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BLOOMSBURY, THE HOGARTH PRESS,
AND THE BOOK SOCIETY LIMITED

Reflecting upon the origins of what became known as the Bloomsbury Group in a series of memoirs to friends between 1920 and 1922, Virginia Woolf describes leaving behind the “rich red gloom of Hyde Park Gate” and “the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia” (“Old Bloomsbury” 187; “22 Hyde Park Gate” 180). Detailing how, after the death of her father Leslie Stephen in 1904 and the break-up of what had been a large extended family, her elder sister Vanessa had “wound up Hyde Park Gate once and for all,” Woolf notes:

The four of us were therefore left alone. And Vanessa—looking at a map of London and seeing how far apart they were—had decided that we should leave Kensington and start life afresh in Bloomsbury. (“Old Bloomsbury” 187)

Just over three miles apart, the apparent disjunction between Kensington and Bloomsbury, the fashionable, ostentatious West End and the more aesthetic, intellectual North, proved to be an important rhetorical and cultural rupture for the younger Stephens. To Virginia the move seemingly enabled new temperaments and a new way of living marked by increased light, air and space, “the roar of traffic” as opposed to “muffled silence,” and “experiments and reforms” across a whole raft of domestic arrangements (“Old Bloomsbury 187-88). As she writes: “So there was now nothing that one could not say, nothing that one could not do, at 46 Gordon Square. It was, I think, a great advance in civilisation” (“Old Bloomsbury” 201).

Deeply appealing in its eschewal of stuffiness and convention, this is the idea of Bloomsbury that continues to resonate. When in October 1916, Virginia wrote of her and her husband Leonard’s

intention of “starting a printing press, for all our friends stories,” their publishing house, the Hogarth Press, was indelibly linked to this atmosphere of change and modernist experimentation (*Letters* 2: 120). Though it began life on the dining room table in Hogarth House, Richmond (southwest London) and was not physically located in Bloomsbury until March 1924 when the Woolfs moved to 52 Tavistock Square (north-west Bloomsbury, just east of Gordon Square), from its beginnings the Hogarth Press took inspiration from the atmosphere and reputation of Bloomsbury. It is still well-known as the publishers of many Bloomsbury writers including Clive Bell, Roger Fry, David Garnett—as well as the work of Leonard and Virginia Woolf—and was the first port-of-call for others with innovative texts that were likely to eschew the tastes of more commercially-minded publishers (notoriously, the Woolfs were compelled to reject James Joyce’s *Ulysses*). As the South African novelist William Plomer was to write in a letter of introduction to the Woolfs in 1924:

From a distance I have followed your activities with interest and sympathy, because I suspect that you are nearer the heart of things than any other publisher in London. [...] If, when the time comes, you find yourselves unable to print my work, it is probable that it will remain in manuscript. I have no intention of throwing myself like a piece of meat to what is called the Public (15 June 1924, Hogarth Press Archive [hereafter HPA]).

Questioning this compelling narrative, this chapter explores how the Woolfs and the Hogarth Press also sought to work beyond such cultural and geographical confines. From its early days, the Woolfs worked with large commercial printers to increase the scale and reach of their production and despite their reputation for the avant-garde they also published many works that were to become “bestsellers.” If not quite prepared, in Plomer’s terms, to throw themselves “like a piece of meat to what is called the Public,” they also worked hard to engage with a wider section of readers through their support for the Book Society Limited, the first mail-order book club in Britain. Engaging with Melba Cuddy-Keane’s useful theorisation of a “democratic highbrow,” this chapter examines what this might mean in terms of the Woolfs’ own Hogarth Press publications and explores how

the fashionable worlds of Kensington and Belgravia would continue to impact upon the Woolfs' personal and professional lives through the sale of books.

Betwixt Bloomsbury and Belgravia

The British Book Society Ltd, in operation from April 1929, was modelled on the American Book-of-the-Month Club which had been established by the American publisher Harry Scherman in 1926 to increase the sale of books to a wider number of people.¹ Premised upon the possibility of keeping its readers "permanently in touch with all that is finest in modern literature" (qtd. in Leavis 34), the Book Society had a "distinguished" selection committee who nominated one book each month from the new works it received from publishers as a Book Society "Choice" to be mailed out to its members. Subscribers, who could pay monthly, quarterly or annually upfront, could either keep that month's book choice or return it in exchange for one of the Book Society's other recommended titles. This process is amusingly described in E. M. Delafield's *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), itself a Book Society Choice for December 1930:

Arrival of Book of the Month choice, and am disappointed. History of a place I am not interested in, by an author I do not like. Put it back into its wrapper again, and make fresh choice from Recommended List. Find, on reading small literary bulletin enclosed with book, that exactly this course of procedure has been anticipated, and that it is described as being "the mistake of a lifetime." Am much annoyed, although not so much at having made (possibly) mistake of a lifetime, as at depressing thought of our all being so much alike that intelligent writers can apparently predict our behaviour with perfect accuracy. (6)

As in the States, the Book Society's model of carefully guided taste-forming and collecting in book buying was highly successful and by 1930 it had over 13,000 members living in more than 30 countries. There was a limited market for the sale of new,

¹ On the origins of the American Book-of-the-Month Club see Radway 154-86.

full-price books in this period, when the circulating (fee-paying) libraries represented the mainstay for publishers in terms of book sales and were well supported by affluent readers. A Book Society nomination thus had a large impact on a text's sale figures, potentially catapulting an author's first edition sales from the typical three to 5000 copies normally sold in hardback to libraries and bookshops, into the tens of thousands. Book Society Choices were closely followed by the trade and with guaranteed sales of over 7000 copies, the society demanded the attention of authors and publishers. As Boots Book-lovers' Library—one of the largest circulating libraries in the country—noted in its advice to librarians:

Their choice has become a standard of literary advice very well respected throughout the country. Even people who do not belong to the Book Society are prepared to order these volumes through libraries, so that most publishers are exceedingly pleased to have one of their titles chosen. (4)

As this brief account of its operations will no doubt suggest, the model and aims of the Book Society were apparently at odds with the cultural and aesthetic ideals of Bloomsbury and of the Woolfs' Hogarth Press. The idea that newly published books could be chosen by a selection committee for members to buy was met, as the socialist writer Margaret Cole noted in 1938, with "outraged clamour" by the book world as a "crime"—"and thereby—it was assumed—giving undeserved boosts to inferior literature and causing better authors to languish in penury" (5). This is the thrust of Cambridge academic Queenie D. Leavis's now notorious critique of the Book Society: "first, that by conferring authority on a taste for the second-rate (to the Book Society the publication of *A Modern Comedy* is 'a real event in the story of modern English literature') a middlebrow standard of values has been set up; second, that middlebrow taste has thus been organized" (34). Virginia Woolf was of course highly critical of the "middlebrow" in her (unsent) letter to the editor of the *New Statesman and Nation* in October 1932 and, as Melba Cuddy-Keane has written, she "opposed the increasing standardization or 'massification' of the reading public implicit in the processes of mass production

and distribution" (2). The large sales generated by a Book Society nomination sit rather uncomfortably with more romantic ideas of the handprinted books of the Hogarth Press.

In geographical terms the location of the Book Society was also a long way—at least symbolically—from that of Bloomsbury and of the Hogarth Press. Originally located at 10 Buckingham Palace Gardens (SW1), in 1937 the Society moved its headquarters round the corner to a "large and dignified building" in 13 Grosvenor Place, Belgravia (SW1). This location near Hyde Park corner, facing Buckingham Palace Gardens and just off Constitution Hill, was at the heart of royalist London and its powerful symbols of ceremony and Empire. The grand Wellington Arch, built in 1825-27 to celebrate Wellington's defeat of Napoleon, was clearly visible from the new clubroom's balcony, as were the outlines of Buckingham Palace through the gardens across the road. The September 1937 issue of the *Book Society News*—the monthly journal delivered to members—showed an enticing artist's impression of this new clubroom, where subscribers were invited to use the facilities and to read and exchange their books whenever they were visiting London.

Subscribers were no doubt attracted by the careful branding, model of taste and cultural distinction that membership of the Book Society offered and enjoyed the invitation to share in this atmosphere of wealth, symbolic power, and prestige. The affluence and fashionable, esteemed taste on offer here in the Belgravia premises of the Book Society was a long way from the modernist interiors and experimental modes of living further north in Bloomsbury, WC1. This was the area from which the Stephen children had so eagerly removed themselves in 1904 and was also now, in Virginia Woolf's imagination, the home of the so-called "middlebrow." In response to the debate between J. B. Priestley (a member of the Book Society selection committee) and Harold Nicolson on "the brows" on BBC radio in October 1932, Virginia Woolf wrote of the middlebrows that "[t]hey do not live in Bloomsbury which is on high ground; nor in Chelsea which is on low ground. Since they must live somewhere presumably, they live perhaps in South Kensington, which is betwixt and between" ("Middlebrow" 198-99).

For their part, the Book Society and its Selection Committee were equally keen to disassociate themselves from the perceived insularity and cliquishness of the Bloomsbury set. Responding to the initial suggestion in May 1928 that he might chair a British equivalent to the American Book-of-the-Month Club, the popular novelist Hugh Walpole wrote to A. S. Frere, one of the directors at the publishers William Heinemann, that:

I think the Book of the Month Club suggestion is most interesting and I would of course love to have a finger in it if it comes to anything; also I am proud to be asked to be chairman [...] I hope though that you will get names on the committee that will reassure the public, people who are not cranks nor like to drive always in the direction of a special clique. (Qtd. in Hart-Davis 299)

Walpole's concern that the Selection Committee for the Book Society "reassure the public" and avoid "cranks" or those in a "special clique" can be read as a sideswipe at the coterie reviewing and literary culture popularly associated with "Bloomsbury." The cliquishness of Bloomsbury and what Pierre Bourdieu would have described as its powers of "cultural consecration" were often invoked by those contemporaries, like Walpole, not privy to its inner workings (3). Though Walpole became close friends with the Woolfs over the course of the 1930s, his relationship with Virginia was always fraught. His remarks here echo his well-known views on the form of the novel and the reasons why "the novel of the new school in England has not all the readers that it ought to have" (*Letter to a Modern Novelist* 14). For Walpole, the invention of character and "the genius for story-telling" (*Letter to a Modern Novelist* 18) were the hallmarks of good and readable literature, shared in his view by writers from Homer to Shakespeare to Trollope but not, importantly, by Joyce. This was why Walpole was perceived by the trade as an important spokesman for the ordinary or common reader. For the "battle of the brows" of course worked both ways. Clemence Dane (Winifred Ashton), also to become one of the Book Society selection committee, described the preface to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) as "an unpardonable piece of snobbery" and an example of "the central heating of Bloomsbury" (qtd. in *Letters of Leonard Woolf* 543).

The Book Society selection committee and the democratic highbrow

In his establishment of a “distinguished” selection committee for the Book Society, Walpole was careful to avoid this kind of heating and assembled a group of well-known, non-partisan writers and critics broadly designed to “reassure the public.” The first members of the selection committee in 1929 were the essayist and novelist J. B. Priestley, playwright and scriptwriter Clemence Dane, Professor George Gordon, president of Magdalen College Oxford, and the writer Sylvia Lynd. In the 1930s these were replaced at various points by philosopher and populariser of science Julian Huxley (elder brother of Aldous Huxley), bestselling novelist Margaret Kennedy, First World War poet and lecturer Edmund Blunden, and the ’30s “Auden gang” poet Cecil Day Lewis. By the 1940s Daniel George, literary critic V. S. Pritchett, and novelist Compton Mackenzie were also on the bill. Hugh Walpole acted as chairman and honorary chairman throughout the 1930s, returning to the Book Society after his forays into Hollywood acting and scriptwriting in 1934 and 1935.

The names of these individuals were intended to signify good taste, success, and cultural standing. All had complex, nuanced relationships with establishment literary culture. Apart from Priestley—“a North Country, no-nonsense-about-me, I-know-my-mind kind of little man” as Walpole described him in his diaries (Hart-Davis 265)—the members of the selection committee were largely upper class, and part of what you might call the intellectual aristocracy. Several were educated at Oxford (Julian Huxley, George Gordon, Margaret Kennedy, Edmund Blunden, Cecil Day Lewis; Walpole was at Cambridge)—Huxley, Gordon, Blunden, and Day Lewis also taught there. Clemence Dane and Sylvia Lynd trained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London (Lynd went on to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art as well). Walpole and Cecil Day Lewis were sons of clergymen. All were a part of London literary culture, with various connections in publishing, reviewing, and intellectual life of the time through editorial work and writing for periodicals like the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman and Nation*. They were also all concerned in vari-

ous ways with popularising or democratising literary and intellectual culture. George Gordon, "most unprofessorial of professors" (Hart-Davis 285), shook up the intake of Magdalen undergraduates at Oxford (trying to move away from "princes, archdukes and the like"); Julian Huxley gave up his academic post to concentrate on writing popular science; Cecil Day Lewis wrote detective novels under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake; Margaret Kennedy had a world-wide bestseller with *The Constant Nymph* (1924) and was much in demand as a judge of literary prizes.

So despite easy dismissals from Cambridge academics like Q. D. Leavis, what the selection committee offered to their readers through their Book Society Choices was a complex mixture of these different impulses. Operating with "no arrogant claim that the books chosen were the best of anything" (Bott 50), Book Society Choices reveal a broad and complex understanding of what we might mean by the "brows" in this period and something approaching a more complex cultural category like what Melba Cuddy-Keane has described as the "democratic highbrow." As Cuddy-Keane writes: "can highbrowism be considered democratic, even if it is not popular in the sense of attracting large numbers, as long as it is open and available to any self-identified individual?" (15). This gives us another way of reading the workings and meaning of the Book Society, one that questions Q. D. Leavis's early response to it as embodiment of the "literary middleman," responsible for the standardising and organising of middlebrow culture. In her study of *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere*, Cuddy-Keane invokes the "democratic highbrow" to ask "how could an intellectual culture, largely created by an educationally and economically privileged few, be passed on to a new audience consisting of the many?" (52). Cuddy-Keane is not discussing the Book Society nor the members of its selection committee in this context, but the question is an apt description of much of what the Book Society and its leading figures were about.

This different reading of the Book Society is revealed once we start to look at its monthly selections in more detail. Though the books chosen by the Book Society were intended to be "worth-while" reads and not too complex for the average reader—these

were the kind of rhetorical gambits it was fond of offering to critics, and designed no doubt to assuage the tastes of its readers—its choices and recommendations belie a complex relationship with and an investment in intellectual culture which it desired to make more widely available and accessible. There is an important caveat to be made here of course. The benefits of membership and actually purchasing twelve books a year at the publisher's trade price would never have been possible for the genuinely "many." To think about a typical member of the Book Society we should remember E. M. Delafield's provincial lady (fairly affluent, able to keep servants and governesses) and the colonial officials in Her Majesty's embassies posted overseas who were keen to keep up with the best of new literature sent out from London and who might conceivably have visited the Book Society's clubrooms when back home. But the idea that highbrow, intellectual culture—the artistic products of the educationally and economically privileged few—could be made more widely available through educated advice and new, more democratic distributive channels, correlates closely with the aims and goals of Walpole's Book Society.

The Book Society's first Choice in April 1929 was Helen Beauclerk's *The Love of the Foolish Angel*, an esoteric love story which was finely produced and decorated in collaboration with the illustrator Edmund Dulac, Beauclerk's lover (interestingly for a title once mediated by a book club, this work has not been republished and now retails at a high rare book price). Edmund Dulac, well-known as a fine artist and book illustrator, also designed the first cover of the *Book Society News* in April 1929. As with the society's Belgravia clubrooms, the visual markers here signified taste and distinction. Other early Book Society Choices, some now better known than others, include Francis Hackett's *Henry the Eighth* (1929), Compton Mackenzie's *Galipoli Memories* (1929), *Whiteoaks* (1929) by Mazo de la Roche, and *A Note in Music* (1930) by Rosamund Lehmann. Though historical fiction regularly topped the lists of the *Book Society News* and the novels of C. S. Forester (with their still popular protagonist Captain Hornblower) were a regular feature of its monthly choices, it also experimented with avant-garde and more clearly modernist works. As Hugh Walpole commented in an appraisal

in April 1939, looking back on the first ten years of the Book Society, "[w]e did not set out to be 'highbrow,' but we have chosen and recommended books by Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, Aldous Huxley, Elizabeth Bowen, Auden, Louis MacNiece" ("Our First Ten Years" 48). Popular choices for the book club who were closely associated with both Bloomsbury and with the Hogarth Press include Rosamund Lehmann (*Weather in the Streets* [1936] and *The Echoing Grove* [1953] were both Choices in addition to *A Note in Music*), Vita Sackville-West, William Plomer, Winifred Holtby, and Virginia Woolf herself.

The Woolfs and the Book Society

It is largely in the business archive of the Hogarth Press, rather than what were to become the Woolfs' published letters or diaries, that we can trace the tangible connections between the Hogarth Press and the Book Society, or, to go back to our initial equation, between Bloomsbury and Belgravia. Letters in the Hogarth Press archive clearly show that, despite contemporary misgivings about the role and possible effects of the new book club, Leonard and Virginia Woolf were, in common with other publishers of the time, keen to work with the Book Society selection committee. As day-to-day manager, Leonard submitted many Hogarth Press manuscripts to the Book Society in proof form for consideration throughout the 1930s, including C. H. Kitchin's *The Sensitive One* (1931), *Saturday Night at the Greyhound* (1931) by John Hampson, and Vita Sackville-West's *All Passion Spent* (1931). These titles were all rejected but other Hogarth works fared better: recommended Hogarth Press titles (alternatives that members could choose to request if they didn't like the committee's chosen book for that month) include Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), *The Waves* (1931) and *The Years* (1937), Christopher Isherwood's *Sally Bowles* (1937) and *Lions and Shadows* (1938), and Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border* (1938). Three Hogarth Press novels were also selected as Book Society Choices. One was the bestselling historical novel *The Edwardians* (1930) by Vita Sackville-West, second was the murder story *The Case is*

Altered (1932) by South African writer William Plomer, and third was Virginia Woolf's own *Flush* (1933), her mock "biography" of the Victorian writers Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, written from the perspective of their cocker spaniel.

These three texts are interesting examples of what we might understand and what the Book Society selection committee might have taken as examples of the "democratic highbrow." Vita Sackville-West was an aristocrat—*The Edwardians* is an elegy to her family home of Knowle in Kent—and her witty, self-reflexive historical novel involves the reader on a glamorous romp through the decadence and ultimate futility of high-society Edwardian life. The Woolfs immediately recognised the popular potential of the story—historical novels were one of most popular categories of Book Society Choices—and Leonard wrote to Vita that Virginia had "pounced" on the manuscript and "approves so violently" that he would send it off to the printer and read it in proof form to save time (9 March 1930, HPA). The Woolfs sent the second manuscript immediately to the Book Society who, once they had agreed upon it as a Choice, duly confirmed a minimum order of 9000 copies in April. Hugh Walpole's review of *The Edwardians* in the *Book Society News* makes interesting reading: offering a defence of the genre of historical fiction, Walpole praises the narrative, characterisation, social history and poetry of the book. What is more, he is keen to point out its utility, relevance and accessibility to a wider audience, as well as making important intertextual and "highbrow" references to guide and reassure the society's subscribers:

[T]he book's great charm to myself is the poetry of its background. The author has created *Chevron* with only a few touches here and there. But how the building lives! Indeed, it finally saves the book from any casual change of triviality or snobbish preoccupation with the upper classes. [...] Rather they will be reminded, although in no way by imitation, of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. You may say that the pathos and beauty of England's old houses have been given two superb greetings in these two books! ("The Book Selected for May" 2)

Orlando, Virginia Woolf's first bestseller, was published before the Book Society had been established, but it is not hard to imagine its having been voted as a Choice were that to have been possible.

William Plomer was a product of British colonial civil service and rule—moved between South Africa and English boarding schools for much of his early life—and was welcomed into Bloomsbury and its literary and intellectual life by the Woolfs when he moved back to England in 1929. He was, as he had first introduced himself to Virginia and Leonard and as he would later write in his autobiography, culturally attuned to the highbrow: "Literature has its battery hens [...] I was a wilder fowl" (*The Autobiography of William Plomer* 354). Yet unlike some of his other work, *The Case is Altered* had clear popular appeal. A detailed, psychologically-driven character study of the disparate inhabitants of an interwar boarding house, the book is based on the sensational real-life murder of Plomer's landlady, Sybil da Costa, in November 1929 (Plomer was fortunately away when the murder took place, his unwitting return to what had become "the murder house" was similar to the experience of the character Eric Alston in the novel) (Alexander 162). There are many interesting elements to *The Case is Altered*—the attraction of violence, an engagement with the new films of fascist and Nazi ideology, communist philosophy, homosexuality, shifts in domestic service, and the changing distinctions of social class in English life as seen in the story of the downwardly mobile Miss Brixworth. But what is most powerful is the sense of doom and inevitable violence inherent in the disturbing, damaged relationship of the landlady and her husband which leads to an obscene crime of passion that would have resonated with contemporary readers familiar with the real-life murder on which the book was based. As Leonard wrote to Plomer: "In parts it seems to me brilliant, particularly the character sketching and the magnificent way in which you have done the actual murder" (8 February 1932, HPA). There is an oblique, mocking reference in the novel to the average reader's investment in gore and violence when Miss Brixworth drops her Boots Book-lovers' Library book into the bath and red pigment in the hardboard covers leaks into the water: "the bath was full of blood!" (147). When we read the story now it seems clear that *The Case is Altered* is the least "Bloomsbury-ish" of all of Plomer's fictional and poetic output.

I have written elsewhere of the lengths to which the Hogarth Press were willing to go in order to secure a Choice nomination from the Book Society.² This included rushing proofs and normal production processes, extracting promises from printers, binders and paper-makers to accelerate timescales and increase supplies, and many long hours for Leonard as he disclosed to Plomer when working on *The Case is Altered* in May 1932: “the Press is in rather a chaotic state and I shall be tied to it hand and foot for the next weeks [...] If you were anywhere in this neighbourhood on Wednesday or Thursday afternoon and looked in, you would find me on my stool” (22 May 1932, HPA). In the case of Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*, written as she wrote to Walpole “by way of a lark when I had finished *The Waves*” (15 April 1933, *Letters* 5: 177), the Woolfs went further, changing all of their original publication plans (regarding price, size of the book, type of paper etc), commissioning Vanessa Bell to re-draw her illustrations and adding extra images to increase the size and cost of the book so as to bring it into line with the normal retail price that Book Society members would expect to pay.³

The Book Society had a real interest in Woolf’s work. On a personal level, there were various links between members of the selection committee and Virginia and Leonard: Hugh Walpole and Edmund Blunden were close friends with the Woolfs; the Hogarth Press had published the work of Walpole, Blunden and Day Lewis. More importantly, in spite of their desire to achieve a broad, international appeal through their Choices and to avoid being associated with any narrow literary “clique,” Virginia Woolf was clearly an important and increasingly popular author in the late 1920s and ’30s whom it would have been incumbent upon the selection committee as authoritative taste-makers and literary guides to enable their readers to get to know. The writer Sylvia Lynd appears to have been a particular supporter of Woolf and of her contemporary modernist, Dorothy Richardson. In a review of the latter’s collected *Pilgrimage* novels, the innovative style of which she compares favourably to that of James Joyce,

² See Wilson.

³ For the details of this pre-publication history, documented in archival materials, see Wilson 251-56.

Lynd writes that though Richardson "[h]as never had a popular reputation, [...] she has always been regarded by readers who are conscious of literature as well as of books as a pioneer in her generation" ("Pilgrimage Collected Novels" 17). The being "conscious of literature" is a key to understanding the Book Society's recommendations here and comes up again in Lynd's reviews and recommendations of titles by Woolf. Signed reviews appear from Lynd in the *Book Society News* for Woolf's *The Waves* and the more obviously political works *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. In a sensitive review of *The Years* Lynd attempts to describe the readerly pleasure in reading Woolf's fiction despite its eschewal of major incidence in terms of plot or public events. She writes: "In a picture gallery we do not demand a point, we ask for the pleasure that comes with looking. It is just this pleasure that we get from Mrs Woolf" ("The Years" 6). *Flush*, a short and entertaining work with a fast-moving plot-line, was in this sense not typical of Woolf's style and it is not hard to see why the selection committee would have been keen to announce it as a Book Society Choice. Such an announcement confirmed authority and esteem onto both the Book Society and its selection committee as tastemakers, as well as onto readers and subscribing members, encouraged and emboldened thereby to read the "highbrow" along with the best of them.

There are many questions as to why the Hogarth Press, so central to the cultural cache of Bloomsbury and apparently at odds to the Book Society in its aesthetic model and geographical operation, were so keen to work with the selection committee and to have titles chosen. Partly it may have been to do with money—the Hogarth Press, as much as other publishers, needed the occasional bestseller to help carry its lists and the Woolfs were not impartial to either the material rewards of successful book publishing nor the symbolic achievement of being able to "manage a best seller as well as Heinemann, and with far greater distinction" (Virginia Woolf to Molly MacCarthy, 8 June 1930, *Letters* 4: 177). Virginia Woolf's belief in the democratisation of reading and her championing of what she dubbed the "common reader"—the reader who reads "for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others" ("The

Common Reader” 1)—may also help us to understand some of the links between the Hogarth Press and the Book Society. In “Are Too Many Books Written and Published?” the BBC radio broadcast that she recorded with Leonard in July 1927 (shortly before the formation of the Book Society), Virginia argued that “[a]bove all things the reader wants variety; he wants books written by all sorts of people; by tramps and du[ch]esses; by plumbers and Prime Ministers. The reader’s appetite is insatiable” (241). This was something akin to what the Book Society, with its eclectic list of choices and recommendations, clearly offered. Though we should remember that Virginia’s dialogue here is meant to be polemical, constructed in opposition to that of Leonard, she also offers an uncanny precursor of what the Book Society would offer: “As people read more books they will read better books; they will also realize the pleasure of owning the books they read instead of borrowing them from a library” (243). This had long been a call of authors and publishers and for those who subscribed, this is what the Book Society made possible. As one satisfied member wrote in from Robin Hood’s Bay in 1939: “I look ahead, say in five years time. I shall have sixty or more books, keenly chosen, approved by myself. Each book will have coloured a month in a member’s life. I wonder how many of us could show a like record from any five years of our own haphazard reading” (Walpole, “Our First Ten Years” 52).

What is particularly interesting to me in considering the relationship between the Hogarth Press and the Book Society is the relative absence of this relationship in terms of the documented public record. There is no mention of the Book Society in Leonard Woolf’s published volumes of autobiographies: not even when he describes in great detail the bestselling success of *The Edwardians* which was clearly helped, though of course not solely enabled by, having been a Book Society Choice. There are many reasons, no doubt, that Leonard would want to disassociate the Hogarth Press from the kind of cultural critique often levelled at the Book Society with its whiff of the “literary middlemen” and Virginia’s own despised “middlebrow.” Book clubs today in their modern manifestations—despite, or perhaps because of, their huge popularity—continue to face a bad press. There is

more work to be done on the literary and cultural impact of the Book Society as the first mail-order book club in Britain. Here I hope to have suggested some of the impact on Bloomsbury of the powerful new networks of distribution in the interwar period and the influence of common readers, new book-buyers and literary taste formers in creating a potentially more democratic way-in to book selling, literary distribution and the consumption and pleasures of literary culture.

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Archives

University of Reading Special Collections, Hogarth Press archive (HPA), MS 2750.

Nottingham: Alliance Boots Archive & Museum Collection.

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