

Virginia Woolf in 1916

'I wish you'd leave Wissett and take Charleston', Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister one hundred years ago this May. She had heard about the house near Firle, currently tenanted by animals but full of potential, not far from her own Sussex home Asheham. In October, Vanessa Bell made the move with Duncan Grant and David Garnett. So began the great phenomenon of the farmhouse under the Downs which now inspires thousands of visitors every year.

And what of Woolf herself that wartime year: is it possible to dip back into her life a century ago? She was 34, a respected literary journalist, and one of the best-read thinkers in Britain; she had a well-received novel behind her, and serious plans. There is no daily record of this time (her diary-keeping began in earnest the following year), but her letters are packed with news of friends, questions, books and politics. Everyone delving into these rich pages will bring up a different sample with which to start the tune of 1916.

It was a time of gradual convalescence after a long, terrifying period of illness. Woolf lived cautiously, in dread of another breakdown, and she was under instructions to do only a little work each day. She was tough, patient, and appreciative of small things: a visit, a letter, half an hour's writing. 'I suppose I am happy merely because it is so pleasant to be well again', she wrote to her dear friend Ka Cox in February.

She was still receiving encouraging letters about *The Voyage Out*, which had been published the previous spring, and she was feeling her way towards a new novel. At Wissett with her sister in July, she had an idea for a book that would centre on someone like Vanessa, and which would become *Night and Day*. But most of her work that year went into re-establishing herself as a critic and winning new freedoms as a literary essayist. Books for review arrived regularly from the *Times Literary Supplement*. She read enormously and immersively: Carlyle, Samuel Butler, contemporary novelists from Arnold Bennett to Elinor Mordaunt – who was, she thought, finding expression for things the Victorians never thought of. Her admiring review of Arthur Symonds's essays was also a conversation with him and a manifesto for modern prose. She was reading the eighteenth-century dramatist Carlo Gozzi to practice her Italian; her lists of verb declensions (in purple ink) are now in the British Library.

She wasn't sure she wanted to delve back into the 1840s for Charlotte Brontë's centenary, but after ten minutes with *Jane Eyre* there was no turning back: 'she has you by the hand and forces you along her road'. Woolf's passionately admiring piece on Brontë was the essay of a professional novelist working out how it's done; the essay of an instinctual biographer, feeling the presence of the 'small, pale, volcanic woman' in every line; and the essay of an enraptured reader who understood great novels as 'living and changing creations' which grow with you and are new in each re-reading.

The Woolfs divided their time this year, as they would now for the rest of their lives, between London and Sussex. They were pleased with their new home, Hogarth House in Richmond, where they planned to start a printing press. And they were glad to go, when they could, to Asheham, the remote house in Sussex that Virginia had rented since 1912, and which they both now held in deep affection.

Asheham was set back in a hollow, on Itford Farm, facing West towards the Ouse with the line of the Downs beyond. It was demolished in 1994, and those who never saw it can only peer at its long gothick windows in photographs and read descriptions of what Leonard called its 'strong character: romantic, gentle, melancholy, lovely'. The locals thought it haunted; the Woolfs never quite denied this, but decided that the noises in the night were comforting.

Even with the help of two servants (who despaired of it), this wasn't an easy place to live – what with the four-mile cross-country walk with knapsacks to and from the station, no telephone, running water or electricity. Fires provided the only heat, candles and oil lamps the only light for all that reading. Draughts poured in around the big windows, and the level of damp is indicated by the fact that the furniture was sometimes grey with mildew. But in August thistledown drifted in the air and wild mushrooms supplemented a wartime diet that involved a great deal of semolina.

The Sussex countryside that summer was a place of strange sounds and superstitions. Out in the open, you could hear the guns from Northern France, their low reverberation filling pauses in work or conversation. The war was a remote, unknown world of horror. Yet it was also this close: you could hear it. Everyone knew somebody who was over there. Leonard had been exempted from service on medical grounds in May, but there was no knowing how long the reprieve would last. He continued to write urgently about international relations.

Virginia wrote an essay called 'Heard on the Downs', an eerie dispatch from the rural home front, catching the fraught mix of quietness and agitation, distance and closeness. It starts with the sound of the guns, described by 'two well-known writers' (perhaps Leonard Woolf and G.E. Moore) as 'the hammer stroke of Fate' and 'the pulse of Destiny'. Woolf offers her own 'more prosaic' description of the sound: it is 'like the beating of gigantic carpets by gigantic women, at a distance'. With that she conveys, so precisely that we can hear it now, a low, hollow thudding. The image she chooses is domestic but also mythic. The figures might be goddesses from the ancient world, beating out the measure of all time. Woolf turns from the abstractions of 'Destiny' to the familiar territory of carpets, but the guns sound stranger than ever. And there seem to rise with the carpet-dust a whole cloud of questions about the relation between women and the war.

Five years later, writing the wartime part of *Jacob's Room*, she gave the carpet-beating image to Betty Flanders, who wakes in the night thinking that she hears the guns. 'Not at this distance', she tells herself: not in Scarborough. 'It is the sea.' But Woolf knew that the pounding of the waves and the thud of the guns could not always be told apart. 'Again, far away, she heard the dull sound as if nocturnal women were beating great carpets.' Then we hear the other sounds of the domestic night. Betty Flanders' hens shift slightly on their perches.

Woolf knew that sounds on the bare Sussex hills had worried lone walkers for centuries, but she thought that in wartime there were many 'phantoms hovering on the borderland between belief and scepticism'. For her part she was sceptical, recording the credulity of local people like an anthropologist watching another tribe. Her neighbours thought the vibrations from France had addled their hens' eggs, and spoilt the summer weather (it was dismal all July). Now that the eggs were edible and the sun was blazing, they thought that the falling of the church bell prophesied the war's end. Woolf had clearly been listening to the rumours with some amusement, and saw how quickly they were endorsed as facts.

Yet she, too, was feeling haunted. 'Often', she writes in 'Heard on the Downs', 'you turn sharply to see who it is that gallops behind you. But there is no one'. The war was there and not there in every moment. In the central section of *To the Lighthouse*, the section in which the war takes place somewhere else, she wrote a kind of ghost story in which the only ghost is the wind nosing through an empty house. There are memories

here, perhaps, both of Asheham's friendly draughts, guarding the house from danger,
and of the sounds of a terrible elsewhere which echoed outside, in the chalky hollows of
Sussex, in 1916.

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