

mixed—be sick, get well, do this, don't do that—and she records with extraordinary clarity and insight how confused, enraged, and embattled she felt as a result. What he did not want her to be was independent; what he wanted her to be was his companion and an assistant “angel in the house” to Stella. In 1897, Sir Leslie alternately defined Woolf as weak any time that she wanted to be independent and grown-up (have lessons, go to school) and as strong any time that she was needed to shop or to chaperone Stella Duckworth and Jack Hills in the days before their marriage.

Contrary to the charming fiction of a doting father interested in his brilliant daughter's education that Katherine C. Hill erects (with some help from Sir Leslie himself), the 1897 journal portrays a father who did not provide his daughter with a continuing sense of her own worth or capacity. And this attitude seemed to have less to do with Woolf's actual state of physical well-being than with the myth the family had about her. No one as incapacitated as she supposedly was could have carried out the exhausting round of daily activities her diary describes.

We must understand that when Sir Leslie announced to his wife his plan to teach Woolf to be a historian, it was a self-serving, self-aggrandizing plan that he did not necessarily carry out. It defined him in the way that suited him—as a generous, doting, caring instructor to his difficult, brilliant, temperamental daughter—not in the way that he was—a selfish, loving, temperamental, difficult, hard-working, self-absorbed autocrat. If Virginia Woolf then took on herself the immense task of becoming a chip off the old block, he could have the pleasure and the reward of thinking that he had had everything to do with her achievement. Hill has been so seduced by Sir Leslie's idealization of himself that she overlooks the poignant and powerful story the 1897 journal really does contain. It is the single most important account we have that Virginia Woolf was *herself* largely responsible for doing the work, for creating the structure, for making the routine that would make her the historian of her father's fantasy. And she did so without anything but incidental help from him, without much formal instruction, acting against the family's definition of her as incipiently insane, as fragile and frail. The credit for this courageous act was chiefly hers; saying the act was her father's doing simply because her father thought it was his doing ignores the facts and, more importantly, diminishes and denies the struggle she engaged in to accomplish it.

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To the Editor:

Katherine C. Hill presents careful and convincing evidence of Stephen's influence on Woolf's criticism. But to view Stephen as personally supportive overstates the case; to view him as professionally liberating falsifies it. The sentiments in Sir Leslie's letter to Julia, quoted approvingly by Hill (p. 351), are the sort Woolf herself attacks in *Three Guineas*, *The Years*, and elsewhere, for the very reason that the father could *not* envisage his daughter as “Lord Chancellor.” Of course he saw writing as “a thing for ladies,” since, as Woolf later said in “Professions for Women,” “The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse” (*Collected Essays* [New York: Harcourt, 1967], II, 284). Surely we should not ignore Woolf's bitterness. Nor should we shut our eyes to the evidence of her refusal to be “like father, like daughter.” For example, even if Woolf could imagine what her father's pleasure would have been when she was offered the Clark lectureship at Cambridge (p. 351), the fact remains that she refused.

Hill tells us that, early and late, Woolf herself reflected her father's interest in history (p. 354). Whatever her “Common History” book was originally to have been, however, the essays Woolf actually wrote for the book, “Anon” and “The Reader,” demonstrate not a “lifelong love” of history and biography but rather a lifelong love of literature (see Brenda Silver's edition, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 [1979], 356–441). Perhaps Hill's essay was written before the publication of these important documents. Hill also cites letters written in May 1905—with their heavy stress on the writing of history—as proof of Leslie Stephen's influence (p. 354). The manuscript diaries of this period do not support such an inference; rather they suggest that the supposed plan “to produce a real historical work this summer; for which I have solidly read and annotated 4 volumes of medieval English[,]” was a fiction calculated to win the recipient's praise. In fact, Woolf was reading hurriedly, and with few annotations, just enough history to serve as the basis for her “lectures” at Morley College. Here are some representative reactions: “Finished, Thank God, with judicious skipping Mrs. Gr[een]'s Town Life of 15 Cent . . .”; “I pick up a fact or two, not wholly dry”; “Green [*Conquest of England*] for some reason runs off my mind like water”; “I must now solidly drudge through the beginning of English history. . . .” (holograph notebook, Christmas 1904 to 31 May 1905; entries for 9 Jan., 21 March, 29 April, and 10 May 1905. For permission to quote from this

manuscript, I am grateful to Quentin Bell and to the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)

Leslie Stephen had not in fact “trained [his daughter] extensively in history and biography” (p. 351), nor had he sent her to Oxbridge, whose doors were then open to women (despite Hill’s implication to the contrary [p. 353]). Woolf’s education had been hit or miss and had prepared her for little more than ladylike reviews of ephemeral novels which, she wryly noted, “don’t take much brains . . .” (18 March 1905). When the *Times* sent her Edith Sichel’s *Catherine de Medici*, she privately admitted her ignorance: “It is hard work reviewing when you don’t know the subject” (16 March 1905). The editor rejected Woolf’s review, saying that the article was not “‘academic’ enough,” that “a professed historian is needed . . .” (25 April 1905).

This is the background for the letters to Violet Dickinson that Hill quotes. Woolf was smarting from a number of rebuffs, of which the “Sichel affair” is illustrative, and she turned conclusively in the direction of fiction. In August 1906 she wrote “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,” a key work for anyone hoping to come to terms with Woolf’s handling of Leslie Stephen’s intellectual legacy. (See the edition by Susan M. Squier and Louise A. DeSalvo, in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 25 [1979], 237–69.) The narrator, the historian Rosamond Merridew, unequivocally denigrates the methods and conclusions of celebrated historians:

I have borne in mind that the intricacies of land tenure were not always the most important facts in the lives of men & women & children; I have often made so bold as to hint that the subtleties which delight us so keenly were more a proof of our ancestors negligence than a proof of their astonishing painstaking. For what sane man . . . could have spent his time in complicating his laws for the benefit of half a dozen antiquaries who were to be born five centuries after he was in the grave? (p. 241)

Rosamond not only rejects the truths arrived at by “professed” historians but also insists that to deal with the medieval period one must “imagine merely, like any story teller” (p. 242). Woolf thereby declared her independence from her father’s world of history and announced her primary allegiance to the world of the free imagination.

Within a year Woolf would begin work on her first novel; and over the years her writing was to become more and more true to an imaginatively conceived reality. Thus while I appreciate the caution in Hill’s suggestion that Leslie Stephen’s “ideas

about literary history . . . may have in some small way stimulated” Woolf’s innovations in fiction (p. 359), I cannot accept it. As for Sir Leslie’s probable approval of his daughter’s innovative fiction (p. 360), what would he have made of *Orlando*, where the fun derives in large part from Woolf’s debunking of the methods of historical biography and the preoccupations of the biographer? Indeed, Woolf pointedly comments late in the book that “the true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute” ([New York: Harcourt, 1956], pp. 305–06). And so, I fear, is Hill’s contention that the editor of the *DNB* stimulated in even a small way the remarkable “literary revolution” of his daughter.

ALICE FOX
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Ms. Hill replies:

Louise DeSalvo’s letter misinterprets my position, and her reading of the 1897 Diary oversimplifies Virginia Woolf, Leslie Stephen, and their complicated, ambiguous relationship.

I do *not* set up “the charming fiction of a doting father,” because to do so would reduce the emotional complexities of the Stephen family situation. Leslie Stephen was certainly a tyrant, and the 1897 Diary thoroughly documents the wretched way he treated his daughters. Stephen objected to Stella’s marriage to Jack Hills and behaved with unbecoming petulance just after the wedding: an entry for 14 April paints him as a frustrated child and shows him trying to climb out of a carriage trapped in a traffic jam. Another entry (3 Feb.) has him locked up in the drawing room with Stella, apparently arguing over “chaperone” arrangements for her trip to Eastbourne with Jack (Virginia refused to go along as their companion). On 3 August, Stephen pursued Virginia upstairs and forced her to go out walking with him, almost driving her to tears. Indeed, as Woolf herself tells us, it was fortunate Leslie Stephen died when she was twenty-two, since his unreasonable emotional demands might have prevented her from writing.

But this lamentable conduct is only one side of Leslie Stephen—he was a complex figure, like most human beings, rather than the comic-strip villain DeSalvo makes him—and though some of Stephen’s behavior limited and restrained Woolf, some of it supported and strengthened her. DeSalvo is plain wrong when she insists “there is absolutely no evidence in the 1897 journal” that Leslie Stephen carried out his plan to educate Virginia in history