Alternative Histories: Hogarth Press's *World-Makers and World-Shakers* Series

by Eleanor McNees

Confronting the rising Nazi threat in Europe and Britain in July 1937, the Hogarth Press published four short biographies under the series title *World-Makers and World-Shakers*. The choice of subjects appeared random, ranging over centuries, disciplines and nationalities from Socrates and Joan of Arc to Darwin and Italian *Risorgimento* figures—Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour. Perusal in the Hogarth Press archive of Leonard Woolf's initial solicitations to prospective writers reveals that the final biographers (not Woolf's first choices) were either friends of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, previously published Hogarth authors, or popular writers likely to appeal to a broadly middlebrow public. In retrospect, both the subjects and their biographers suggest the Woolfs' commitment to a new genre with a pedagogical purpose, one particularly pertinent given the imminent threat of Fascism. Juvenile biography with its target audience of twelve-to-sixteen year-olds offered humane historical models to counter the ominous contemporary political movers and shakers in Germany and Italy as well as the patriarchal and dictatorial figures Woolf would deride in *Three Guineas*. Closer to home, the series provided counter-examples to Oswald Mosley and his British Union of Fascists' advocacy of a "masculinist ethic" in elementary and secondary education.[1] In keeping with the anti-Fascist premise, Leonard Woolf asked artist and radical political activist John Banting to design the dust jacket for the four biographies. Louisa Buck described the illustration as "a tree transforming itself into a linear classical nude on the four volumes…," and she and J. H. Willis concur that the covers strongly suggested a surrealist influence.[2]

In a 23 April 1936 letter to Commander Stephen King-Hall, Leonard Woolf elaborates on the original prospectus for the series, expressing his preference for teaching history through biography instead of by rote through the "source method":

> I suggest that the subject of these biographies should be people who influenced the course of history, either through what they did, or through what they were: for this purpose they may be admirable, or the reverse; they may have been the active innovators of change, or the passive resisters to it. They should be people whose lives were sufficiently eventful to make a good story. Their names should be familiar enough to young people to make them want to read about them, but not so familiar through school histories and textbooks as to seem too much like lessons. (HPA MS 2750/579)

In his notes on possible biographical subjects, Leonard Woolf listed largely "admirable" figures from across centuries and professions of whom eighteen are men and four are women.[3] Woolf included two more ambiguously "admirable" figures when he first approached Scottish novelist Naomi Mitchison in April 1936 about Augustus

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Caesar ("or any other Greek or Roman who you feel should have a place in such a series") (HPA MS 2750/283) and when he asked *Time and Tide* editor Phoebe Genwich-Gaye in June 1936 to write Cromwell's life. Neither subject appeared in the series, Mitchison preferring to work on Socrates and (at first) Plato, and Genwich-Gaye pleading lack of time.

Leonard Woolf's invitations to and negotiations with the final biographers reflects a certain bias as well as an editor's necessary consideration of prospective sales. The biographies were to target young boys and girls in elementary and secondary schools and not the paying students in the public day and boarding schools, partly because Woolf hoped for general adoption by the Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and, perhaps also because many of the non-fee-paying pupils would be less likely to continue to university and thus might benefit from selected historical models whose behavior encouraged emulation. The target of the juvenile audience suggests a certain avuncular impulse to impose historical examples on the greater mass of youth who would be consigned to follow leaders drawn largely from Britain's elite—from Oxford and Cambridge via prestigious public schools. Woolf insisted that the biographies "…should be written not so much by experts on any particular period or subject, as by people who understand young people and can write simply, and vividly, without writing down to their supposed readers" (HPA MS 2750/579). As he cautioned the author of the Darwin biography, Reginald Snell (pseud. L. B. Pekin), the language had to be kept simple, and Woolf asked Pekin to revise particular phrases to accommodate a young readership. Comparing his own experience lecturing to working women and men with the juvenile biographers' task, Woolf exposes the patronizing liberalism of a public school education: "I have practically no experience of teaching children, but I have had a good deal of experience in lecturing and writing for Co-operative women and Labour people, and I found…that with the women of the Co-operative Guild there was practically nothing that you could not say to them and make them understand, provided that you kept the language absolutely simple" (LW to Snell, December 1936, HPA MS 2750/334). Thus the goal of the *World-Makers and World-Shakers* series was to present historical models chosen by a Cambridge-educated editor with a liberal Labour anti-Fascist agenda. The five biographers who agreed to Woolf's terms were outspokenly liberal and largely pacifist.[4] Likewise, their subjects—Socrates, Joan of Arc, Mazzini, Garibaldi and even Cavour—were all resistors of oppressive rulers and defenders of individual freedom against tyrannous regimes. Only Darwin avoided politics and explicit preaching of his own philosophy though his critics cast him as a disruptor of religion and conventional science.

The *World-Makers and World Shakers* series has received scant attention from both early reviewers (only the *TLS* provided a review beyond brief synopses and notices) and contemporary critics and historians. Only one scholar, Claire Battershill, examines the series in the context of genre studies and the new biography in particular. She is principally concerned with how the biographies departed in method and style from their Victorian predecessors. Though she acknowledges the potentially political agenda of the series—"a kind of predominantly leftist revolutionary tone congruent with many of the philosophical pamphlets that the Press was producing at around the

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same time" (151), she doesn't elaborate on the education debates or on the means by which the biographies convey a revolutionary tone to challenge rising crises of nationalism and Fascism.

In what follows, I suggest that Leonard Woolf's principal motive in launching the series was to raise the Hogarth Press's stakes in the education debates that had rocked Britain since the establishment of the Board of Education in 1900 and the commencement of a history curriculum in secondary schools in 1906. Instruction in history, however, depended on the Local Education Authorities; no national curriculum existed until after World War II. In the interwar years the method of teaching history remained generally static and prescriptive: "…oral lesson followed by dictated notes," and "stories and biographies" in elementary school followed by "periodic studies" in middle school with a "review of the whole course of English history in the higher class"(Batho 277). But the Great War had proven the need for broader understanding of a world beyond Britain.

Some of the most significant efforts at educational reform during and just after World War I were instituted by Virginia Woolf's cousin, Herbert Fisher, who was first Minister for Education under Lloyd George's coalition government and later Minister for the Board of Trade. Though Virginia Woolf sketches an ambivalent portrait of Fisher in two lengthy diary entries of 1919 and 1921, Fisher worked to improve the teaching of history in secondary schools and to increase and standardize teachers' salaries.[5] His goal—using history to help students appreciate the development of human civilization—was, if loftier and more general than Leonard Woolf's purpose, an indication of Fisher's commitment to a liberal arts curriculum. Under the Education Act of 1918 (often called Fisher's reform act), Fisher advocated increased government contribution to teachers' salaries and a state-funded pension scheme. Importantly, he also raised the school-leaving age to fourteen (from twelve years old) and encouraged the establishment of more schools for fourteen to sixteen-year-olds. At the start of his term as Minister of Education, he simplified the examination system and helped initiate both School Certificates and Higher School Certificates. Though many of Fisher's progressive reforms failed due to post-war governmental cuts, successive Ministers of Education's efforts also stalled until after World War II when the leaving-age was finally raised to fifteen.[6]

In 1937 concurrent with the publication of the *World-Makers and World-Shakers* series, the Board of Education issued a report suggesting that history be taught through biography "so that the pupil shall leave school with at least some knowledge of those outstanding characters in our national story whose names are commonplaces of our daily life and thought" (Cannadine *et. al.* 73). Leonard Woolf's series aimed to move beyond this exclusively "national story" to include at least figures from classical Greece and western Europe.

Of the four biographies and the extant correspondence between the biographers, Leonard Woolf and his assistant, Margaret West, the lengthiest (and most interesting) negotiations were with people Woolf did not know personally—prolific Scottish novelist Dorothy Mitchison and her co-author Richard Crossman—and a little-known progressive school German teacher, Reginald Snell. Under his pseudonym, L. B. Pekin, Snell published five other works on pedagogy with Hogarth, one in the *Day*

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to Day Pamphlet series, and two others condemning public school exclusivity and teaching methods. Of his 1939 book on co-education published by Hogarth, Pekin claims that had Hitler been in a co-educational school, "the times would be a good deal pleasanter" (HPA MS 2750/333). Amongst the other biographers Pekin stands out as most sensitive to the juvenile audience (as teacher in the progressive St. Christopher's, Letchworth, he could better gauge the appropriate tone) yet most anxious about his own abilities. When he finally agreed to write the biography, he promised Leonard Woolf: "I will do my best with Darwin, and try not to be too grown-up about it" (HPA MS 2750/33).

Figure 1: L. B. Pekin, Darwin (London: Hogarth Press, 1937). Dust jacket by John Banting. Copyright Banting estate.

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The Darwin biography strikes an admirable balance between summarizing Darwin's life and character and describing his principal theories about evolution and the struggle for existence. Of the goal of the series in general, Battershill notes, "The subjects' carefully calibrated levels of fame combine with the series' cautiously pedagogical aim, that the books should not "seem too much like lessons" [HPA 579, n.d], but should still communicate the significance of these figures and should teach young people about history" (Battershill 152). Pekin avoids sermonizing or delving too deeply into Darwin's theories. He supports his chronological account of Darwin's life with carefully placed quotations from Darwin's letters and autobiography to make Darwin more accessible to a young audience. Above all, he emphasizes Darwin's modesty and his persistence. In the final pages Pekin proffers Darwin as an example of humane and ethical behavior and, perhaps covertly, suggests his own pro-Socialist stance in a comparison of Darwin to Karl Marx:

> [H]is theories were widely read and discussed all over the world during his lifetime, he was very highly prized in Russia, while in Germany Karl Marx—as important a world-shaker as Darwin himself, the man whose criticisms of the 'capitalist' system of production for profit have converted so many people to socialist or community-serving ways of thought—wished to dedicate his great book *Das Kapital* to him. (77)

A pacifist and fierce hater of Fascism, Pekin transforms a controversial Victorian figure into a contemporary capable of students' emulation. Darwin's lack of egotism—his "unconscious influence" and his being the vehicle through which a revolution in human thought occurred—contrast sharply with the forceful and coercive Fascist dictators at work in 1930s Europe.

Like Pekin's, the other three biographies in the series strove to emphasize the humanity of their subjects over heroic larger-than-life qualities. In making famous figures accessible to common readers, however, the biographers evinced a similar political agenda to Pekin's. Socrates, Joan of Arc, and the Italian Risorgimento trio (Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour) are all more intentionally revolutionary than Darwin in their opinions and actions. In suggesting that Richard Crossman, then an Oxford tutor of Classics but also a Labour Party liberal, co-author the Socrates biography with her, Dorothy Mitchison confessed to Leonard Woolf that "Dick Crossman has got a lot of guts, but may easily take the politically wrong turn, and I think I ought to keep an eye on him" (HPA MS 2750/283). Crossman glibly responded to Miss West's request for a brief blurb to advertise the biography: "Socrates—the story of the man who knew that he knew nothing," later elaborating: "Socrates was condemned to death by an Athenian jury in 399 B.C., for corrupting the youth and believing in strange gods" (HPA MS 2750/283). A crossed-out final sentence at the end states, "They paint a picture of the 'first conscientious rejection' upon the background of Athenian glory and collapse." The biography, apart from a rather extensive historical context on which Leonard Woolf insisted, presents Socrates as conscientiously rejecting social and political pressures to conform. Crossman and Mitchison draw frequent comparisons between the Greece of Socrates' time and 1930s England and Europe. They compare Athenian slaves "simply

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thought of as inferior mining-machines" to contemporary Africans who slave away in South African gold mines (14). In an implicit criticism of the British education system, they show how Socrates radically reversed the distinction between pupil and teacher since he "never pretended to *know* anything. He said he was…not a teacher, but a pupil anxious to learn from anyone the answers to the questions he asked" (36).

If modesty was the hallmark of the Darwin biography, courage and passive resistance characterize *Socrates*. The authors draw lessons from Socrates's refusal to support the execution of Athenian generals who had failed to act in time in a sea battle with Sparta:

> That shows that Socrates could stand up to an angry crowd, and if ever you are in a crowd like that—and they happen still—you will see how extremely brave one has to be to do it. And you will see, too that the only kind of person who can have that courage is someone like Socrates, who only cares for and believes in the real truth. If you believe in the same things as the crowd the ghosts and terrors and follies and unreasonable hates, then you, too will be swept away by them and will not be able to stand against injustice as Socrates did (60).

The biography ends with a rousing call to its young readers to think for themselves and to resist tyranny: "Although he has been dead for more than two thousand years… he can, if our minds are open to him, stir us up to follow him, twisting ourselves free from power and money and pride on to the dangerous and exciting hunt for our own time's truth" (80). When she submitted the manuscript to Hogarth, Mitchison wrote to Leonard Woolf: "It is a bit tendentious in parts but we pride ourselves on having kept out the word 'fascism'!" (HPA MS 2750/283).

Vita Sackville-West's *Joan of Arc*, the only biography in the series about a woman, was essentially a simplified version of a full-length adult biography Vita had published the previous year with Cobden-Sanderson, marking a departure from her loyalty to the Hogarth Press. After Miss Waddell had declined to write *Joan of Arc*, Leonard Woolf made a late offer in June 1936 to Vita, ingeniously telling her, "I did not say anything to you about it because I thought you would have had enough of the good woman, but it has struck me that it is just conceivable that you might be willing to do a short book like this which would not in any way compete with your great book" (HPA MS 2750/419). Like Socrates, and to a lesser extent Darwin, Joan of Arc becomes a beacon of independent vision and thinking for a young audience. That her miraculous powers of persuasion, coupled with her ability to fight like her male counterparts, finally ends with her execution, sends a similar message about the necessity for extreme courage in a hostile or repressive society. Joan's insistence on her own vision and independence in the face of a church that considers her a heretic, challenge fourteen-year-old readers to emulate her bravery and to stand up for their own ideals in an increasingly threatened world. Of the four biographies, Joan's life appears most appropriate for the juvenile audience since she leads the charge for the relief of Orleans when she is only a few years older than the intended readership. Sackville-West tries to convey the contradictions in Joan's character, stressing her humility which "was no less remarkable than her genius" (40). The book, written more simply than the three other biographies, aimed to appeal directly to young readers bored by dry history texts. Sackville-West promises to

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avoid the typical "stiff and unreal" description of famous historical figures and to show Joan as "not wax, but a real living person with her faults as well as her virtues; so real, that you feel sure a drop of blood would come from her finger if you pricked it, and she would cry…" (8). In response to Vita's annoyance about the series being advertised for both young people and older readers, Leonard Woolf quoted a notice in the *Nottingham Journal* stating that the series "should prove useful also to older readers who require an outline sketch of the subjects" (HPA MS 2750/419). Several other reviews in regional British newspapers also suggested that an older audience with little time for extensive research might find the books informative. In a one-paragraph review of 24 June 1937, *The Scotchman* stated that "Older readers also who would welcome a short-cut to knowledge about outstanding historical figures should find this series useful" (15).

Whereas the other four biographers pursue a progressive educational model by incorporating, though usually subtly, political allusions to the present day, Sackville-West attacks the old system of teaching and reading history. In a peroration that echoes Woolf's criticism of the Edwardian materialists, she debunks former pedagogical methods in favor of her livelier approach:

> Of course there are the usual dull and dry facts of history which have to be mastered before we can come to an understanding of her true achievement. They can be explained in a few pages, after which we can go on to the only really interesting way of studying history, which is by gaining a vivid knowledge of the men and women who made it. For history is not only dates and facts, but Life itself, and it goes on creating itself every day, not as an abstract thing, but as the natural consequence of the characters and feelings and ambitions of the people we read about every day in the papers. (8–9)

The dull "material" facts of history were more difficult to ignore in the case of Marjorie Strachey's biography of the three Italian Risorgimento leaders. Initially in April 1936 Leonard Woolf wrote to Strachey suggesting only Garibaldi and Mazzini or (inserted in pen in the margin of the letter) Warren Hastings (HPA MS 2750/474). But the following December, Strachey pressed her case for including Cavour who appeared to her "more essential to the business than Mazzini" and who "is unjustly forgotten—or rather, neglected. He is not a romantic figure, but he is the sort of man who, in these days, should be called to mind, & the young should be reminded that the Sword & the Soul without the Brain may lead to undesirable & disastrous results" (HPA MS 2750/474). Anxious to have the completed manuscript on time, Leonard grudgingly agreed: "…I am sure that you are quite right as to its importance, but I do not share your admiration for him." After reading the manuscript, however, he conceded, "I think too you were probably right about Cavour and I was previously wrong" (HPA MS 2750/474). When she delivered the manuscript, Marjorie confessed to Leonard that though even a fourteen-year-old audience might struggle with the material, she "could not leave out the political & diplomatic aspects for the sake of the kiddies" (HPA MS 2750/474). The eighty-page biography works to compress three distinctly different lives and personalities within a half century of political events. In the process, however, the three figures jostle each other for prominence, with Mazzini emerging as the principal

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subject. Though Cavour receives the least attention, Strachey justifies his inclusion: "But for this [unification] to be accomplished more was necessary than high ideals and heroic deeds; to attain success the patriotic party needed, besides Mazzini the prophet, and Garibaldi the general, a statesman, who should be as great and devoted in his way as they in theirs" (53).

The subject of the Italian Risorgimento and its "makers and shakers" offered, of the four biographies, the closest parallel to events of 1930s Europe. Whereas Austria, France and Spain had vied for control of Italy's provinces, by the late 1930s Hitler and Mussolini were menacing their own countries and about to reach beyond to the rest of Europe and Russia. Though Strachey avoids explicit comparisons with the present, her final paragraph suggests the failure of ideals for the three men fought: "And their work? How far has their achievement lasted? To-day Italy is indeed united and independent—so far the aspirations of the three great liberators have been fulfilled. But the constitution for which Cavour toiled, the democracy for which Mazzini suffered, the freedom for which Garibaldi bled, have vanished from the kingdom of Italy (80).

Marjorie Strachey, younger sister of Lytton and friend of the Woolfs, was both an educator and an author, having published a novel, *The Counterfeits*, in 1927, a biography of Chopin, and two accounts of early Christian theologians. In her biography of the Strachey family, Barbara Caine tends to dismiss Marjorie's achievements, commenting that "…her numerous novels, biographies, and essays never succeeded in gaining any form of critical acclaim" (357). Ironically, Virginia Woolf, though she frequently alludes to Marjorie as "Gumbo" and satirizes her dramatic manner of dressing and gesturing, gravely considered Marjorie's opinion when Woolf was struggling with Roger Fry's biography. In her diary entry of 7 July 1938, Woolf remarks that "Gumbo… last night threw cold water on the whole idea of biography of those who have no lives. Roger had, she says, no life that can be written. I daresay this is true" (*D5* 155).

The series *World-Makers and World-Shakers* avoided this dilemma with the choice of already famous historical figures. Within the eighty-page limit, the biographers were forced to indicate the essence of their characters by a brief quotation or dramatic action and to provide just enough historical "fact" to justify Leonard's hope that the books would be adopted in history classes. In the end, though few schools purchased the biographies for the intended pedagogical purpose, Leonard looked back on the experiment as worthwhile. In the final volume of his autobiography, he commented that *World-Makers and World-Shakers*

> …was a series of biographies for young people which would attempt to explain history to them through the lives of great men and women, and at the same time present history from a modern and enlightened point of view. I had hoped to get the books used in schools. The hope was not fulfilled, and, though we sold out the edition of the four books which we published, we never got the sale we wanted and did not go on with the venture. This was partly due to the fact that we were so soon overwhelmed by the war and the difficulty of getting paper. But I still think that the idea was a good one, and our first four books were extremely interesting. (*The Journey Not the Arrival Matters* 98–99)

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If the series failed to reach a broader public in either Britain or the U.S. (where the biographies were published the following year by Stackpole and Sons), the books deserve recognition for their attempts to disrupt the rote teaching of history that Sackville-West criticized in *Joan of Arc*, as well as for their covert political agenda—to offer alternative models to the two dictators then shaking the world.

Notes

1. In their discussion of Fascism in British education in the 1930s, Pamela and Roy Fisher emphasize the focus by Cecil Courtney Lewis, editor of *The Blackshirt Newspaper* and advocate of boarding schools for all, on physical fitness and sports over curriculum to form a "masculinist ethic" (77).
2. Buck notes that Banting designed jackets for eleven Hogarth Press publications at Leonard Woolf's behest. In his history of The Hogarth Press, J. H. Willis states that Banting's designs for the series "successfully combine surrealistic elements with forceful geometric elements" (384).
3. Of these 22 possibilities, only one—Tolstoy—is a novelist, one—Leonardo da Vinci—an artist, one—Christopher Columbus—an explorer, and one—Socrates—a philosopher. The others are religious figures who either influenced politics or founded sects—St. Francis, Savonarola, Joan of Arc, Gandhi; scientists—Darwin, Edison, Faraday, Nansen, Marconi; political scions or monarchs—Catherine the Great, Marie Antoinette, the "Last Russian Czar," Lenin, Abraham Lincoln.
4. The Hogarth Press had already published a searing indictment of British education by Mark Starr, *Lies and Hate in Education* (1929), in which Starr condemned the "Kipling attitude" of history textbooks for inculcating an imperialist and class-ridden bias amongst young readers (33).
5. Woolf details two lunches with Fisher, one in 1919 and the other in 1921. In both entries she evinces her ambivalence between the public professional "Minister of Education" and the private human being. She struggles between satirical portraiture and grudging tolerance for his public life and refers to Fisher as "a strange mixture of ascetic & worldling. The lean, secluded man now finds himself dazzled by office, & with all his learning & culture swept away by men of vitality & affairs" (*D1* 263). Her 18 April 1921 entry two years later similarly contrasts the public figure with the private relative.
6. In a recent essay in which he details three decades of interactions between Virginia Woolf and H. A. L. Fisher, David Bradshaw suggests that Fisher may have served as a model for some of Woolf's ineffectually intellectual male characters in several novels. More pertinent here, however, is his comment about Leonard Woolf's refusal to applaud Fisher as an educational reformer ("'The Very Centre of the Very Centre': H. A. L. Fisher, Oxford and 'That Great Patriarchal Machine'" [16]).

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