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Book Review of: *In and Out of Bloomsbury: Biographical essays on twentieth-century writers and artists* by Martin Ferguson Smith

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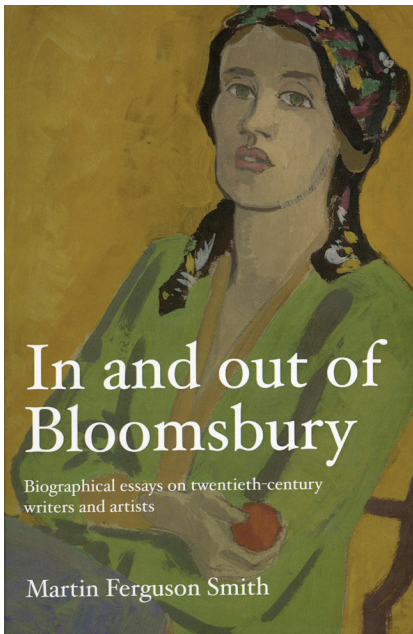
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Book Reviews

Martin Ferguson Smith, *In and Out of Bloomsbury: Biographical essays on twentieth-century writers and artists*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.

Using a good deal of previously unpublished and primary source material, Martin Ferguson Smith's *In and Out of Bloomsbury* reads at times like the pages of a twentieth-century gossip column, making the private lives within the Bloomsbury group public for our twenty-first-century eyes. However, the work of this classicist by trade is more than commentary on the group's unconventional lives; Smith's book brings to light previously unpublished or misidentified



photographs of several figures in the book, and by doing so, he offers new insights into each figure. Rather than proposing a unifying thesis, he focuses on providing biographical sketches of each figure, highlighting unengaged or unpublished manuscripts from their lives. He seeks to fill in scholarly gaps and succeeds in doing so. His book will have broad appeal among twentieth-century literature scholars and enthusiasts, particularly those who focus on Virginia Woolf, Dorothy L. Sayers, Rose Macaulay, and the Bloomsbury group, though the cost of the book may be prohibitive for some until the paperback version is released.

While primarily devoted to exploring the lives of the Bloomsbury group, Smith widens his scope to include other figures within the twentieth-century cultural milieu, such as (to this reviewer's delight) Dorothy L. Sayers and one of J.R.R. Tolkien's schoolmasters. Chapters 8 and 9, which are about Sayers, unveil a fascinating picture of her time at the Godolphin School, utilizing the school's records and other internal sources to contribute to Sayers scholarship in a new way. He highlights Sayers as one of the contributors of original words for the Somersham Pageant in 1908, "just two months after her fifteenth birthday" and before she began her time at the Godolphin School (201, 208). Another particular contribution he makes in this chapter is noting that in her *Letters*

series, Barbara Reynolds mistook a famous picture of Sayers in girlhood to have been taken during the time she was at Godolphin performing in *Coriolanus*. Smith dug into the Marion E. Wade Center's archives to discover a record stating that the inscription on the back of one of the original photographs reads "Somersham Pageant, 1908," along with a salutation from Sayers to her cousin and a photographer's matte identifying the photographer as "Maddison & Hinde, St. Ives" (201). Smith also rightly points out that most Sayers biographers have not used the Godolphin School diary and have made very little use of Sayers's unpublished Godolphin letters, and some have placed an inordinate amount of assumption on Sayers's unfinished novel, *Cat O' Mary*, being largely autobiographical rather than simply having some commonalities with Sayers's own life (223).

For Tolkien scholars and enthusiasts, Chapter 10, with its provocative title—"The Secret Love-Child of an American Civil War Commander: The Strange Story of Tolkien's Schoolteacher"—may be of particular interest. The fascinating birth story of Richard Williams Reynolds, one of Tolkien's schoolteachers, involves the affair of his father, a former Confederate army officer-turned-businessman, and a Chicot county widow. After the affair, that widow-turned-unwed-mother returned herself to the status of widow on her son's birth certificate. The story could easily be the plot of a novel, but it is the true background of the eventual schoolteacher of a famous author.

A major strength of the book is Smith's focus on the individual people who comprised these snapshots of time and historical movements within each figure's life, demonstrating how many individuals and their stories make up even a short period of one person's history. Another delightful contribution is his exploration of Sayers's formation of a group of female friends at Godolphin, which he illustrates by showing how many of them contributed to Sayers's magazine that she produced, *The Belfry*. This exploration rightly recognizes Sayers's uncanny ability to draw creative, unconventional women (or, in this case, girls) into community to create together and support one another. *In and Out of Bloomsbury* achieves what few academic works can boast, which is good critical scholarship from primary sources combined with a biographical sensibility for the casual reader. Smith says in the introduction that he will be happy if his book sheds new light on well-known figures and "increases knowledge and appreciation of some less well known ones," and he has done just that (8).

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