



## The Edwardians

*Vita Sackville-West , Juliet Nicolson (Introduction)*

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At nineteen, Sebastian is a duke and heir to a vast country estate. A deep sense of tradition binds him to his inheritance, though he loathes the social circus he is a part of. Deception, infidelity and greed hide beneath the glittering surface of good manners. Among the guests at a lavish party are two people who will change Sebastian's life: Lady Roehampton, who will initiate him in the art of love; and Leonard Anquetil, a polar explorer who will lead Sebastian and his free-spirited sister Viola to question their destiny.

A portrait of fashionable society at the height of the era, THE EDWARDIANS revealed all that was glamorous about the period - and all that was to lead to its downfall. First published in 1930, it was Vita Sackville-West's most successful book.

## The Edwardians Details

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Author : Vita Sackville-West , Juliet Nicolson (Introduction)

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# From Reader Review The Edwardians for online ebook

## Cynthia says

I've been aware of Sackville-West for some time and, though I knew she was a writer, I thought of her mainly in relation to Virginia Woolf so I was surprised at how good *The Edwardians* was. It's set during that short period after Queen Victoria's death and the reign of her eldest son Edward. The main character is a young duke named Sebastian.

Of course he's inherited a life of privilege with all its ancient traditions but after he meets someone from outside his class Sebastian begins to question his life. *The Edwardians* threw off some of the staid values of Victoria's morals and, at least the upper classes, became downright licentious or was it that the stopped trying to hide it? Sackville-West also explores women's issue through the eyes of Sebastian's mother and sister and through the eyes of his lovers. Sackville-West wasn't just a hanger on to the Bloomsbury group but an active talent.

Thank you to the publisher for providing an advance reader copy.

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## Jane says

History records that Vita Sackville-West wrote *'The Edwardians'* on holiday, targeting popular success. Her book was a huge hit, it was adapted for the stage, it was translated into several languages, but neither its author or its publisher saw it as having any claim to literary greatness.

They were probably right, but it is a lovely entertainment that captures a particular time and a particular class wonderfully well.

The author wrote what she knew, and at the very beginning of the book she notes that:

*"No character in this book is wholly fictitious."*

If you have knowledge of her and her circle you will appreciate that; and understand that she is looking back at the world that she grew up in, comparing it with the world that her mother knew and the very different world that her children knew; and knowing that, while she loved it dearly, it was fatally flawed.

But it doesn't matter if you know nothing at all, because the book is such a lovely period piece.

The story opens in 1905, with Sebastian, the nineteen year-old Duke of Chevron ascending to the roof of his country home to escape the guests at his mother's house party. She loves society, while Sebastian isn't quite sure how he feels. He is drawn to the glamour of his mother's social set, but he can't help being aware of how shallow their lives and their values really are.

His estate, Chevron, is a working estate, and Sebastian loved everything he can see and hear from his high vantage point.

*"The whole community of the great house was humming at its work. In the stables, men were grooming*

*horses; in the 'shops', the carpenters plane sent the wood-chips flying, the diamond of the glazier hissed on the glass; in the forge, the hammer rang in the anvil, and the bellows windily sighed ... Sebastian heard the music and saw the vision. It was a tapestry that he saw, and heard the strains of a wind orchestra."*

It had been that way for hundreds of years, with sons following their fathers into the shops to learn a trade, and with positions within the house filled by the daughters and nieces of those already employed; with staff claiming – and constrained by – their inheritance just as much as the family they served.

All of this is so vividly evoked, and the early chapters are rich with details of the life of the house, the party arrangements, the family, and a veritable army of servants.

One of the weekend visitors to Chevron, Leonard Antequil, didn't belong to that world; but his adventurous life, including a winter spent alone in a snow hut in the Arctic Circle, and had brought him fame and made him a very desirable guest for the fashionable set.

It may not have occurred to the other guests that he was there as the result of his own of his efforts while they were there only by chance of birth or marriage. Or that he thought little of them.

One night Sebastian invited him up onto the roof, and he spoke to him openly and honestly, sensing his dissatisfaction and urging him to recognise the limitations of his lifestyle and to consider breaking with tradition.

*"Very well, if you want the truth, here it is. The society you live in is composed of people who are both dissolute and prudent. They want to have their fun, and they want to keep their position. They glitter on the surface, but underneath the surface they are stupid – too stupid to recognise their own motives. They know only a limited number of things about themselves: that they need plenty of money, and that they must be seen in the right places, associated with the right people. In spite of their efforts to turn themselves into painted images, they remain human somewhere, and must indulge in love-affairs, which are sometimes artificial, and sometimes inconveniently real. Whatever happens the world must be served first."*

Sebastian is torn between his deep love of his home and his knowledge of the truth of Antequil's words.

The arguments are beautifully expressed and perfectly balanced.

Sebastian regretfully declines Antequil's invitation to accompany him on his next trip; but he never forgets their conversation.

He is seduced by an older woman, a society beauty of his mother's generation; when their affair is ended by an ultimatum from her husband he drifts into a shallow life as a man about time; and then he draws a middle-class doctor's wife into his life, and makes the mistake of inviting her to Chevron ....

*"He had tried the most fashionable society, and he had tried the middle-class, and in both his plunging spirit had got stuck in the glue of convention and hypocrisy."*

All of this says much about Sebastian's world; but it isn't quite as engaging as those early chapters about life at the family estate.

Meanwhile, the world was changing.

Sebastian's sister, Viola, knew that, and she was glad.

*"For what have our mothers thought of us, all these years?" said Viola; "that we should make a good marriage, so that they might feel that they had done their duty by us, and were rid of their responsibility with an added pride. A successful daughter plus an eligible son-in-law. Any other possibility never entered their heads – that we might consult our own tastes for instance ...."*

The author knew that.

The first defection at Chevron, when the head-carpenter's son chooses a job in the new motor industry rather than follow his father into Chevron's shops, illustrated that beautifully.

Sebastian was caught up with his own concerns, he was unhappy, but an encounter with Leonard Antequil on the day of the coronation of George V made him realise that he could change his life.

But would he?

I can't say, and there are lots of details that I haven't shared.

I loved this book: the prose, the conviction, the wealth of detail, the depiction of society.

That's not to say it's perfect. It's a little uneven, the structure isn't strong, and much of what it has to say feels familiar.

But it does so much so well, it has such authenticity, and it is a wonderfully readable period piece.

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## David says

Well, not all of them. Which must be something of a relief. In fact, there's quite a small cast: Sebastian, Duke of Chevron; his immediates; his squeezes; his servants; his tenants; a smattering of the Dowager's awful friends; a rather unbelievable adventurer; and then ending with ... **Zadok the Priest and Nathan the Prophet anointed Solomon King** ... a chapter at the Coronation of George V!

In the opening chapter our Duke's a boy and I thought (hoped) he'd be England's answer to Kiyoaki, the young heir to the Marquis Matsugae in Mishima's "Spring Snow". Look!:

"Sebastian sulky is irresistible. Promise me you will never ruin him by persuading him to appear good-tempered."

"One half of Sebastian detested his mother's friends; the other half was allured by their glitter."

"The ambassador's words threw Sebastian into an ill humour, he was stung, disturbed; he was ashamed of his virginity. People were not very real to him, and women least of all."

"For Sebastian liked to pour vinegar into his own wounds."

But then Sebastian is rather ruined by a very safe relationship with his mother's best friend, Lady Roehampton ... and not only was I denied my "English 'Spring Snow' fantasy" but the whole thing started to fizzle out.

It also felt that once Vita had done her "this is how an Edwardian grand house worked" bit, she'd rather lost

interest herself.

Still, very amusing at times:

"There were thirty people to luncheon; but two places remained empty; they were destined for two people who were motoring down from London and who, naturally, had so far failed to arrive. The duchess never waited for motorists. They must take their chance. And, to-day being a Sunday, they would not be able to send the usual telegram saying that they had broken down."

"These parties of theirs, he thought, were like chain-smoking: each cigarette was lighted in the hope that it might be more satisfactory than the last."

"one must certainly have the lion of the moment at one's parties, it was perhaps just as well that he should not boringly roar."

"Lucy laughed her silvery laugh, the laugh that had made several men believe that she understood what they said."

"It was one thing to be admired because one was so lovely, and quite another thing to be admired because one was still so lovely."

"her social vanity was mortified. She knew it, when she met the Duchess of D. dining with Lucy, and was given two fingers instead of three – she had never been given five – and was called Lady Roehampton instead of 'Sylvia'.

'What a success you have had!' Said the duchess, putting up her lorgnon as though to scrutinise the remains of Sylvia's beauty; 'the Daily Mail this morning was full of your praises. Quite a public character you have become.' Sylvia's only wonder was that the duchess should condescend to mention the Daily Mail at all."

"Sylvia descended upon this gathering as a bird of paradise might wing down upon an assembly of hens."

"People like us must never think, for fear of thinking ourselves out of existence."

"Everybody streamed out of the Abbey, greatly relieved. They were tired, but how impressive it had been! And, thank heaven, no one had thrown a bomb."

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## **Sarah says**

Whereas *All Passion Spent* had a quiet, old woman at its center, *The Edwardians* has a dashing, young man. I'm inclined to think Sebastian is a little closer to Vita's own essence, though I suppose that one is debatable. Perhaps she was so annoyed with Woolf's *Orlando*, she decided to create her own male alter ego!

Both of these books by Vita are well written, so why do I stubbornly withhold that fifth star?

I can certainly appreciate her wit, her wisdom, her stunning prose. But, the thing is, I can't quite relate to her. One obvious reason is that I'm poor and she was insanely rich. Another is a fundamental difference our respective yearnings. She wanted passion, grandeur, adventure. I want constancy and the quiet contentment she seemed to fear.

Though the book has literary merit, it doesn't quite satisfy my own literary cravings. Sorry, Vita!

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## Carol says

This novel concerns the intellectual and emotional awakening of Sebastian, Duke of Chevron, during the last days of the Edwardian era, in the decade before WWI. Sebastian is just nineteen when the book opens, and thus just entering the youthful part of his adulthood. A member of high society, he is surrounded by frivolous, licentious people who prize good behaviour and maintenance of position and image above all else. The main issue of the novel is whether or not Sebastian will follow the model of high society, as illustrated by his mother Lucy and her friends, or strike out in a more independent and authentic direction, like the one his quiet and smart sister Viola eventually chooses. The story is bookended by the appearances of Leonard Anquetil, an unconventional explorer, adventurer, and free spirit, who first causes Sebastian to question and doubt the lifestyle of his peers and sows the seeds of independence and authenticity in him. I wish that there had been more of Leonard and Viola as a foil for Sebastian and Lucy.

Sackville-West's prose glitters in a way that made this book a delight to read. She also shows a fairly balanced view of early 20th century British high society, revealing both its glory and luxury as well as its banality and hypocrisy. Her depiction makes it completely clear why Sebastian wishes to rebel yet finds it very hard to disentangle himself.

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## ^ says

I read as far as the first two chapters, before flipping fast-forward to the final chapter and the Coronation of King George V. I faced up to the inevitable; I had to admit that here was a book I didn't care for was. The unadorned, dull, flat pace of the writing engendered nothing but yawning. My interest and sympathies were not engaged. Where was the point? Indeed *was* there a point? Lifting and casting my eyes around the room I was reminded of no shortage of other books yet to be read.

I may be guilty here, literally, of missing the plot, big time. Whatever merits this novel possesses, this book gave me a glimpse of one woman's somewhat bleak interpretation of early twentieth century English upper class Edwardian Society; a life of tightly interwoven blood relationships that she appeared ill at ease with, though born into that social class herself.

A **"Brideshead Revisited"** or a **"Forsythe Saga"** of the first decade of the twentieth century, **"The Edwardians"** is most definitely not. Neither has it been filmed neither for TV or cinema. Should I wonder why?

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## Morgan says

Most people know Vita Sackville-West from reading Virginia Woolf. She was a close friend, a lover, and the muse for Woolf's "biography" Orlando. With me being a huge fan of Virginia, I had to read some of Vita's books. I couldn't help compare the two writers.

There isn't much to compare with Vita and Virginia, writing wise. You can sometimes see similarities, but they are completely different. Virginia is more experimental. With this novel at least, Vita is more

straightforward. Vita reminds me more of Edith Wharton with her grand descriptions of things. The fact that Vita and Virginia don't write the same is actually a good thing.

I didn't really care for the plot of this book. It's not a bad book, it's just slow. It's about a high class Edwardian family living in England. Parts of it I didn't really get because I'm not English and other parts I liked because of the disruptions. I'm thinking I'll like *All Passion Spent* better.

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### **MaryannC.Book Fiend says**

My first ever Vita Sackville-West book and it won't be my last (I have another lined up for reading). This earns a place in my all-time favorites, a novel that peers into the lives of the old aristocrats known as The Edwardians. Because V. Sackville-West came from this sort of background I felt like I was getting an inside look into this world ruled by class, society, the fashionable, the haughty and the snobbish of this wonderful era. I absolutely love this book and I recommend it to everyone who is a fan of *Downton Abbey* and the like.

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### **Mo says**

I'm not sure why I so disliked this... it should have been right up my alley. Wrong book at the wrong time?

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### **Fonch says**

An iconoclastic review soon/Crítica iconoclasta en breve.

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**“It is no good my telling you. One never believes other people's experiences and one is only very gradually convinced by one's own.”**

Sebastian is nineteen years old, dashing and handsome, and the heir to a vast and beautiful country estate called *Chevron*. Edward the Caresser, eldest son of Victoria, is on the throne of England. It is 1905, and the grim days of World War One are still unrealized. As a member of the Upper Classes and a regular at any gala event in Edwardian high society, Sebastian is the perfect age in the perfect era.

**His role in life has been preordained.**

Sebastian takes as his lover a friend of his mother, the Lady Sylvia Roehampton. She is, despite her age, still considered the most beautiful jewel in English society. *“Sebastian was intensely aware of her quality as she strolled beside him; her quality of a beautiful woman exquisitely finished, with a perfect grasp on life,*



*untroubled, shrewd, mature, secret, betraying her real self to none.* "To be seen with the most dashing young man in London enhances her already glittering reputation, and for him to be seen with Sylvia only makes the most eligible bachelor more entrancing. You would think that if anyone would be appalled at this spectacle it would be his mother Lucy, but she takes a very practical view of the matter. **"She was quite content that Sebastian should become tanned in the rays of Sylvia's Indian summer."**

She expects Sylvia to keep her head and advance the bedsheet knowledge of her son and not do something as insane as to fall in love with him. He could fall in love with her, but she could not do the same. The balances are teetering in the relationship, but the final blow to this "suitable" arrangement comes from Lord Roehampton, who doesn't find it...well... suitable at all.

### **It turns into a sticky wicket.**

Sebastian meets a man at one of his mother's parties by the name of Leonard Anquetil, who is invited as a peculiar person of personal accomplishment. He is a famous explorer who has conquered jungles and lived to tell about it. *"There was no mistaking that strange countenance, pitted with the blue gunpowder, scarred by the sword-cut; a countenance sallow and sarcastic between the two black puffs of hair."* Anquetil has no title or inherited money. He is a self-made man in the best possible fashion. Sebastian had never met anyone like him.

Anquetil is the temptation. He is the father figure who could make a better man of Sebastian, but he would have to give up his life at Chevron to go adventuring with Anquetil. Despite his superficial existence, I can't help liking Sebastian because of his love for the family estate. It is real. He doesn't weigh it to see what it is worth. He looks upon the beauty and the people with true love and affection. This is certainly Vita Sackville-West peering through her character's eyes for a moment. She never inherited her family estate at Knole House, and for the rest of her life she pined for the person she was when she lived there.

### **Portrait of Vita Sackville-West by William Strang.**

Sebastian knows he will never find another to match Sylvia, so he tries romancing a series of very different women. There is Theresa, the Doctor's wife, whom he is sure he can woo with the glamor of his life that she admits to be so enamored with, but despite his most charming efforts, she proves obstinate in maintaining her faithfulness to her husband. There is a pretty estate girl who is ushered off stage by his mother once things start to look serious. He finds a bohemian girl by the name of Phil, who sees the world and her place in it with clearer eyes than Sebastian. *"With her black hair cut square; her red, generous mouth; her thick white throat; and brilliant colours; especially when she crouched gipsy-like, over her guitar."*

He asks her if she would marry him. She laughs at his naivete. As crazy as it seems to even consider marrying a coarse girl several class rungs below him, he is just trying desperately to escape his predestination. He can't help but ask himself, isn't there more than this?

### **And then Anquetil reappears.**

So who is this Vita Sackville-West?

### **Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West in 1933.**

Vita Sackville-West had an open marriage with the writer and politician Harold Nicolson. They were both bi-sexual and had numerous affairs during their marriage. The most famous of these affairs was between Vita and Virginia Woolf. Woolf wrote the book *Orlando* and based the main character on Vita. This book was what Vita's son Nigel called "*The longest and most charming love letter in the history of literature.*"

This book, *The Edwardians*, came out in 1930 and was published by the Woolf owned Hogarth Press. It was a smashing success. The world was mired in a recession, and the book hearkened back to better days. It was selling 800 copies a day and by the end of six months had sold over 20,000 copies. The Edwardian age was long passed, and people were looking back at that last extravagant age as a time that would never come again. It might seem odd that the lower classes were so fascinated with the upper classes during a time of economic struggle, but if we don't know about such people and the lives they lead, how can we dream?

### **Part of the restored gardens at Sissinghurst.**

Sackville-West never did recover her family estate, but she did buy the moldering remains of Sissinghurst, an estate that used to belong to another ancestor long before. The money from the success of this book helped to restore it to better than its former glory.

I have recently read a biography of Edward the VII called *The Heir Apparent: A Life of Edward VII, the Playboy Prince* so there was certainly some added enjoyment for me when Edward, known as Bertie, would be seen loitering at one of these high society events. The people reading this book in 1930 would have recognized many of the thinly disguised, real life people used as characters in this novel. In the front of the book, Sackville-West states: "**No character in this book is wholly fictitious.**"

### **Oh Vita, you naughty, naughty girl.**

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I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Joseph says**

*The Edwardians* might pass as a novel that presents a good surface story or something to waste away an afternoon or two with. It is well written and contains a small cast of characters. Sebastian is the center character, the dashing nineteen-year-old, who rebels against his mother, but still stays within the norms of society. Viola is his younger sister who is awkward and cares less about society and position than Sebastian. The Duchess is firmly in the society scene and lives by image and proper appearances. Then there is Chevron which could be the main character as well as the setting. It is the estate Sebastian is set to inherit -- the massive building and the surrounding property and houses.

A close look at the author, Vita Sackville-West, will show that this book is more than just a novel. The opening imprint reads "No character in this book is wholly fictitious." Lucy, Duchess of Chevron, is a thinly veiled portrayal of Victoria Sackville-West's controlling mother of Vita Sackville-West. Chevron is without a doubt the one true love of Vita. Sebastian and Viola are two different Vitas. Sebastian is the idealized Vita. The one with the true connection to the land and estate. Vita regretted the fact that because she was a woman she had no claim on her family's estate. It would be taken from her. Sebastian plays her male alter-ego. Viola is the more realistic Vita -- A bit awkward, not a society person, and at odds with her

mother.

The story is also an examination and a criticism of the waning days and fall of the Edwardian period. "Appearances must be respected, though morals may be neglected." is the theme of the upper class. An affair was not bad unless it was exposed either through indiscretion or someone with a grudge. Affairs did not end marriages although they did hurt. Marriage was designed and arranged for stability and preserving the family name. Affairs, on the other hand, were expressions of love. This idea did not hold true outside of the nobility. The middle class did marry for love and took their vows much more serious as Sebastian finds out. The morals are too in this book outside of religion. It is not mentioned by the middle-class wife Teresa Spedding in determining what is right and what is wrong.

*The Edwardians* is a well written examination of the period. Although Vita Sackville-West exaggerated at times, it is, after all, a work of fiction. She did write about what she knew. This book like a few other of her works is loosely based on her life. Although I do not watch much television I have watch Downton Abbey and many themes in *The Edwardian* are reflected there. Relations between the nobility and the staff, the rise of a middle class, socialism, and the coming of the motor age are told in both. Also, the coming fall of the landed class is expected in both also. *The Edwardians* is an interesting book and made even better once the reader knows of the life of the author.

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## Chari says

Lo que me ha gustado. Mucho disfruto de esta clase de libros.. no puedo evitarlo, es mi única Dorcas debilidad^^

Ha sido como ver la serie Downton Abbey o Upstairs Downstairs por el retrato tan ¡magnífico! de la sociedad inglesa de comienzos del siglo XX con sus deslumbrantes pero encorsetadas costumbres, un mundo de entrañables tradiciones ligadas a la mansión de Chevron contempladas a través de los ojos de sus dos jóvenes protagonistas, los hermanos Sebastián y Viola, sobre todo de Sebastián futuro heredero y duque. Es al mismo tiempo una novela de aprendizaje, pues lo veremos crecer y tomar decisiones respecto la vida futura que elegirán cada uno entre tantas exquisiteces que los rodea a la par que artificialidad, hipocresía y superficialidad.

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## Lesley says

The Edwardians is my first foray into the work of Vita Sackville-West. Prior to this all I knew of Miss Sackville-West was her firm association with Virginia Woolf. Shame on me for not seeking out her own personal brilliance sooner.

The Edwardians is a in depth look into high society of Great Britons Edwardian period. The novel is supposedly based on many a true fact and figure. Set mainly, in the country estate house of Chevron the book deals with the highly guarded relationships of the social set of the era and their many first world issues.

The language and the imagery brings this not so distant past into close focus. It's easy to get swept away in a world so far from ones own but at the same time knowing that the actual relatability of the characters is far from accessible.

Not much happens in the way of plot points but it takes a step back from the reading process to really notice. The characters thoughts and opinions are such that they take over your conscious thought.

While highly enjoyable, I found the novel unsettling at times. Being dragged into a place where loveless marriages of convenience are more than acceptable and where no one can really be trusted is a little dubious but overall I found being swept away to 'a more civilized' time wonderfully distracting.

My particular edition was purchased at Shakespeare and Co in Paris and it has the famous stamp to prove it. I've looked forward to reading this book for years now but have continually put it off for one reason or another. I'm glad to have finally finished its pages and even more pleased that they didn't prove a disappointment.

For anyone yet to sample the lyrical prose of Vita Sackville-West, I highly recommend you do so as soon as possible.

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## **Bettie? says**

**Among the many problems which beset the novelist, not the least weighty is the choice of the moment at which to begin his novel.**

I had only a few pages left to read when I set this aside last Autumn. Didn't want to abandon entirely but didn't have much eagerness for carrying on. No doubt this is must for those who like to delve into London's geometric society but it really has been a chore for me.

It gets 2\* only because I (finally) finished

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