wretched. But next morning my father, who was a poignant optimist, had a brainwave.

If I could argue so obstinately, he argued, there was another career open to me: the law - where I would be paid even if I lost the case (as I had lost the argument with him, he happily pointed out). So I became an articled clerk in a firm of solicitors – a job that did nothing to help the family’s dwindling finances since in those far-off days an articled clerk was paid no wages but actually paid the firm which employed him. The solicitors’ office in Windsor where I worked was a gloomy, Dickensian place: buses passed the door going one way to Dedworth, the other way to Gravesend.

The only branch of law that awakened my interest was criminal law – which is not really an interest in law at all but in human nature (something I would need as a biographer). As the first examinations loomed, I gave up law and submitted myself to two years in the army doing my National Service. Please study me carefully. Does my prose style strike you as that of a natural leader of men on the battlefield? It’s a rhetorical question and I leave the answer to those who study the chapter on my military exploits. Suffice it to say I unaccountably missed

a war, flew the union jack upside down at the Tower of London and never found the enemy on Salisbury Plain. I ended up as second-in-command of redundancy – or streamlining as the government called it. And so, as it were, I made myself redundant.

Leaving Maidenhead, I later found intermittent quarters in the consulting room of a semi-retired London doctor (who had been my mother's doctor). There, on his dark leather couch, the only other occupant a dimly suspended medical skeleton, I passed my nights, rising at dawn to avoid the early invalids. Later still, I put up in the attic of a house belonging to a school friend – living beside the water-tank, wrapped up on cold nights in brown paper: something between a tramp and an undelivered parcel. And all this time I was teaching myself to write – I even composed verse (I wouldn't call it poetry) the influence of which veered drastically between Wordsworth and W. H. Auden.

But I was not the only writer in the family. My father having tried to steer me away from the notion of writing for a

living (something I might do in my retirement he suggested), suddenly switched on the batteries of his optimism and began writing himself. While I lay tinkering with a few impressionistic paragraphs, adding (beside the water-tank) a comma here, a semi-colon there, he polished off in the evenings and at weekends a plain history of the world in heroic verse into which he generously included a few of my own rhymes. We sent the one hundred, closely-typed foolscap pages of this rhyming history to the publishers Faber & Faber and, after a long and anxious wait, received a letter telling us that the satire was not sufficiently satirical for publication. We studied this document long and hard as if it had come from the Delphic Oracle.

From a magazine I eventually received a commission to review an anthology of Oxford and Cambridge writing. I worked on this for weeks and some months later it was published: my first piece in print. The following year a cheque arrived for one pound. Here was success. But the question was: could I afford success?

My first biography turned out to be about an unknown writer whose books I had read in the public library and who, after the appearance of my *Life of him*, stubbornly remained unknown. The first sixteen publishers to whom I sent the typescript returned it to me as if it had been a tennis ball sent over to them for that purpose. There was a long rally. It was eventually published in 1964. Malcolm Muggeridge kindly contributed a long introduction free of charge and my publisher, Martin Secker, who gave me lunch at the Café Royal, was able to report that, following a surprisingly generous review in *The Observer*, sales had topped 39 copies. I was on my way.

I hope you will believe me when I tell you that biographers are like saints: they are always thinking of other people. To some extent I was to become a multi-volume miniaturist, a comic writer fated to write tragedies – the *Lives of others* usually end in the deaths of others: the deaths of people you may never have met but to whom you may have grown attached, sometimes deeply attached as you hold their letters and journals in your hands and are almost literally in touch with them. My

biographical subjects – the stubbornly unknown Hugh Kingsmill, the biographer Lytton Strachey, the artist Augustus John, the playwright Bernard Shaw and a company of travelling players of all sorts and conditions from Ellen Terry to Edward Gordon Craig – all these have taken the place, in a sense, of the teachers I never had at a university. I have been pursuing my adult education under their guidance and at my readers' expense. But towards the end of the twentieth century my work changed direction and (though I did not abandon biography) I began writing a mixture of family history, memoirs and autobiography.

In my last book, *A Strange Eventful History* (2008) I turned from my own, perhaps rather eccentric family, to a large-scale theatre dynasty; and now in this final book of mine (I don't believe I shall write another), I have produced a miniature group biography. *A Book of Secrets* is concerned mainly with women's secrets. The men in my book were to some extent public figures, people of some power and position whose status has fallen dramatically in our own day. In short: they were bankers, they

were members of parliament and peers of the realm – people who were much respected in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and who all belong to the same family. But the women connected with this family are my main subjects. Some of them became what used to be called “damaged goods” – and all of them were involved in one way or another with this same family over two or three generations. They belong to what James Lees-Milne called the lower upper class. Their secrets lent some of them an air of mystery and an almost legendary status which has faded in recent years. They appear now like ghosts from the past which still seem to pass invisibly among us as if asking for their identities to be recognised, their self-esteem recovered. My task has been to travel back in time and, unlocking their secrets (some of their secrets), release them from oblivion. For their stories are like some of our own stories, their secrets like our secrets and the stories and secrets of people we know. It is a hidden but continuing narrative, an alternative history, connecting their past to our present.

I started on this quest over forty years ago. In or around 1970 I was doing some work at the Victoria and Albert Museum where I met a dazzling young girl who worked as an assistant curator there. Sometimes I would take her out for a drink after work. She often worked late and, waiting for her after the public had left the museum, I would wander through the silent corridors and galleries. One evening I came across a bust by Rodin of a woman called Eve Fairfax done in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her face fascinated me. It seemed to change depending on the angle and distance from which I looked at it. Sometimes she appeared serene; sometimes she seemed clothed in an air of melancholy. I never knew how she would appear those evenings as I turned the corner and she came into view again. Before long this sculpture began to haunt me and I started making enquiries about Eve Fairfax.

Rodin's sculpture was to have been a wedding present - a wedding present for a wedding that never took place. The man who commissioned it was Eve's fiancé, Ernest Beckett, shortly to be raised to the peerage as the second Lord Grimthorpe. What

had prevented their marriage? Some people believed that Eve had a love affair with Rodin – certainly an emotional bond later developed between them. She continued to see him for more than a dozen years and he continued making portraits of her in marble, terracotta and bronze until shortly before the First World War. I discovered that she belonged to the family of Thomas Fairfax, the great parliamentary General whose New Model Army defeated Charles I at Naseby in 1645. What I did not discover was that I could have met Eve Fairfax in the early 1970s. She was to die, a forgotten figure, unmarried and a pauper, in 1978 at the Quaker Retreat in York aged one-hundred-and-six. In those last years she no longer knew who she was – she was lost to herself.

The biographies I wrote over the next three decades were to take me far away from this story. But it continued to fascinate me – and in the intervals between these books, I would return to pursue this quest.

I discovered to my astonishment that Eve had had an illegitimate child during the First World War – not by Rodin or

Lord Grimthorpe. He was the son who is never mentioned, the son who disappears. Of even greater significance was the discovery of Her Book – not a book she wrote, but a vast tome given to her by Lady Diana Manners in 1909. She carried this enormous book round with her for over sixty years. It is an extraordinary volume. Everyone she met had to make a contribution. It is a portmanteau of a book into which all sorts of mysterious bits and pieces were written, pinned, pasted, inserted: love letters, photographs, poems, postcards. I had never seen anything like it – from a distance, and at first sight, it might have been taken for the saddle of a mighty horse - the sort of legendary horse that entered Troy. For the book was full of people. Like a tramp Eve carried this monstrous object wherever she went, confronting people with it, sometimes charming them, often intimidating them. And among these people are some of the characters in my book. Eventually it became a terrible encumbrance, a chaotic artefact that was nevertheless part of Eve's very being: her pride and her penance. She is like a figure from *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Further back and in quite another fashion I came across some vivid diaries written by Luie Tracy Lee, a charming young American girl who, travelling through Europe in the early 1880s, had met Ernest Beckett in Rome at the studio of a celebrated American sculptor and friend of Henry James – she met him and she married him. Ernest was then a close friend and political ally of Winston Churchill’s father, Lord Randolph Churchill. Like Ernest, Randolph had married a wealthy American girl, Jenny Jerome – both wives, Luie (who was related to the financier J. P. Morgan) and Jenny, being what were called “Pilgrim Daughters”, having crossed the Atlantic in the opposite direction from the Pilgrim Fathers and enriched the British aristocracy. At this stage of his career Ernest Beckett appeared to have a great political future waiting for him. His young American wife, whom everyone loved, was an enormous asset to his career. But things soon began to go wrong. Lord Randolph Churchill died mysteriously in his mid-forties; Beckett was rumoured to be having an affaire with another girl he met in Rome; and his wife suffered one or two miscarriages.

It was important that Luie produce a male heir for the Grimthorpe title. On 3 May 1891 she finally gave birth to a son – but six days later she died. She was twenty-six years old. More damaged goods.

But the Becketts did have two daughters before the birth of their son – and then Ernest seems to have had two other children: a son and a daughter. His illegitimate daughter was to gain notoriety through a famous lesbian romance with Vita Sackville-West – their story was first made known to the public after their deaths when Vita's son, Nigel Nicolson, published his own and his mother's accounts of the affair in a famous best-seller, *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973). The description I give of their relationship in my book is rather different – for one thing it is given less from Vita's point of view than from that of Ernest Beckett's daughter, Violet Trefusis.

The diarist James Lees-Milne (whose wife had brief liaisons with both Vita and Violet – I throw this in to illustrate the rich complexity of my narrative) James Lees-Milne likens Violet's love letters to “those flaming yellow bulldozers which

one meets tearing up road verges, hedgerows, concrete walls . . . and any and every obstacle that lies in their path”. They are, as Vita’s biographer Victoria Glendinning acknowledges, fluent, fanciful, inspired letters, though sometimes painful to read.

Violet was prepared to sacrifice everything for her love of Vita whose mother, Lady Sackville, described the affaire as resembling “a sensational novel”. As Vita later admitted: “We have got something indestructible between us . . . a bond of childhood and subsequent passion, such as neither of us will share with anyone else”. It was indestructible, yet it threatened to destroy everything around it. The girls were like “two flames leaping together”, flames that, Vita reluctantly came to believe, would consume the rest of her life: her marriage, her family, her literary reputation, her place in society. “You have chosen, my darling,” Violet wrote to her; “you had to choose between me and your family, and you have chosen them. . . Tant pis pour moi [So much the worse for me]”.

This is a genuinely tragic love story with many comic intervals, many violent and terrifying moments. There is an

unexpected postscript to it also. Violet Trefusis was to figure in many contemporary novels as a fictional character and has become mainly remembered as someone in other writers' books. But perhaps her most interesting re-creations take place in her own novels. This came as a complete surprise to me when I was writing my book. In Cyril Connolly's anthology *The Unquiet Grave* (1944), Violet marked one passage in red crayon: "We love only once, for once only are we perfectly equipped for loving. . . And on how that first great love-affair shapes itself depends the pattern of our lives". Violet's novels were the negotiations she made between that love, and the loss of that love, and the rest of her life.

The pattern of her publications was irregular and chaotic – partly because she had to take so many other concerns into account. She did not want her mother, or Vita Sackville-West, or indeed Virginia Woolf to read some of what she wrote and become aware of the autobiographical subtext – her secret text which, at one time and another, involved them all. She did not want to reignite the gossip and rumour that had so painfully

encircled her relationship with Vita. Except for during the Second World War when she returned to England, she lived her life in exile: mainly in France and also in Italy. Some of her novels were written in English, some in French – and the best of these were not translated into English until after Violet was dead. But despite this delay they were depth-charged by the waves of posthumous publicity emerging from *Portrait of a Marriage* – publicity which, by an awful irony, had brought about their belated publication in Britain. Virago, the publishing house devoted to recovering the forgotten work of women writers, set about putting matters right, bringing out two of her novels with introductions by Lorna Sage and Lisa St Aubin de Teran, but the publishers were eventually defeated by copyright difficulties. And Lorna Sage, Violet Trefusis's great champion among British critics, died before she could accomplish what she planned. Everything seemed to be ending in muddle and confusion – the confusion being worse confounded by the appearance of Violet as a pivotal character in other writers' fiction: in Nancy Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate*, Cyril

Connolly's *The Rock Pool*, Harold Acton's *The Soul's Gymnasium*, in several novels by Vita Sackville-West and most famously as the exotic and ravishing Princess Sasha who appears so seductively in the first chapter of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (a novel which was dedicated to Vita).

All this has obscured the fact that Violet Trefusis was a talented writer herself. In my book I have tried to pick up the baton from Lorna Sage and hand it on to a new generation of readers. Copyright problems are now over, so here is an opportunity for some enterprising publisher to recover these novels, repair these damaged goods, and bring them back into print.

I would like to draw the attention of any enterprising publisher who reads this to four of Violet's short novels which, I believe are of lasting interest. *Echo* is a passionate semi-gothic novella set in Scotland; *Hunt the Slipper*, my favourite, is an accomplished satire on the immature habits of the English class system which drains and distracts all natural emotion; and *Pirates at Play*, a slightly overcrowded courtship novel which

cleverly dramatises the differences between Italian and British culture and contains an ingenious, rather wicked pen-portrait-in-miniature of Violet's presumed father Ernest Beckett's fiancé Eve Fairfax (with a description of her extraordinary Book). Finally there is *Broderie Anglaise* written as a dissenting text to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* which contains retaliatory pen portraits of Vita Sackville-West as the disdainful Lord Shorne (a Prince Charming whose hereditary face "had come, eternally bored, through five centuries" of one of his country's most illustrious families) and also a pen portrait of Virginia Woolf as the bluestocking novelist Alexa Harrowby Quince: "fluid and elusive; a piece of water-weed, a puff of smoke".

To these published works of fiction may be added an early, arresting, and as yet unpublished, autobiographical novel *The Hook in the Heart* which is more nakedly autobiographical. All these are waiting to be discovered by the enterprising publisher.

I cannot end this talk without some mention of the two women to whom my book is dedicated – for without them it would not have been written. While I was following in the

footsteps of Eve Fairfax and Violet Trefusis's father, Ernest Beckett, I met Catherine Till. She steered me rapidly around Yorkshire and introduced me to everyone and anyone who might give me help. She is one of the most intrepid people I have ever met: a great traveller, she will suddenly pitch her tent near Chernobyl or in Azerbaijan, send me a postcard as she strides along the Silk Road or joins a flock of small horses riding through Mongolia where a gentleman from Singapore threatens to shoot her. She reminds me of Lady Cicely Waynflete, the heroine of Bernard Shaw's play *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, whose impregnable good manners and lack of fear overcome all obstacles and difficulties, particularly the difficulties created by men. But what puzzled and fascinated me was how Catherine's bravery was matched by inner uncertainties. It was on one of our hectic car drives through Yorkshire that she became one of the characters in my book rather than a fellow researcher in the margins. And this is because she revealed herself as probably being the daughter of that son whom the young American Luie (the Pilgrim Daughter

who married Ernest Beckett) gave birth to a few days before her death in 1891. Together Catherine and I travelled to the Villa Cimbrone, a miraculous palazzo some fifty miles south of Naples at Ravello, high above the Gulf of Salerno. This is the place which Ernest Beckett bought at the time he was to have married Eve Fairfax: a place where he planned to refashion his life out of reach of his British creditors. We go there in search of a lost archive which might enrich my book and help to settle Catherine's identity – which is one of the secrets in my book. The great modern detective in these matters would appear to be DNA, which is an equivalent to the discovery of individual fingerprints a hundred and twenty-five years ago. But outside the criminal courts DNA, it seems to me, can cause almost as many problems as it solves.

This is the first of two journeys I am to make to the Villa Cimbrone. It a place of fantasy answering the need for make-believe in all our lives – make-believe that is as essential an ingredient of non-fiction as facts are an essential part of fiction. Granite and rainbow – to use Virginia Woolf's phrase. The Villa

Cimbrone is thematically at the centre of my book of secrets. I go there like a figure from a Henry James story but, with our differing agendas, Catherine and I become, it later seems to me, a modern version of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza – and I am the cautious Sancho Panza.

My second journey to Cimbrone is made seven years later at the invitation of the mysterious Tiziana Masucci who writes from Rome inviting me to give a talk at the Ravello festival, a festival dedicated that year (2007) to passion. Tiziana, who is the Italian translator of Violet Trefusis's novels, is giving a reading in the garden of Cimbrone quoting from "those flaming yellow bulldozers" which are Violet's love letters. She is no blood relation to Violet, but in legal-literary terms has, as it were, become Violet by purchasing her copyrights. And she is, I discover, far more than that. In her early thirties she has fallen deeply in love with a dead woman she has never met and this has dramatically changed her life. She is very far from being the arid academic I had imagined her to be before I met her at the Villa Cimbrone. What she illustrates is the power of some

imaginative novels over the lives of later generations of readers. Tiziana's passion for Violet Trefusis became part of my book. She has already re-introduced Violet's novels into Italy and stimulated a new interest in them in France – and I have been co-opted, it seems, into her campaign to spread the news of Violet's singular talent through Britain. I hope that I have more success than I had with my first biographical subject, Hugh Kingsmill, who to-day floats in limbo as a Faber Find still waiting to be discovered.

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