

THE STEPHENS IN ST IVES: LESLIE, VIRGINIA AND THE *DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY*

'The Stephens in St Ives: Leslie, Virginia and the Dictionary of National Biography', *Virginia Woolf Bulletin*, 59 (2018), 11-24.

Philip Carter

For Virginia Woolf, nowhere was as important, for so many years, as the west Cornwell fishing port of St Ives. Woolf's association with the town framed her life, from childhood holidays at Talland House to one of her final works of non-fiction; it shaped three of her principal novels and is a recurrent theme in her juvenilia, diaries, correspondence and memoirs from the 1890s to the late 1930s. Her first encounter with St Ives came at six months old, in July 1882, with the first family holiday in the town. There followed a further twelve consecutive summers in St Ives prior to her mother's death. Woolf returned in August 1905—a visit recounted in her Cornish journal—and made subsequent visits to St Ives and the neighbouring villages of Zennor and Lelant: twice in 1908, once in late 1909, twice in 1910, once in spring 1914 and again in September 1916, May 1917 and March 1921, and then at Christmas 1926, and in the May of 1930 and 1936. While Woolf shifted her focus in these years—from St Ives to Zennor (which was closer to the Arnold-Forsters)—the town remained a touchstone; fittingly, her first and last returns to Cornwall in adulthood, twenty-one years apart, took in visits to Talland House.

Woolf's bond with St Ives was psychological as well as physical, of importance for a sense of her child and adult selves. From the opening of 'A Sketch of the Past', the town takes centre-stage in her evocation of childhood. The train journey from Paddington to St Erth is chosen as a suitable first memory, while the celebrated evening at Talland House, with its beating waves and scrape of the acorn on the end of the cord of the blind, was judged the 'most important of all my memories' (*MOB* 64). What emerges, time and again, is Woolf's sense of St Ives and its surrounding countryside as a place of truthfulness and steadfastness, and as a site of experienced or anticipated pleasure. As Hermione Lee has written, Talland House was where Woolf 'sites, for the whole of her life, the idea of happiness' (Lee 22). On her return visits, she repeatedly emphasised the solidity and rootedness of Cornwall's pleasures, as witnessed in a letter written while at Zennor in spring 1921, listing 'Cliffs, Choughs, Ravens, Cream, solitude, sublimity, and all the rest of it' (*L2* 464, [30] March [1921]).

St Ives is also noteworthy for its imagined proximity. Woolf's diaries and letters provide numerous instances of a sensory connection by which Talland House was

recalled on hearing church bells or the click of a gate. It was a proximity expressed most emphatically in 'A Sketch of the Past', with Woolf's capacity to 'go back to St Ives ... I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there' (*MOB* 67). On occasions, this closeness born of memory and association tipped into physical proximity—as with her impromptu journey to Lelant on Christmas Eve 1909, following the revelation of 'how absurd it was to stay in London, with Cornwall going on all the time' (L1 414, 25 December [1909]).

As one would expect, St Ives's importance is noted and explored by scholars of Woolf. Talland House is central to the early chapters and coda of Hermione Lee's biography; Marion Whybrow and Marion Dell have researched Virginia and Vanessa's Cornish childhoods; Alexandra Harris included Cornwall in a 2015 radio series on Woolf and walking; Maggie Humm has written on Woolf and the town's early art circles; while Frances Spalding and others have contributed to academic events accompanying 'Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by her Writings' at Tate St Ives (February–April 2018).

In contrast, there are today few traces of Woolf in the town itself. The many visitors who come to St Ives because of Woolf will not find a commemorative plaque, despite several campaigns to have one installed from the 1960s onwards (Dell, *Escallonia* 4). There is no sign to Talland House or guide in the Tourist Information Centre, and walking tours head towards the harbour and the grave of artist Alfred Wallis, rather than over the hill to Carbis Bay. Reviews of the recent Tate show, while complimentary to the exhibition, questioned why connections between Woolf, Vanessa Bell and St Ives had not been drawn on before 2018.

There may still be relatively few traces of Woolf in St Ives, but there was another Stephen in St Ives—like Virginia a writer, biographer and memoirist—whose relationship with the town is even less appreciated. This, of course, is her father, Leslie Stephen. Leslie's modern-day obscurity is not as surprising as that of his daughter, and goes well beyond histories of west Cornwall. Though a dominant figure in late-Victorian letters, Stephen and his literary legacy are now regarded—when considered at all by popular commentators—as specialist and obscure. In histories and literary studies he is often cast as one of the brooding Victorians against whom the Bloomsbury Moderns defined themselves. This makes Stephen, and his work, vulnerable to caricature and dismissal, though this was never the position of Woolf (or indeed other Bloomsbury members) in what proved an ambivalent, shifting and complex relationship with her father, especially after his death.

To modern observers, the Stephen daughters will always trump their father, and rightly so. Moreover, given Woolf's marginal status in St Ives, it would be naïve to expect there to be any public record of her father; no one has ever considered commemorating his association with west Cornwall. But Leslie Stephen's own Cornish connections, and in particular the fourteen summers he spent in St Ives from 1881, are nonetheless significant. These years provide insight into the work and character of a famously industrious man who, approaching later age and in declining health, was then engaged in his greatest professional challenge.

One might argue we already have this portrait in the figure of Mr Ramsay, conspicuously presented in a great work of modern literature. It, however, remains one depiction—and a complex, ambiguous one at that—debated for its accuracy and intention as a biographical sketch. By contrast, historical rather than literary studies of Leslie Stephen make little of his association with Cornwall. Noel Annan deals with St Ives in barely more than a paragraph, while Frederic Maitland's *Life and Letters* offers slightly more, including correspondence Stephen sent while resident in the town, of which further selections are reproduced in John W. Bicknell's edition of Stephen's letters.

Stephen first visited St Ives in August 1881 while staying at Pont, near Fowey. He was then no stranger to Cornwall, having undertaken walking and climbing tours from the 1850s, and holidays with Julia in Falmouth and Newquay from 1878. Fully aware of her father's fondness for St Ives, Woolf reimagines this first encounter. He must, she writes, 'have seen the town almost as it had been in the sixteenth century, without hotels, or villas ... Munching his sandwiches up at Tregenna perhaps, he must have been impressed, in his silent way, by the beauty of the Bay; and thought: this might do for our summer holiday' (*MOB* 127). Stephen moved swiftly, purchasing the lease for Talland House in the same month, and returned the following April to oversee repairs. Starting in July 1882, he then made thirteen lengthy summer visits to Talland House. These were supplemented with additional off-season trips, especially in the early years of the lease. In 1883 he paid three visits: in January and May—with his nephew James Kenneth Stephen, and his friends William Robertson Smith and James Bryce—and then with the family from July. Similar short stays took place in April 1884 and February 1885. With summer visits stretching to between sixty and ninety days each, it is reasonable to suggest that Stephen spent between 900 and 1000 days in St Ives in the period August 1881 to October 1894.

A fuller appreciation of Stephen's engagement with St Ives is appropriate for several reasons. First and foremost, it is to Stephen that we owe his daughters'

association with west Cornwall. It was Stephen who made St Ives possible by taking Talland House, and it was he who brought Cornish holidays to an abrupt end, following Julia's death in May 1895. Given the legacy of these holidays, his uncharacteristically impulsive decision to lease Talland House must stand as one of the most significant holiday bookings in the history of modern culture.

Second, there is the town's shared importance to father and daughter. Not all of Woolf's recollections of Leslie in St Ives were warm. Her diary entries for 3 September 1928 and 1931, for example, recall the strict paternal regime of the Talland House schoolroom, while the negligence and shortcomings of Mr Ramsay surely reflect other unrecorded tensions (*D3* 194, *D4* 43; see also *D2* 15, 31 January 1920). At the same time, a mutual appreciation of the town offered Woolf common cause with her father. Stephen's initial attraction to St Ives, as imagined by his daughter nearly six decades later, echoes her own celebration of a town that was then little changed by the arrival of the St Erth branch line, and the first tourists and artists, from the late 1870s. Woolf also remained acutely aware of the creative legacy of her childhood holidays. St Ives was celebrated as a 'gift' from her parents that was 'perennial, invaluable. Suppose I had only Surrey, or Sussex, or the Isle of Wight to think about when I think of my childhood' (*MOB* 128).

One further reason for paying attention to Leslie Stephen in St Ives is to better understand the man himself. Accounts of Stephen's life and legacy often locate him in the gloom of Hyde Park Gate, the pipe-smoky atmosphere of the *DNB* office at Waterloo Place, or stomping round the garden of a fictionalised Talland House. St Ives as a place of escape and repose therefore provides us with a more variegated biographical portrait. The positive effects of Cornish holidays were soon evident. As Stephen wrote to his close friend, James Russell Lowell, in July 1882: 'The house has turned out to be better than we expected ... The scenery is lovely. We are close to the railway & the post ... and we are in the quietest of regions, where a tourist is a rarity' (Stephen 1996 1.251, 27 July 1882).

Stephen's Cornish letters (together with Stella Duckworth's photography) provide many references to the pleasures of his children and the activities he pursued with them. They spent time on Porthminster Beach and in the sea; harvested produce from the Talland House garden; hunted and caught moths; and there were games of cricket, botanical expeditions, and occasional firework displays. Once a fortnight Stephen also hired a boat and, accompanied by a fisherman, took the children to sea.

Leslie Stephen the family man is an interesting theme in Woolf's later memoir, in which she recalls his participation in their games. Such a figure—relaxed, playful,

and rather childlike—is at odds with her alternative depiction of the ‘spartan, ascetic, puritanical’ father who burdened their lives in London, most notably as a widower from the mid-1890s (*MOB* 68). But St Ives does appear to have lightened Stephen’s mood, as witnessed by Woolf’s cousin Herbert Fisher, who visited the family on Cornish holidays. Writing in 1940, Fisher recalled ‘the Leslie Stephens in the circle of beautiful children and brilliant intellectuals ... Leslie, so formidable within the home, was a different creature when he was striding over the Cornish cliffs botanizing as he went, repeating poetry and overflowing with good spirits and enjoyment’ (Fisher 20). As Mrs Ramsay reflects, ‘it did her husband good to be three thousand, or if she must be accurate three hundred miles from his library and his lectures and his disciples; and there was room for visitors’ (*TTL* 46).

Inviting and entertaining of these ‘visitors’ and ‘brilliant intellectuals’ was a second dimension to Stephen’s holidays in St Ives. He was proud of Talland House and keen that others experience its pleasures. Many family members paid visits, but more striking are those from his literary and scholarly circles whom he tempted down to Cornwall. St Ives in the 1880s and 1890s is now best known as an emerging colony of artists in which Stephen himself played an active part, as a founding member of the St Ives Arts Club and a patron and exhibitor of works at Talland House. But Stephen’s presence also made the town a place of literary and intellectual excursion and association. Regular visitors included the novelists Lucy Clifford and Henry James, the poet George Meredith and the historian Frederic Maitland. Others included the Cambridge professor of Arabic, William Robertson Smith, who, as editor of the ninth edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was a fellow toiler in reference publishing; and Stephen’s closest friend, James Russell Lowell, author, ‘godfather’ to Virginia, and at this time US ambassador in London.

It was common for these guests to be co-opted into a third Cornish passion: walking. On earlier trips to the county from the 1850s, Stephen had pioneered the sport of cliff climbing. In later years, as climbing and alpinism became more challenging, Stephen turned to hiking, with the moorland between St Ives, Penzance and Land’s End offering excellent, and beautiful, walking country. As with Talland House, Stephen was keen to share these delights with others. Thus, an afternoon letter from him to Julia, in May 1883, notes that he must break off to take Robertson Smith for a walk to the Gurnard’s Head, since the ‘gorse is magnificent in patches’. This cliff walk of about eight miles was subsequent to a tour earlier that day of St Ives, and a post-lunch walk to the Knill Monument and home via Carbis Bay (Stephen 1996 2.303, 14 May 1883).

Such regular jaunts were far outstripped by Stephen’s lengthier solo expeditions. These included his habit of crossing Cornwall by a series of hikes and train hops, as in

February 1885 when he walked from Bodmin to Truro (a journey of about twenty-five miles), before catching the last train to St Ives. Stephen wrote to Julia a day later: 'I am not a bit tired & feel hungry & well', though he did admit 'I shall do [no] more walks at present' (Stephen 1996 2.323, 5 February 1885). In view of these exploits, it is no surprise that those who recalled Leslie Stephen in St Ives often described a man in motion. Herbert Fisher remembered him 'striding over the Cornish cliffs', while Helena Swanwick recalled a 'gaunt figure with a ragged red-brown beard striding over the moors, a dog at his heels' (Swanwick 107).

St Ives was not just a place for relaxation, however. For a man of Stephen's intellect and energy there was also, and always, work to be done. The work that he undertook from 1882, in London but increasingly in St Ives, was of especial significance, for these were the years of his editorship of the *Dictionary of National Biography*—his best-known, enduring and certainly his most challenging scholarly endeavour. Indeed, the summers Stephen spent as a regular visitor to St Ives, beginning in July 1882, coincide exactly with his time as the founder and editor of the *DNB*. Stephen held the editorship until 1891, when he was forced to retire owing to ill health and exhaustion. While the history of the Stephens in St Ives is now, for many, a prelude to *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, for Leslie it was a part-setting for what was then the largest work of scholarly reference in the English language.

Leslie accepted the editorship of the *DNB* in October 1882, a month after the family's return from its first St Ives holiday. In December, plans for a national biography were announced in the *Athenaeum* magazine. Stephen then began work to gather names for inclusion, to select contributors, to establish plans for writing and proofing, and to crank up the presses in what quickly became a colossal undertaking producing hundreds of biographies a month.

The first volume appeared just over three years later, in January 1885, and commenced with people whose surnames began with A—the first entrant being the French-born cleric Jacques Abbadie. Over the next fifteen years a new volume—each with entries on roughly 600 people—appeared every three months. This punishing schedule continued until June 1900, when the *DNB* reached Z, the last entry being the Dutch-born diplomat William Van Zuylestein. Between Abbadie and Zuylestein stood biographies of 29,106 men and women, written by 653 authors, whose work appeared in sixty-three print volumes. Despite resigning the editorship in spring 1891, Stephen continued to write entries as the work ploughed through the alphabet. With the *DNB*'s completion, his personal tally stood at 378 biographies,

including some of the most prominent literary lives of his own specialist periods: Addison, Austen, Boswell, the Brontës, Coleridge, Defoe, Macaulay, Pepys, Pope, Swift, Thackeray and Wordsworth among them.

Stephen's contribution was immense, but his relationship with the *DNB* was never comfortable: it deteriorated markedly in the late 1880s, and showed little improvement following his retirement. In his later *Mausoleum Book*, Stephen bemoaned the *DNB* as 'a very laborious and ... a very worrying piece of work' into which he had blundered, ill-equipped and ill-prepared (Stephen 1977 86). He was even more blunt in private correspondence: the *DNB*'s London office became his 'place of torture' and the *DNB* was his 'treadmill ... the damnable thing' onto which he had been dragged 'by fate like a careless workman passing moving machinery' (Lee 100; Fenwick 240, 24 October 1887).

Given the lack of an official *DNB* archive (records were destroyed on the project's completion), Stephen's letters from St Ives provide valuable insight into his experience as editor—not least because Cornish holidays gave him time and space to write conversational, and often revealing, communications to his close friends. As he put it to Lucy Clifford in July 1884: 'So long as I am a dictionary-ridden animal, I write to no one till I am free', but, having recently arrived at Talland House, 'I am now free for three or four days, and show my natural disposition by immediately blossoming into correspondence' (Maitland 384, 25 July 1884). From this correspondence, it is clear that St Ives served several purposes for Stephen in his relationship to the *DNB*, and that these shifted as his attitude to the project began to change: from early anticipation and energy to weariness, gloom, frustration and dread.

In letters written in the summer of 1882 there was a definite sense of Stephen enjoying a restfulness he would seldom experience once the *DNB* got going later that year. On 2 August he wrote in carefree mood to the *DNB*'s publisher George Smith, to whom he restated the positive impression earlier conveyed to Russell Lowell: 'We are having lovely weather here, and the place is perfectly charming. I think that we have made a great hit in taking the house, which is perfect for our requirements.' The break was doing him the world of good, he reassured Smith: 'I shall, I hope, come back ready to write and edit biographies by the dozen' (Maitland 349, 2 August 1882).

Back in London, he wrote to J. A. Symonds on 13 October: 'I have been all but absolutely lazy for three months, but I must now buckle to' (Maitland 351). Buckling down began in earnest with the *DNB*'s announcement in December. But in these early stages there was still a chance to get away to St Ives, this time in January 1883

when he visited with James Kenneth Stephen. After which he returned, fired up to write his first *DNB* article: on the eighteenth-century author Joseph Addison, which became the model entry sent to all would-be contributors to the project.

If St Ives offered Leslie Stephen a place to relax and revive before intense bouts of work back in London, it is reassuring to know that the pleasures of west Cornwall often proved too tempting, even for this exemplar of industry. During his second family holiday, in August 1883, Stephen declared himself in a ‘state of indolence ... I make a dozen excuses before doing anything’ (Maitland 378, 5 August 1883). Summer 1888 found Leslie similarly amusing himself by ‘reading lessons with the children’; a month later he informed Charles Norton of having been ‘idle for the last two months’ (L1 1, 20 August 1888; Maitland 395, 5 September 1888).

Stephen may have celebrated his own ‘state of indolence’ in the summer of 1883, but the *DNB* was now accompanying him to St Ives. In this year come glimpses of the burdens placed on him, as the *DNB* developed into a huge publishing project. As he complained to the philosopher George Croom Robertson, the ‘infernal Dictionary must be kept going, though I begin to long for the day when it will appear, and have its fate decided one way or other’ (Maitland 378–9, 5 August 1883). These burdens, once established, would never be conquered. In September 1886, he wrote to George Smith, declaring his ‘holiday to be over ... I have enough books about me here to carry on my work & keep the dictionary going’; and his remaining month was spent in this fashion (Stephen 1996 2.339, 2 September 1886).

Not all work was on the *DNB*. ‘I am here for a holiday’, Stephen wrote to Norton in August 1885, ‘but this year my holiday is no holiday. I am working hard to bring out my life of Fawcett’—that is, a biography of his friend, the economist and politician Henry Fawcett, commissioned by his widow, the suffragist leader Millicent Garrett Fawcett (Maitland 387, 23 August 1885). Notwithstanding these additional pressures, there was also a constant threat of new *DNB* commitments being sent from London. This evidently occurred in August 1886, prompting him to bemoan his fate to Lucy Clifford: ‘A hideous packet from the Dictionary has come, which I have not yet had the courage to open. As soon as I have finished this [letter], I must spend some hours of lovely holiday weather in my accursed drudgery’ (Maitland 390, 4 August 1886).

From the mid-1880s, words like ‘infernal’ and ‘drudgery’ became increasingly common in Stephen’s letters from St Ives. An especially difficult year was 1884, because in late September it emerged that one of the *DNB*’s leading authors—a Presbyterian minister and noted Elizabethan scholar named Alexander Grosart—had been copying his entries from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and inventing

references. Letters went back and forth between St Ives and London in an attempt to resolve the crisis caused by Grosart, whom Stephen labelled an ‘accursed Doctor of Divinity’ and ‘this clerical scoundrel’ (Stephen 1996 2.316, 16 October 1884). Writing to George Smith, Stephen admitted that news of the plagiarism row ‘will make me uncomfortable here’ and that he was cutting short his holiday ‘to do what I can at any rate to help you out of this scrape’, concluding that he was ‘exceedingly sorry that I have been away’ (Stephen 1996 2.314–15, 1 October 1884). A year later another crisis was bothering him, and its consequences were now familiar; as Stephen wrote to Norton: ‘Things always seem to go wrong when I am out of town in order to spoil my holiday making’ (Maitland 387, 23 August 1885).

As work dragged on during the mid- to late 1880s, St Ives emerges more clearly as a place of refuge from London and the *DNB*. As early as 1884, Stephen spoke of ‘retiring to St Ives’—in part for his sanity, in part for Julia’s health—though he conceded this would be impossible at present (Stephen 1996 2.308, 31 March 1884). Writing to Norton in July 1887, he declared himself ‘well enough’, but that he would be ‘all the better for a thorough holiday in which I mean to indulge. ... I like a genuine sea & good granite rocks and a bit of wild moorland’ (Stephen 1996 2.352, 17 July 1887). Stephen’s correspondence makes clear how important St Ives had become, taking on the role of a second home, distinct from 22 Hyde Park Gate. In the summer of 1890 he paid his last visit to America, and on the voyage home wrote to Julia lamenting the ship’s slow progress: ‘Shant I be glad’, he signed off, ‘to see Godrevy lighthouse’, a landmark that would signal the approach of family life in west Cornwall (Stephen 1996 2.387, 12 July 1890).

Less easy to discern is just how burdened Stephen had become as editor of the *DNB* by the late 1880s. Certainly there is a lot of huffing and puffing in his letters: about the dullness of work, the pedantry of authors, and the relentlessness of the publishing cycle. Declarations of exasperation came readily to Stephen, and his readiness to admit his faults and limitations to close friends remains a fascinating aspect of his private self. As he told his correspondents, he had wasted his opportunities, he was a mere scribbler, incapable of anything better, and he deserved the pressures imposed by the *DNB*.

Some of these declarations were mock-serious and some carefully constructed bids for sympathy. But by the late 1880s and early 1890s the tone of Stephen’s St Ives letters was changing. In these years, his gloom was much more deep-seated as he succumbed to ill-health and exhaustion. He spoke of the *DNB*’s capacity to reduce or even kill him, and likened it to his personal ‘old Man of the Sea’, a figure who brought death to those caught in his unrelenting grip (Stephen 1996 2.352, 17 July 1887; 2.399, 1 May 1891).

Julia Stephen became alarmed at her husband's deterioration and imposed complete rest for their Cornish holiday of 1888. She was encouraged by the family's physician, Dr David Seton, who urged that Leslie free himself from the 'incubus of this Dictionary', whereupon 'he would be much better in health' (Lee 100). In a letter to Norton, Stephen outlined his intention 'to go back [to London] quite well in a month'. Even so, his attitude to the Dictionary remained cool; the prospect of returning to its routine filled him with dread, and he vowed to return only to help Smith and to salvage 'my own self-esteem', which was 'more or less involved in pushing it through' (Maitland 395, 5 September 1888).

Claims of Stephen's recovery proved premature, however. In the following year he collapsed at his London club, apparently mid-way through a conversation about how well he was feeling. Urgent steps were now taken—led by Julia—to remove her husband completely from the burdens of the *DNB* and its editorship. In this, she was generously assisted by Smith, who accepted his friend's resignation in April 1891. On his retirement from the *DNB*, Leslie Stephen was fifty-eight. For nearly a decade St Ives and the *DNB* had been bound together in the figure of its editor, for whom the town became a refuge (albeit never wholly secure) from the pressures and hassles of the 'damned Dictionary' (Maitland 385, 19 November 1884). Retirement did not end Stephen's association with the town, though there were to be just three *DNB*-free Cornish holidays ahead of him.

In conclusion, what might we take from a fuller appreciation of St Ives's significance, not just to Virginia Stephen, but also to her father? A study of Leslie Stephen in St Ives consolidates much of what we know: here was a man of industry, energy, literary fellowship, as well as self-absorption and neediness. At the same time, it offers insights into a less-expected figure: the demanding patriarch as family man, the workaholic at rest, and the fierce critic having fun.

Then there is the darker side: the image of a publicly successful and feared man of letters wracked by self-doubt and a sense of missed opportunity. There are, of course, glimpses of each of these character traits in London. But the fact that St Ives was holiday time serves to bring them—and especially Stephen's troubled side—into sharper focus. The comments he made while on holiday reinforce our sense of the pressure Stephen found himself under, as his years in St Ives and as *DNB* editor ran in parallel. Just as his literary and intellectual friends followed him to west Cornwall, so too did the *DNB*—with its deadlines, crises, guilt-traps and infuriating contributors. Stephen in St Ives was not, therefore, simply an ageing prodigy

wondering how to move from *Q* to *R*. Here, rather, was a man responsible for *A* to *Z*: at the centre of a costly, high-profile, unwieldy national enterprise of which he felt he had lost control, swallowed up by a publishing machine for which he was both culprit and victim.

However, Leslie Stephen in *St Ives* offers us an important point of connection between father and daughter, defined by their love for west Cornwall and its shared importance as a place of sanctuary. Each sought out *St Ives* for different reasons. For Stephen, the town became a partial haven from office life and the *DNB*, which took on a vivid presence in his letters as a machine holding him back or the ‘Old Man of the Sea’ weighing him down. By contrast, the *DNB* features only occasionally in Woolf’s diaries and correspondence. But when it does, it appears as similarly burdensome. Most striking is when Woolf describes her mental instability with reference to the *DNB*. In a diary entry for 3 December 1923, she wrote of its having crushed the life out of her younger brother Adrian before he was born, and of giving her ‘a twist of the head too. I shouldn’t have been so clever, but I should have been more stable without that contribution to the history of England’ (*D2* 277). Writing to Ethel Smyth, Woolf later attributed her weakened nervous state to Stephen’s literary inheritance: ‘Lord! What a bore!’, she writes, ‘To think that my father’s philosophy and the Dictionary of National Biography cost me this! I never see those 68 black books without cursing them for all the jaunts they’ve lost me’ (*L4* 145, 27 February [1930]).

Woolf often saw those black books. She inherited them on her father’s death, and she carried them with her. As Hermione Lee has written, the Woolfs’ houses were ‘awash with the *Dictionary of National Biography*’; one of Woolf’s last letters, written at Rodmell in late March 1941, refers to an afternoon spent ‘trying to arrange some of my father’s old books’ (Lee 48; *L6* 483, 21? March 1941). For Woolf, the *DNB* was akin to family: inherited not chosen; present from childhood; influential on her genetic make-up; a subject of ambivalence and obligation, and a persistent, sometimes wearisome, presence. But a closer look at Leslie Stephen, especially in *St Ives*, also reminds us that the Dictionary was similarly burdensome to him—though for Leslie the familial relationship with the *DNB* was less one of questionable paternity, than an ill-judged marriage made in middle age.

One final dimension to this story relates to histories of late-Victorian publishing. Academics who study the *DNB* invariably treat it as a creation of those late-Victorian men (and some women) who laboured in the British Museum or the London Library and who socialised at the gentlemen’s clubs and salons in and around Pall Mall. In October 1917 the titles of the *DNB*’s publisher, Smith, Elder & Co., were transferred to John Murray. However, Murray’s acquisitions did not include the loss-making

DNB, which George Smith's children gifted to the University of Oxford for upkeep and future extension by Oxford University Press, and there it remains. It was from Oxford that the wholly new edition of the Dictionary, rewritten and much expanded, was published in 2004 in print and online, and from where regular updates continue to be issued.

For more than 130 years, therefore, the *DNB* story has traditionally been one set against the backdrop of literary London and donnish Oxford. But for three months each year between 1882 and 1894 the *DNB* (or at least the *DNB* in the shape of its editor and moving force) set up residence, with numerous academic associates and acolytes, in an unspoilt fishing port in west Cornwall. Alongside London and Oxford, therefore, we should add St Ives as one of the principal locations to shape the life of a Stephen who was not Virginia, and was the backdrop for a literary classic that is not *To the Lighthouse*.

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