CONGENIAL SPIRITS

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF

VIRGINIA WOOLF

EDITED BY JOANNE TRAUTMANN BANKS

Praise for *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*

"Critics, scholars, readers, take note; bear witness to a literary event. . . . The vibrant, brilliant, intensely human personality of Virginia Woolf . . . fairly leaps off the pages."

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"The apparently endless current of observation and reflection flows so naturally that one would think she wrote as easily as she breathed, if not more so."

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"But read them, read them. They are a wicked delight."

—Margaret Drabble
The New York Times Book Review

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Introduction

IN turn-of-the-century handbooks on how to write a proper letter, women were advised to be self-effacing. Ladies, they were told, do not begin a letter with 'I'. They begin instead with something that will interest their correspondents, chiefly themselves. This was the prevailing advice when Virginia Stephen first put pen to stationery. The mature Virginia Woolf sniffed at propriety, but the young woman – struggling to find any self at all and feeling the influence of her formidable father and mother – must have been powerfully tempted to be guided by conventional manners.

The proper female letter writer was simply another version of the hostess, a role Virginia had observed closely. Her exquisite mother, Julia Stephen, played it for years to rave reviews. We can applaud her skills ourselves in the famous dinner scene from *To the Lighthouse*. The successful Victorian hostess devoted herself to her guests and appeared to deny herself. She saw to it that they were entertained, drawn out, left with a flattering sense of themselves, and, not incidentally, tied to her as the source of all this pleasure.

The hostess as letter writer: here is the genesis of Virginia Woolf's great achievements in the epistolary form. What an irony for one of this century's most famous feminists. Of course, she was not satisfied with what was modelled for her. As she did with every other written form she practised, she claimed her inheritance and then changed it profoundly. She once said that she had to strangle that Victorian ideal of subservient femininity, the Angel in the House, before she could free herself to write. In the case of her letters, the Angel was not dead, only transformed. It hovered over an epistolary journey that subtly led Virginia away from self-effacement. So much for the writers of ladies' handbooks! Virginia used her letters to spin a delicate web that supported her personality almost until the end.

But she began in the feminine tradition. 'The way to get life into letters [is] to be interested in other people.' That is Virginia in an early letter (Number 501). The sentiment could have been lifted from a handbook. Virginia followed her own dictum beautifully. She may have

been a shy hostess at her early Bloomsbury parties, but, wrapped in the comfort of written language, she moved with ease into the essence of the role. Over the years she seldom relinquished it. Her style alone – confident, inventive, witty – entertained lavishly. She flattered her correspondents with intelligent attention. She praised them, usually in the guise of tangential insults. She flirted with men; she flirted, even more often, with women. The middle-aged Violet Dickinson, for instance, with whom Virginia Stephen was involved in a romantic friendship, was told that her height made her 'the length of seven fine males' (224). Miss Dickinson relished the teasing and was probably mildly titillated by it. Virginia set up running jokes, peculiar to each correspondent, so that they would recognise their cues and relax into the familiar. She pretended that Vanessa Bell had no grasp of the obvious. *Antony and Cleopatra*, Virginia told her – that's a play by Shakespeare; the Sierra Nevada are mountains in Spain. For years after the event, Clive Bell received postcards with references to a supposed quarrel during their romantic entanglement. Ethel Smyth was repeatedly called an 'uncastrated cat'. It was a magnificent performance. Her friends loved it. Had she been able to tolerate the vulgarity, her mother would have approved.

Hostesses were supposed to trot out the sort of ephemeral references known as small talk. In order to avoid exercising guests unduly in a social situation, conversation was to be kept light. Never discuss religion, the handbooks ruled. Nor should a lady alarm her guests by introducing controversial politics. Virginia learned from her brothers' Cambridge friends that it was permissible to debate issues of truth, beauty and sex over tea. In her letters she often eased into these eternal verities, and a good many others, by way of charming daily details, which for her had enormous significance in themselves. Her novel about the quintessential hostess, Mrs Dalloway, set Virginia to grapple in fiction with a method she had already forged in letters. Writing to her literary friend Gerald Brenan about that novel's progress, she wailed: 'But how does one make people talk about everything in the whole of life [. . .] in a drawing room?' (1388).

Significantly, when in her letters she isolated the big issues from the charm, as in her public letters to periodicals (see, for example, 1139a), she wrote with more control and to less effect. Debate abstracted from the human element was not her strength. She did not analyse social and philosophical concepts so much as narrate them. A great deal about the servant question may be gleaned from all her letters to her sister about

particular problems with Nelly or Lottie. When the nation was beset, as it was, for instance, in 1938 during the Munich Crisis, Virginia's letters (3447 and 3449) stressed what she called 'gossip about the inner history'. The public story was interlaced with personal details. Everyone knew that war was averted at the last moment when the Prime Minister, then addressing Parliament, was handed a note from Hitler. Virginia's correspondent also heard that the Prime Minister looked ten years younger as he read it. The views of Virginia's eminent friend John Maynard Keynes were aired, but so were the efforts of Mrs Ebbs, wife of the village rector. It is altogether an unusual, valuable perspective, for all its association with that form of small talk called gossip.

When gossip comes from the pen of a literary genius, it is almost certain to be lively. It may also induce shame. Ought we to be listening to such talk? 'Gentlemen,' said Henry L. Stimpson, American Secretary of State, 'do not read each other's mail.' With this pronouncement in 1929, he ended his country's code-interception programme. The Secretary was wrong. Of course gentlemen do. Most people seem to draw the line somewhere, but the popularity of Virginia Woolf's letters must be due in part to their generally amiable gossip. 'Talking of death and bullets,' she wrote cheerfully to her nephew Quentin Bell, 'have you heard that Mrs [T.S.] Eliot is on the war path, said to have a carving knife with which first to skin Tom; then Ottoline; finally me? For she says Ott and I are Tom's mistresses; now as I never had a favour from that man its rather hard to give my life on the pavement' (2767). Occasionally, Virginia went too far. 'Malicious!' cried her friends, but she was unrepentant. She could not resist the discovery of a comic character anywhere.

The delightfully wicked purveyor of gossip was normally stifled during a friend's illness. Sometimes she was irrepressible: 'Will [Arnold-Forster],' she told Vanessa Bell, 'is once more in hospital – this time with water on the knee – from what you and Duncan will doubtless draw your own conclusions' (980). But in most cases, illness brought out the caring side of Virginia Woolf and warmed up the comedy in her letters. In one of her splendid letters to Jacques Raverat, dying slowly from multiple sclerosis, she shyly dropped her mask: 'really and truly I would do a great deal to please you and can only very very dimly murmur a kind of faint sympathy and love' (1501). This caring for the sick was another aspect of her sense of responsibility as a letter writer. It may even have been the ultimate act of the hostess. True, her mother was famous for her nursing skills, and to some extent Woolf was

carrying on that tradition too, but her compassion seems real enough. Her sister's terrible grief over the loss of her son was partly healed by Virginia's daily notes. Even the tiresome Barbara Bagenal received wonderful letters during her illness. The oddest example of this literary therapy occurred in 1906 after Woolf's brother Thoby had died, a young man, from typhoid. Struck by the same illness, Violet Dickinson had to be kept from the dreadful news. That much is understandable. But from the day of his death, Virginia began to invent a life for him when writing to Violet. Thoby ate this; Thoby said that. He sends a jolly message to his fellow sufferer. Is this denial? Is this the incipient fiction writer at practice? Perhaps instability of a serious order? Whatever else it is, it is certainly self-effacement carried to an extreme.

Virginia made the strongest statement of this motif in a letter to a young friend with whom she frequently discussed literary technique. She told Gerald Brenan that one of the purposes of a letter was 'to give back a reflection of the other person' (2078). The mirror is an arresting image for her epistolary method and philosophy. Unlike a realistic novel, which has been famously described by Stendhal as a mirror riding along a roadway, a letter from Virginia Woolf was not a large, flat mirror. Virginia would not have liked it half so much if it were. She would not have valued a reflection of a friend that included so complete a view of his or her surroundings as to overwhelm the real person, who was that small, luminous creature in the corner of the mirror. Nor would she have believed in the accuracy of such a reflection. That sliver of a mirror, a letter, that scrap of paper quickly covered, suited her aesthetic and philosophical purposes. Virginia's letters are like the mirrors in the finale of the pageant in *Between the Acts*. Carrying mirrors of all sizes and qualities, the actors hold the reflecting sides towards the audience while the director intones Virginia Woolf's faith: all we can ever know of ourselves are scraps, orts and fragments, held in momentary harmony and sympathy.

Over the years she refined the reflections so well that present-day aficionados of her letters can play a parlour game with them. Give the players a letter to one of Virginia's major correspondents. Cover up the name of the addressee and see if the image of the implied reader is so particular that the correspondent can be correctly guessed. The game will be easier in that Virginia tended to pick up the same general subjects each time she wrote to a certain friend. Once a connection was made on the basis of a friend's interests, she strengthened it with every letter. Eventually, she saw that she was doing so. She speculated that 'one's

friendships are long conversations, perpetually broken off, but always about the same thing with the same person' (1722). With Roger Fry she spoke about art, she said; with Lytton Strachey about reading; with E. M. Forster about writing; and with Clive Bell about love. It was part of her courtesy that, even as she played to her reader's interests, she made it seem that they were her own passionate concerns as well. And so they were. Somewhere along the line, subjects and tones initiated because they were likely to be hospitable for others became just as surely reflections of Virginia's multi-faceted self.

It was at this point that her letters diverged dramatically from their origins in girlish attempts at cultural hostessing. While holding up the mirror to her friends' advantage, Virginia discovered that it was two-sided. Her own image was on the back: 'This sheet is a glass' (2162). Now the letter was an emblem of mutuality, a potential fulfilment of the offer of aesthetic love made by Bernard to Neville in *The Waves*: 'Let me create you. (You have done as much for me.)'

Virginia Woolf was never confident for long about who she was. She was frightened that the centre of her personality would not hold: 'how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia' (2460). Because of the protean nature of her own form, she was lured by apparently limitless elements, such as the sky and the sea, whose vastness promised to receive her protectively. It is not too strong to say that for her psychic survival Virginia needed to keep the several strands of her identity attached to her various friends. She was the spider; the letters were the web; and the whole was spun in a hall of mirrors. Virginia needed a certain courage to return again and again to the hall. It had, after all, shifted at the times of her mental breakdowns into a funhouse of distortions. There must always have been for Virginia an underlying terror that the mirrors would reflect a void, as in her deceptively lyrical, but essentially nightmarish little story 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass'.

That possibility was diluted by Virginia's great numbers of friends, most of them very substantial people whose strengths allowed her to create herself. Writing to Katherine Mansfield, whose own credentials were unquestionable, Virginia shaped an image of herself as a writer of stature. We are alike, they told each other. With young people she created herself as the definitive aunt – never maternal (that was denied her), but wise in a way and always a welcome visitor. Seeing herself mirrored in the process of Jacques Raverat's long dying, she discovered her mysticism.

In this light, the two most satisfying correspondences of her life may

have been those with Vita Sackville-West and Ethel Smyth. Vita continued the pattern of the romantic, maternal figures to whom Virginia turned for affection in her youth, but with this important difference: Vita was a ripe woman whose intimacies were physical as well as (or perhaps more than) emotional. Although not nearly in Virginia's league as a writer, Vita was fully capable of challenging her on the literary field. Virginia's creation of Vita culminated in *Orlando*, the novel Nigel Nicolson has called, in his introduction to Volume III of the complete correspondence, Virginia's 'most elaborate love-letter'. It does not obscure, however, the value of the love letters collected here. With Vita, Virginia allowed herself to be created for a time as a sexual being. That Vita also excited her imagination and her intellect gave Virginia a chance to see herself as a whole, integrated person. It didn't finally hold up, I think – this self that lived in Vita's presence – because Virginia drew back from final intimacy again and again, and so did Vita. But they were richer beings when they were together.

When she burst into Virginia's life, Ethel Smyth demanded intensity. At 70, Ethel was a rip-snorting woman who knew her own mind and thought she knew a good deal else. A younger Virginia might have backed off. But her healthiest side recognised in Ethel someone who would force her to express all her emotions, including anger, who would suck from her what she had always wanted to tell – that is, the absolute truth about her past, her writing and her values. She did not need to worry about how Ethel would take it if Virginia sounded off on Ethel's faults. The old girl could take it. Her devotion to Virginia was never in question. In her twenties, Virginia had written to a friend, 'I only ask for someone to make me vehement, and then I'll marry him' (608). Twenty years later, Ethel made her vehement, and as a consequence received, in my opinion, her best single set of letters.

With only one intimate correspondent, however, did Virginia completely abandon all attempts to play the hostess. Writing to her husband, Leonard Woolf, she reached for no flattering, entertaining phrases. She did not really attempt to address his interests. By any aesthetic criteria, the letters are bad. They are included in this volume by virtue of Leonard's central importance in her life. Virginia thought she knew why they were different: 'This is a horrid, dull scrappy scratchy letter but all letters of real affection are dull' (1927). Judging by this standard, there is no question – whatever arguments some scholars have advanced – that Leonard was, by far, the closest person to her. Virginia considered their relationship beyond words.

Words were something about which she felt ambivalent. She lived – almost literally – by her words, but she distrusted them. 'All good and evil comes from words,' she said (333). Again: 'I am always trying to get behind words' (503). Letters were especially suspicious. She told Jacques Raverat that in writing them, one 'has to put on a kind of unreal personality; which, when I write to you for example, whom I've not seen these 11 years, becomes inevitably jocular' (1501).

In the final analysis, she doubted her ability to know her friends too. Behind her back, some of them agreed that, in spite of her brilliant characterisations, she knew less than anyone. She asked Vita Sackville-West: 'Do we then know nobody? – only our own versions of them, which, as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves?' (1622). Emanations – the spider again; but the question does not really matter in this context. Whether other people are created or uncovered, it is in relation to them that Virginia Woolf existed most truly. She craved cuddling, but since, on the whole, she was not an especially physical person, relationships for her were essentially verbal. Therefore, conversations and letters were paramount. They were the prerequisite for her fragile stability. Her conversations have long since died away. But by her letters we can know her.

The same claim cannot be made for writers whose letters were carefully penned for posterity. Often the so-called great letter writers – especially the men, it must be said – filled their pages with set pieces. Virginia's letters were loved for their scintillating spontaneity. She did make self-conscious pronouncements about her technique, notably when she was young, and even on occasion wrote drafts. But she was telling the truth when she said that for her letter writing was a 'mere tossing of omelettes' (1433). Her mature letters followed her urges.

But what of that masterful, that thrilling, piece of writing, her diary? Is not the true Virginia Woolf to be found in those pages written in private to please herself? Most readers have thought that she is. Their assumption is bolstered by the diary's revelations of doubt, fear and occasional despair. Pain expressed in private must be – mustn't it? – more truthful than pleasure expressed in public. In the diary she wrote regularly about her work in progress. In the letters she did not. In private she considered the characters of her friends with greater boldness. By definition, gossip could not be admitted, for there was no ear in which to whisper it. All this argues for the sense that Virginia Woolf resides in the diary, if anywhere. Most persuasive of all is its language – direct, rich and empowered by an acutely observant person.

Granted, for many of us privacy is often more comfortable and less challenging. But even when we are scrawling in a diary, selfhood may be said to be something we *describe*. We may reveal more shameful facts about ourselves, but that is not the same thing as being real. Thinking alone, as opposed to writing, may remove us even further from our personalities in that there is less of a context. No pen and paper circumscribe us. The ultimate aloneness has been created in sensory deprivation experiments, and no one would suggest that the self is most real then. On the other hand, when we write a spontaneous personal letter, we *inhabit* our selfhood and use it to reach out to another person. It is in relationship that we form our identities as babies. It is in relationship that we continue to form them.

Thus, Virginia Woolf lives in her letters, even here in her selected letters. To be sure, condensing a life usually falsifies it. A life often comes to seem more tragic in summary than when it was lived at its normal rhythms. Loves, illnesses, achievements and disappointments pile up, and death comes in 500 pages. Sometimes, though, the process of condensing distils an essence that the whole disguised. So it is, I think, with these letters. When I had finished the selection and looked at the results, I was surprised by what I saw. The Virginia Woolf who creates herself here is different from the one who slowly emerges from the six original volumes. This Virginia is simultaneously more vulnerable and more admirable.

Furthermore, her laughter is heard even more clearly. In spite of its end, at 59, in suicide, hers does not seem a tragic life. After all, why should a life be judged by its eleventh hour? Surely that's too literary. For her and for her family, her mental illness was truly terrible, but for decades she was sane, prolific and inventively comic. In the end her supporting web dissolved almost completely. She could only throw one thin line to Vanessa and two to Leonard before giving over her fragmented self to the waters. But for most of her years she was the brilliant fulfilment of the imaginative, playful little girl whose letters begin this volume. Given her griefs, it was a courageous life.

JOANNE TRAUTMANN BANKS
Tierra Verde, Florida, 1988

Editorial Note

MOST of the letters in this book were drawn from the complete *Letters of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Nigel Nicolson and me, and published in six volumes from 1975 to 1980. Of the approximately one hundred letters discovered after 1980, the finest appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies* (*MFS*) for summer 1984. Four thousand letters had by then turned up. It seemed that the attics of her correspondents had been emptied, and not much more of interest would be found.

But there are twelve 'new' letters here. A box of files shuffled recently to Charleston – once the country home of Vanessa and Clive Bell and Duncan Grant – was found to contain four very early letters. The first two, numbered 0 and 00, are the pipings of the child Virginia, aged perhaps five. Number 1a includes one remarkable sentence that can fairly be described as the earliest Virginia Woolf narrative now in print. Number 1b is the last of the childhood cache. Of the new mature letters, the most valuable are probably the ones to Katherine Mansfield (1167a) and George Bernard Shaw (3608a). But there are other candidates: numbers 739a, 1395a, 1632a, 1957a, 2695a and 3565a. All the new letters can be identified easily because they are the only ones followed by the name of the present owner. In addition, there are four public letters to editors of periodicals (1139a, 1148b and c, 2022a). They were excluded from the complete edition on the grounds of their being another form, more polemic than correspondence. They are nonetheless cousins to her personal letters, so I have gathered them together. Three important letters to Julian Bell in China (3136a, 3146a, 3206a) and one to Duncan Grant (645a) appeared previously only in *MFS*, where not many people will have seen them. Among the new material must be counted restorations of excerpts omitted from the complete edition for fear of hurting people then alive. The passages are gossip about friends' love lives, and curious readers will have to search them out themselves.

Whether already published or new, to be chosen for this volume a letter had first to be good – one of the best, in fact – and second, if possible, able to advance the biographical narrative. The best letters were instantly recognisable. They were aesthetically pleasing, with all that such an admittedly vague phrase implies. Their rhythms flowed and

romped. Their images dazzled and cohered. They were packed with insight – into Virginia Woolf, her work, her ideas, her circle and times, or, it is not too much to say, into reality itself. The best letters entertained in a broad sense: they were funny, or they were moving. I made some attempt to give an idea of the variety of Virginia's large number of personal correspondents as well as a reflection of those who received the most letters, but this was not a high priority. Occasionally I selected a letter simply because it was important to the story, not because it was a good example of Virginia's skills. Inevitably, the story told by the letters left gaps. Some of them are filled by narrative linking passages and by the footnotes. I hope that readers of the selected letters have read Quentin Bell's superb biography of his aunt, but I have not assumed it. This book is meant to be a self-contained volume that will not mystify the general reader who lacks ready access to other material on Virginia Woolf.

For the same reason, I have provided notes sufficient to explain references that would be obscure and therefore irritating to such a reader. Almost nothing, however, is repeated. In almost every case, for instance, people are fully identified only at the point of their first appearance in a letter. I am aware that some readers dislike annotations of letters, and in fact it has become fashionable to say so. They need not be bothered. Except for brief, bracketed insertions in the body of the letters, the notes are designed to be skipped if desired.

Cuts have been made within the majority of the chosen letters. This is also controversial. A good argument can be made that letters should be printed in their entirety so that a writer's rhythms and intentions, however casual, are not broken. But my reasoning ran like this. Cutting allows more letters to be printed in the space allotted. Uncut versions may be read in the complete edition, where, of course, apart from possibly libellous language, nothing was omitted within a letter. Moreover, Virginia Woolf's letters, in particular, do not suffer unduly from excerpting. For one thing, they sometimes begin slowly. They may include a series of names or events which are important to a given correspondent but bewildering to an outsider. Above all, the very spontaneity for which the Woolf letters have been admired also accounts for some careless passages in otherwise good letters. Ellipses in square brackets (to differentiate mine from Virginia Woolf's) mark all cuts from the text, with the exception of omitted postscripts. A line of trailing dots at the end of a letter distracts, unnecessarily in my opinion, from the appearance and focus of the printed page. I have also left out

the names of the owners. These may be checked in the complete edition, although in some cases the letters may have changed hands since their publication. Their trails can normally be traced to one of the major public collections. I have made no cuts in the new letters.

I have followed the editing methods laid out in the Editorial Note to Volume I of the complete edition. At their core is a precise adherence to Virginia's style, even when her spelling and punctuation are erratic. But when she made an obvious slip, such as forgetting to put in a second quotation mark, I have silently corrected it. Ampersands, which she habitually used for 'and', have been spelled out. New paragraphs have been created wherever Virginia left a long space in a line and the sense clearly dictates a new thought. Dates and addresses are given as they appear in the originals. When they are incomplete, I have expanded them in square brackets. When they are missing, I have supplied them, also in brackets. In the letters from childhood, it was sometimes impossible even to guess the dates or addresses – hence the use of 'n.d.' and 'n.a.'. I have not renumbered the letters. To promote consistency in later references, each one appears with the number assigned to it in the complete edition. Some letters have been reclaimed from the 'too late' appendix at the end of Volume VI and inserted in their proper chronological slot, where they take on their rightful significance. They have an 'a' or 'b' after their numbers in order to fit them into the original numbering scheme. The same system is followed for the new letters, the public letters, and the ones from *MFS*. In most cases, I have accepted the text of each letter as we transcribed it for the six volumes and *MFS*. Where there was any question, I consulted the original letter. As a result, a few changes have been made without notice. The annotations have been redone according to the demands of this volume's shape, and newly available information has been added to them.

In the complete edition, we acknowledged those scholarly books that had been the bases of our research. Since 1980, the flow of fine biographical, critical and textual studies of Virginia Woolf or her friends has continued, and I have benefited from (almost) all of them. There is space here to mention only the ones to which I have turned most frequently: Andrew McNeillie's six-volume edition of *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, which began to appear in 1986; Paul Delaney's *The Neo-Pagans*, 1987; Frances Spalding's *Vanessa Bell*, 1983; Victoria Glendinning's *Vita*, 1983; Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska's edition of *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, 1985; and Diane F. Gillespie and Elizabeth Steele's *Julia Duckworth Stephen*, 1987.

The copyright for all Virginia Woolf letters is held by her nephew, Quentin Bell, and her niece, Angelica Garnett. I want to thank them for their support of this project. Professor Bell and his wife, Olivier Bell – the meticulous editor of Virginia Woolf's *Diary* – have always been a delight to work with. In fact, Olivier Bell's assistance to scholars everywhere is the backbone of Woolf biography. She answered my questions quickly and read the typescript of this volume with great care. So did Nigel Nicolson. I treasure his wisdom, friendship, and continued presence in this work.

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JTB

Contents

Introduction	vii
Editorial Note	xv
The Letters	1
Appendix: Works of Virginia Woolf	445
Family Tree	448
Index	451

1882–February 1904

Adeline Virginia Stephen, who would change the world of modern letters as Virginia Woolf, was born in 1882 into an upper-middle class household in Kensington. Her father, Leslie Stephen, nearly 50 when she was born, was a distinguished critic and philosopher, and the founding editor of the Dictionary of National Biography. *Her mother, born Julia Jackson, was a member of that no longer extant species, the Great Beauty. Julia was a friend of painters and writers. She wrote several pieces herself, but spent her life mainly in caring for the needy and having children. She bore seven: three from her first marriage to Herbert Duckworth, George (b. 1868), Stella (1869) and Gerald (1870); and four Stephens, Vanessa (1879), Thoby (1880), Virginia and Adrian (1883). Virginia's other half-sister, the child of her father's first marriage to Thackeray's daughter, was called Laura (b. 1870), and by the time of Virginia's birth was known to be mentally impaired, perhaps by childhood schizophrenia.*

While their brothers went away to school, Virginia and Vanessa were educated at home – not quite the deprivation Virginia later imagined in that at least she had access to her father's library and to his tutelage. Until she was 25 she moved for the most part within a circle of family and family friends, and in general extended her adolescence beyond the norm for her place and time. From childhood she wanted to write, but she did not begin to practise seriously until after the death of her father in 1904, an event towards which she was profoundly ambivalent.

The condensation of time in the first group of letters – inevitable because few fine letters were written and fewer kept – makes Virginia's early life go by in a rush. The important events, the illnesses and deaths, appear to happen off-stage. Of course they were central. By the time she was 22, Virginia had lost her mother, her sister Stella, and her father. On two occasions – in 1895 and 1897 – she had also lost her mental stability. Fortunately, she had the comfort of her sister Vanessa and the intimate friendship of Violet Dickinson, the first of Virginia's major correspondents.

0: To Leslie Stephen [n.a.]

[n.d.][1]

MY DEAR FATHER
WE HAVEENT BATHED YET WE ARE GOING TO TO MORROW WE SANG IN THT TRAIN YOUR LOVING VIRGINIA.

Quentin Bell

00: To George Duckworth *22 Hyde Park Gate, S.W.*

[n.d.]

MY DEAR GEORGE
I AM A LITTLE BOY AND ADRIAN IS A GIRL I HAVE SENT YOU SOME CHOCOLATES GOOD BYE VIRGINIA

Quentin Bell

1: To James Russell Lowell [*22 Hyde Park Gate, S.W.*]

20.8.88

MY DEAR GODPAPA[2] HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE ADIRONDACKS AND HAVE YOU SEEN LOTS OF WILD BEASTS AND A LOT OF BIRDS IN THEIR NESTS YOU ARE A NAUGHTY MAN NOT TO COME HERE GOOD BYE

YOUR AFFECTe
VIRGINIA

1. The only one of Virginia's five childhood letters that can be dated is Number 1, which was enclosed with a dated letter from Leslie Stephen to James Russell Lowell. She was then aged 6½. Two of the others (0 and 00) appear, from their printing and content, to be earlier. By the time she wrote the letter numbered 1a, she was using script. In 1b she has learned some further spelling, punctuation, and syntax.
2. A fiercely articulate agnostic, Leslie Stephen did not have his children baptised, but he did choose for them 'sponsors', of whom Lowell, the poet, critic, and American Minister in London, 1880–85, was Virginia's. Lowell and Stephen had been friends since the latter's trip to the United States during the Civil War.

1a: To Julia Stephen

[*22 Hyde Park Gate, S.W.*]

[n.d.]

My dear Mother

We went out for a walk with Stella this morning up to the pond and there were a lot of big boats. We cleaned the little room out this morning and we cleaned up the silver things cos they were awfully dirty. It was awfully jolly at the stuffed beasts.[1] Edwin[2] came with us to them. Mrs Prinsep[3] says that she will only go in a slow train cos she says all the fast trains have accidents and she told us about an old man of 70 who got his legs caute in the weels of the train and the train began to go on and the old gentleman was draged along till the train caute fire and he called out for somebody to cut off his legs but nobody came he was burnt up. Good bye

your Loving Virginia

Quentin Bell

1b: To Julia Stephen

Limnerslease, Guildford [Surrey]

[n.d.]

My dear Mother

We have just come back from a [3-mile] walk to Guildford. I caught a frittilary [fritillary butterfly] this morning. Mrs Crane[4] stayed quite late yesterday. We have breakfast and tea in our play room but dinner with Mr and Mrs Watts.[5] Has father done anything shocking yet, and has he found any flowers. The beds are so soft that you sink down ever such a way when you get in. Mr and Mrs Watts go to bed at about

1. The children's name for the Natural History Museum.
2. Virginia's cousin, Edwin Fisher, born the year after she was.
3. Virginia was related to the Prinseps through the marriage of her mother's aunt, Sara Pattle, to Thoby Prinsep.
4. Mary, wife of the artist Walter Crane, whom Watts painted in 1891. The Cranes lived near the Stephens in Kensington.
5. The painter G. F. Watts (1817–1904) and his wife, Mary Fraser Tytler Watts, also an artist. They had completed Limnerslease in 1891. Therefore, the most likely date for this letter is 1892 or 1893. We know that Virginia stayed at Limnerslease in February 1894, but the letter's spring references and its level of sophistication make the later date unlikely. Watts had known Virginia's mother since her girlhood when he lived with the Prinseps.