

## The Disappearance of Violet Hunt

By Naomi Booth

Violet Hunt is the wittiest, most daring, most scurrilous, most generous writer that you've never heard of.

Violet was born in Durham in 1862 (or in 1866 if you believed her), and spent her early life surrounded by the most prominent artists and writers of the late Victorian era. John Ruskin was her sister's godfather and the Pre-Raphaelite circle were regular visitors to her parents. Violet became a legendary literary hostess in her Kensington home, South Lodge—in which she hosted Vorticists and Suffragettes, and supported *The English Review*, and, for two decades, housed a massive statue of Ezra Pound's head, which he apparently had nowhere else to put.

One difficulty in trying to write about Violet Hunt is that so many have already done so. Ruskin was disapproving of the young Violet's precocity, describing her as a child 'of the hothouse of the modern world'. Oscar Wilde, perhaps ironically, called her 'the sweetest Violet in England' and allegedly proposed to her. Violet first met Henry James when she was fourteen years old, and later dedicated her first novel to him—a correspondent, clearly relishing the salacious news, wrote to him: 'Violet Hunt has gone and written a novel weltering with sex, and dedicated it to you!' D.H. Lawrence, whose early poetry she championed, describes his terror in meeting Violet at a party, at which she was 'tremendous in a lace gown, and a hat writhing with blue feathers...I dare not interrupt her. I fled.' Later, he referred to her as a conversational 'assassin', wittily murdering her friends over drinks. (Some friends got their own back, nicknaming her 'Violent Hunt'.)

Violet also appears in altered form in many of the contemporary novels written by her lovers and literary peers—she was the inspiration for several characters in Somerset Maugham's work, and a version of her becomes the shrewd and scheming Florence Dowell of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and then the 'sex-vicious' Sylvia Tietjens of *Parade's End*. Violet appears less as an inspiration in the vein of the classic feminine muse for Ford, and more as a stimulating and caustic irritant for his work. Brigit Patmore offers, if not a corrective, an addendum to some of these cutting versions of her friend: 'In what has been written about Violet Hunt, much has been made of her malice, wit and cleverness, but very little of her good looks and strange pathos ... What struck me at once was the startling beauty of her eyes, for it was almost painful.'

Acerbic as Violet could clearly be, she loved to a fault. She loved many men, often disastrously. And she also loved women, fiercely and generously—especially other female writers. Her enduring friendships with Rebecca West, May Sinclair, and Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, amongst others, are testament to this. Radclyffe Hall

declared her love to Violet, and for some time Violet seems to have considered her as a potential lover. They developed a long friendship and Violet supported her through the maelstrom of outrage when *The Well of Loneliness* was first published. Violet treasured her friend Rebecca West in part for her solidarity: 'She is in the boat with all women.' Violet's commitment to female friendship extended to organising political solidarity for and among female writers. She helped to found the Women Writers' Suffrage League and hosted many of its activities at her home. She was a founding member of English PEN, which Catherine Amy Dawson Scott established in 1921, with the hope that: 'out of social intercourse comes understanding ... It is the artist who tries to gradually accustom people to the possibilities of a better state of things.' Violet worked to help Scott establish PEN as a global network, petitioning for freedom of expression and gender equality for writers.

During the first decades of the twentieth century—decades when Violet was busy loving and hosting and championing the life and work of others—Violet was also continuously writing. Violet had no legally-recognised husband (more on this later), nor a fortune on which to depend. She was a working, middle-class woman who wrote for her living. And she turned her hand to almost every kind of writing to do so: novels, short stories, journalism, translation, memoir, biography. Her first novel, *The Maiden's Progress* (1894), subtitled *A novel in dialogue*, shows her beginning to develop her skill in conversational interaction, which provides the dynamic, witty energy of much of her later work. Her first major novel, *Sooner or Later* (1904) (the one dedicated to Henry James and relished by his correspondent as 'weltering with sex'), was read in manuscript form by Maugham, who admired its daring:

I liked your novel because it explored undiscovered country; I do not think, in English at least, that the relationship between a married man and his mistress, a *jeune fille*, has ever been analysed before. I think you have done it with very great skill. ... of course the work has an autobiographical ring about it and you must expect to hear a good deal of disagreeable things—however what does it matter?

Violet's most successful novel, *White Rose of Weary Leaf* (1908) was publicly praised by Maugham, H.G Wells, John Galsworthy and May Sinclair. Rebecca West described Hunt's work achieving 'a cold, white, vision of reality' in its painful dissection of sexual relationships. Hunt's writing was frank, energetic, and perhaps unprecedented in the candour with which a female writer shares some of her most intimate experiences—*White Rose* was sufficiently salacious to be banned by the Boots' Circulation Library as a result. Violet often wrote romances, but not in the Victorian mould. And she never stayed still: 'Every book is an experiment', she declared, as she moved restlessly between different literary forms. She later published an autobiography, *The Flurried Years* (1926), and her final work, focussing on the life of Pre-Raphaelite muse, Elizabeth Siddal, moved her to new ground—biography. In Violet Hunt's work, Rebecca West tells us, we will find a 'valuable

historical document' of the immense cultural, social and political turbulence that women experienced through the fin-de-siècle.

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Why, then, have so few people heard of Violet Hunt? Even in her own lifetime, Violet had begun to be forgotten. In her later years, many of her titles fell out of print—and many remain so today. Two biographies, by Barbara Belford and Joan Hardwick respectively, were published in 1990, claiming they would win Violet 'the attention she has long deserved', but both are now out of print too. By the time of her death in 1942, Violet had become an obscure curiosity, described by Hardwick as a 'Miss Haversham', living alone surrounded by Pre-Raphaelite art and memorabilia.

There are a number of ways to think about the disappearance of Violet Hunt from public consciousness—the most obvious being that interest in her work and life has been subsumed by interest in the 'great men' who surrounded her. Tellingly, an archive of her papers, which she carefully preserved, was bought by Cornell University Library and is now housed within the Ford Madox Ford archive. This arrangement may not have rankled Violet in the way we might expect. Violet, firebrand though she was, was brought up to believe in and serve the idea of (male) artistic genius. Her family's life had, in fact, been organised around it:

Violet was born in Durham to remarkable parents: her mother was a novelist, Margaret Hunt, who came from a Church family. Margaret's father was ordained and acted as librarian to the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral. Margaret rejected many suitors from this Church circle to marry a painter, Alfred Hunt. Alfred was born in Liverpool and won a scholarship to Oxford, and had at one time been set on the Church himself, but abandoned this calling to pursue his art. Despite Violet's mother, Margaret, being an extraordinarily productive novelist—and the 'wittiest woman in London', according to some reports—the Hunts' family life was organised around Alfred's work as a painter. The family left Durham for London to try to secure Alfred's artistic reputation (though Margaret pseudonymously published a novel that was a biting portrait of the Durham Cathedral community, so perhaps they were wise to move on several counts). Once in London, their accommodation was organised around Alfred's work needs, and the family tolerated long periods of financial uncertainty as well as Alfred's absence from the home when he took frequent painting trips to Northumberland and other areas in the North.

Violet's mother's sense of the primacy of the needs of 'great men' is perhaps most disquietingly shown in her attempts to use her daughters to comfort John Ruskin. In 1873, Ruskin was in distress over his infatuation with Rose La Touche (whom he had met when she was ten years old and who was, by this time, in her twenties and close to death). Margaret Hunt's response was to send Violet's younger sister, Venice, who was then only eight years old, to stay with Ruskin in the Lake District to comfort him. Ruskin was initially enthusiastic, but soon wrote to say that Venice

appeared to be frightened of him—he disliked her reserve. Later, after Ruskin had visited Rose for the last time, Margaret encouraged the thirteen-year-old Violet to position herself as a future wife for Ruskin; she need only wait for three years, when Violet would then be sixteen and Ruskin would be fifty-nine years old. Ruskin responds to the proposal in a letter to Margaret: ‘I really think Violets must be nicer than roses after all—another three years to wait—though! What a weary life I have of it... I do so long for any place where I could rest and have—Violet, or the like—to manage everything for me—and nurse me’. *Or the like*.

While Ruskin later relinquished this supposed engagement, Violet was primed to support the genius of the ‘great men’ around her. This was most disastrously so in the case of her long relationship with Ford Madox Ford. When Violet met Ford (who was then Ford Madox Hueffer), she had recently published *White Rose* and was at the peak of her literary acclaim. Ford was married with two children, but his marriage to Elsie was, to put it euphemistically, troubled: Ford had had a long affair with his wife’s sister; he hated living in the countryside, where Elsie, whose health had been severely affected by the birth of her second child, needed to be; their finances were consistently at breaking point.

Ford and Violet’s relationship was not a whirlwind, but gradually deepened: for the first years of their acquaintance, Violet was steeped in Suffragette work. She was also taking care of her mother, who was now widowed and frail, and she was struggling to make a living from her writing. Violet and Ford grew more engrossed by and attached to one another. Violet was horrified by the way Ford lived—he rented rooms above a poulterer’s and fishmonger’s shop, and visitors remarked on the smell of his lodgings and office—so she took the lead in trying to improve his financial situation, attempting to rescue him from what she called his ‘miserable household’.

Ford asked his wife for a divorce, but Elsie was having none of it. This was the beginning of a complex legal wrangle that would be disastrous for all parties. Despite her unconventional relationships (and her occasional references to marriage as ‘tyranny’), Violet seems to have longed for marriage with Ford. Ford attempted to gain a divorce in Germany by naturalising as a citizen there. It’s unclear when or if the German divorce and a (possibly bigamous) marriage service with Violet were enacted, but Ford took the reckless decision to give an interview to the *Daily Mirror* in which he proclaimed that Violet was now his wife. Elsie threatened to sue the paper. It seems that Violet believed, perhaps naively, that she was legally married to Ford. She insisted on using her ‘married name’, Violet Hueffer, on the title page of her new novel, *The Governess*, and was referred to as Mrs Hueffer in an article about her that appeared in *The Throne*. As a result, Elsie sued *The Throne* for libel (i.e. the implication she wasn’t Ford’s wife); at the same time Violet’s sisters were suing Violet over issues relating to their mother’s literary estate. Violet’s mother was in the late stages of dementia, being cared for by Violet, and Ford was being treated for ‘neurasthenia’—what we might now think of as a nervous breakdown.

Violet was also suffering from her own medical problems at this time—which she tried to conceal from Ford. After an operation, she spent ten days in a nursing home, which she later described as ‘the happiest in my life’. Those few days recovering from surgery seem to have been the only time when Violet was briefly removed from her own caring duties and was taken care of by others.

Violet’s literary work understandably suffered at this time—seeming rushed and sometimes formulaic. One of her biographers, Joan Hardwick, asks: ‘Was she too busy bolstering up Ford to give her full energy to her own work? Was she so concerned to sell her work because she needed the income that she could not afford to take risks and write innovatively?’ It’s true that the quality of Violet’s work is variable, as one might expect from a writer whose energies are so variously spent. ‘She wrote as she lived,’ Jane E. Miller tells us, ‘carelessly, impulsively, with little forethought or editing, but with a great deal of verve.’

Elsie Hueffer won her legal case: as a result, *The Throne* folded. The disastrous details of Ford and Elsie’s marriage, and of Ford and Violet’s affair, were now headline news. Violet was asked to resign from her many social organisations and clubs; she was cut out of her god-father’s will; she was desperately worried about Ford’s health and tried to shield him from the fall-out. Some friends stood by them, but many were squeamish and suggested they stay abroad. Violet was predictably pugnacious in her response to all this. She returned to England and hosted her usual summer party, throwing herself into the teeth of the scandal.

After a decade together, Violet and Ford’s relationship began to unravel. Ford’s German naturalisation caused them both difficulty during the First World War. Ford increasingly kept his distance from Violet, appearing when he needed her support—financial and otherwise. He began a relationship with the younger artist and writer, Stella Bowen. Violet seems to have become fixated on this new relationship, paying the wife of a carpenter who was working for Ford to pass information on to her—by which means she discovered that Stella and Ford had a child together.

Violet described herself having become ‘a queer side-bone’ of Ford. Years later, Violet would still sometimes insist on using her ‘married’ name. Virginia Woolf, when considering publishing Violet’s final book, writes to Vanessa Bell that, ‘we had Violet Hunt-Hueffer (it appears she’s a married woman in certain streets in Berlin, where she signed a document; but not otherwise) and had a lewd and lascivious talk about her statements as to Ruskin’s private parts and so on’. It is fitting that Violet’s final work, *The Wife of Rosetti*, is a biography of Lizzie Siddal—a talented young woman whose own life and artistic interests were overshadowed by her doomed relationship with Dante Gabriel Rosetti. Violet, Hardwick tells us, ‘knew with some bitterness what it meant to dedicate one’s life to the bolstering up of genius.’

There was another significant and highly stigmatising challenge that Violet faced in her later years. Violet had contracted syphilis as a young woman. She later recalled

the shock of discovering she had the disease (which was incurable at the time), and the way that the consulting doctor had regarded her 'with disgust and loathing', suggesting that she remove herself from society but telling her little else about the illness. Violet went to Germany for a while, but her later symptoms were misdiagnosed, and she was able to convince herself that the initial diagnosis must have been in error. Violet suffered severe nose bleeds as she entered the tertiary stages of syphilis and her nose began to disintegrate. It seems likely that the condition also accelerated her cognitive decline. Douglas Goldring describes an incident in which Violet's later confusion unintentionally intensified the force of her damning wit: 'I met Violet at a crowded cocktail party... including both Arlen and myself in the conversation, she went on: "You know I used to see quite a lot of Michael Arlen, at one time, but he never comes to visit me now. He's really quite a nice young man—and extremely clever. I wonder why it is that his books are so *awful*."'"

Unlike her own mother who suffered from dementia, unlike Ford in his periods of breakdown, Violet had no loved-one to take care of her in her final difficult years. She died in 1942, in bombed-out London, neglected, isolated and confused.

Violet stands as a forceful example of the contradictory ways in which some women's lives were changing at the start of the twentieth century. She was a 'new woman' by the standards of the 1890s, but perhaps not by the standards of the new century. She sought suffrage and independence for women, but she made great personal sacrifices to try to support Ford in the role of faithful wife. She was at the centre of innovative artistic and literary movements, but didn't obtain the freedom of the male Bohemian artist—she always needed to take care of her finances and the people she loved. She was a glittering celebrity, at the heart of a Kensington scene, who quickly faded into obscurity.

She left us, in her work, a cast of brilliant, shrewd, mercurial, malicious, desperate women—many of whom are now impossible to read about outside of university libraries and archives. I'll leave you with one of them: the 'vagrant-hearted daughter' at the centre of her short story, 'The Telegram', one Miss Alice Dramer, who 'liked living not exactly in hot water, but in water at least warm'. Miss Dramer, who 'loved the world and going up and down in it immensely ... [s]he was a flirt', finally decides to marry, only to discover that the man to whom she has just got engaged is already dead. A characteristically witty story, 'The Telegram' is about the phantom of the possibility of fulfilment—a 'strayed telegram', a missive that doesn't arrive in time for the frustrated women of Violet Hunt's work.

