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Duncan Grant

Frances Spalding

## About the Author

Frances Spalding is an art historian, biographer and critic. Her acclaimed book, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, was followed by a biography of Vanessa Bell, which led to an invitation ten years later to write on Duncan Grant. In between she wrote *British Art since 1900*, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* and *Dance Till the Stars Come Down: A Life of John Minton*. She is currently editor of *Charleston Magazine*.

DUNCAN  
GRANT

A Biography

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FRANCES SPALDING



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## INTRODUCTION

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'The first merit of a painting is to be a feast for the eye.' So Delacroix wrote in his *Journals* which played a vital role in the formation of Duncan Grant's aesthetic. He read Delacroix on more than one occasion, and himself praised 'the simple representation of beautiful familiar things' in Simon Bussy's pastels, when as a young man he tried his hand at art criticism. In recent years art historians and film critics discussing 'ocular politics' have made us aware that representation is rarely simple and the artist's gaze far from innocent. Duncan Grant's own vision was structured by many things, his eclecticism and his sexuality among them. Often allusions to other works of art appear in his paintings, as in his *Baptism*, which draws upon Piero della Francesca's famous painting in the National Gallery, London. But these allusions, brewed sometimes for many years in his memory and subconscious, reappear subject to a visual logic and wit that transmutes them into a language recognisably his own.

A feast for the eye can take many forms and Duncan Grant's work encompasses a variety of strategies, techniques and methods of representation. At a vital moment in the history of British art, he was at the cutting edge, a bold innovator and the only Bloomsbury painter to exhibit with the Vorticists. He never lost his interest in abstraction, both in design and art, but the main body of

his work is representational, inspired by his knowledge of past art and his fascination with appearances; with, for instance, the rhythms that can be detected in the human figure or the dissolution of form into colour under certain effects of light. What bound his life and art together, whether he remained in his studio or made visits abroad, was the delight and curiosity that fed his looking: he loved the rhyming of shapes and colours discoverable in still-lives; his paintings make discernible the character of a landscape, a town or a building; and his drawings, especially, reveal his knack for catching human idiosyncrasies betrayed by pose, dress or movement. A biography allows us to travel with him through time and to gain some idea of how his many experiences stimulated and enriched his art.

Writing biography is an arduous and at times frustrating, task, but at the same time a fascinating, life-changing experience. One particular delight, when working on a subject within living memory, is the opportunity to meet those who knew the person one is writing about. Many of Duncan's friends and relatives talked of the pleasure he gave. 'One was always happy with him,' Lady Freyberg recalled, of meetings at which they did little more than sit and talk. Richard Shone, who became a young friend in Duncan's later years, would arrive at Charleston with the expectation 'that the fun would begin' the moment he lifted the latch on the studio door. In the course of conversations like these, small and often unexpected details leave behind glimpsed facets of a person who, though departed, increasingly fills the mind.

Duncan Grant was, however, still at Charleston when I first visited it in 1974. He had been indirectly responsible for stirring my interest in Roger Fry: after seeing an exhibition of Duncan Grant portraits, which - hung in chronological order - made vivid the sudden excitement about modern art that erupted in the pre-1914 period, I

wanted to learn more about the man who had mounted the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions which had created such a catalytic effect. I began research which eventually led to my book, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, and in connection with this went to see Professor Quentin Bell. After lunch and a lengthy session of questions and answers, he suggested tea at Charleston. On arrival Quentin gave me a tour of the house which ended in the large downstairs studio and there, seated behind a screen beside the stove, in his ninetieth year, was Duncan.

This was my only real meeting with Duncan Grant, though I was delighted to see him again in September 1976 when he came, in a wheelchair and wearing a straw hat, to the opening of the exhibition 'Portraits by Roger Fry' which I had organised at the Courtauld Institute Galleries, then in Woburn Place. But even with such slight acquaintance, I have never forgotten his voice. If its gentleness was at that time in part due to frailty, it was nevertheless combined with a lilting note of enquiry and habits of pronunciation that communicated a delicacy of thought and feeling. He died in 1978 and two years later I began work on a biography of Vanessa Bell. It was while reading various documents connected with her life that Duncan began to haunt my mind. A decade later his granddaughter, Henrietta Garnett, asked me to write his life. After some hesitation, for there were other potential candidates who had known him well, I accepted, realising, even then, that because Duncan's life embraced such a panoply of places, people and incident no single account will ever exhaust the richness of his story, which in this instance it is my privilege to tell.

One of Duncan's core beliefs was the need for a rational approach to human nature. Like other members of Bloomsbury, he thought that behaviour, if analysed and weighed up with feeling and intelligence, could respond to

logic; and therefore that decisions and actions could be made on a human and not a religious basis.

In October 1916 he wrote to his friend David Garnett that he thought the finest poetry was 'an expression of apparent aloofness from the human feelings involved, by a person who has suffered all feeling . . . a state of mind I am most happy in myself when I have the luck to get there, which isn't nearly as often or as frequent as I would wish'. But this capacity to detach himself from his feelings without denying them increased with time. A gain in serenity went hand in hand with his absolute love of painting through which he expressed his exaltation of life. He saw the magic in people and took pleasure in a meal or a party and especially in conversation. Though a deeply compassionate man, he had no wish to get bogged down in the minutiae of melancholy events and during his later years he navigated his way through difficulties with dignity, sympathy, charm and humour.

My single remaining wish is that something of his quietly festive character, which animated his life and the lives of others and still today irradiates his art, will also be found by the reader in the course of this book.



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## ONE

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### *Of Scottish Descent*

‘Duncan Grant,’ wrote Walter Sickert in 1929, ‘like another gentleman in Europe in a somewhat more difficult line of business, was born with a crown on his head.’ Just as King Alfonso XIII of Spain enjoyed a long reign, despite several attempts on his life, so Duncan Grant became a long-standing monarch within his own field. Few English artists of his generation brought such colouristic complexity and subtle organisation to their handling of landscape, still-life, portraiture, allegory and myth. ‘Duncan conquered,’ Sickert wrote, ‘he saw, he came.’<sup>1</sup>

Whether any hint of future laurels could be observed when he was born in 1885 has not been recorded. As usual, in a large family, there was a lot going on. The chief event that year was the golden wedding anniversary of his grandparents, Sir John Peter and Lady Grant. The proceedings began at two o’clock in the afternoon, when a large number of people on the Rothiemurchus estate assembled at the farm and, led by a piper, marched on to the lawn in front of the Doune.

This noble house, some three miles from Aviemore, is the ancestral home of the Grants of Rothiemurchus, a branch of the Clan Grant, which still owns extensive land in Inverness-shire. Sir John, like other lairds before and after

him, found the Doune a mixed blessing, a financial burden not always mitigated by the income from the estate, which was largely dependent on the uncertain fortunes of the timber industry. Nevertheless, the Grants of Rothiemurchus had traditionally occupied 'rather a high position among the lesser barons of their wild country'.<sup>2</sup>

The original Doune, which takes its name from the Celtic word for fort, had been built on a small mound nearby. From this hill, as times grew less rude, the Grants descended, building the present house, which from the sixteenth century onwards was gradually enlarged, its stern dignity giving way in the Victorian period to rather grandiose accretions (since removed). Nothing, however, could spoil its position, for it faces up the Spey valley, with the hills of Invereshie and Glenfeshie in the distance.

Among those gathered in front of the house that day were Duncan's parents, Captain and Mrs Bartle Grant, and his uncle and aunt, General and Mrs Richard Strachey. Sir John, who had suffered a stroke two years before, was conveyed to the scene in a pony carriage and presented with a silver bowl from his tenants. He was a large man, over six foot tall, with a broad, passive face, not unlike a kabuki mask, a snub nose and mild, dreamy blue eyes. He now spent most of the day stretched out on a sofa wrapped in a plaid rug. And in time this is how his grandson came to remember him. It seemed to the four-year-old Duncan that the eighty-two-year-old laird paid less attention to him than to Walter Scott's slow-moving plots, which wove themselves into the pattern of his days through the medium of the female voice, for his wife, daughters and daughter-in-law were his readers.

His habit of lying on sofas had in fact begun many years before his stroke. Because he had more than once almost died in infancy, he had been greatly indulged by his family, who believed that he lacked energy. He abhorred all sport, disliked riding and rarely went out. But he outstripped his

colleagues with his vigorous concentration and became one of the ablest public servants of his day.

Soon after entering the East India Company's service in 1827, at the age of twenty, he had shown exceptional powers of judgement and decision-making. By 1854 he had become a member of the Governor-General's Supreme Council, and during the 1857 Mutiny he was also acting as Lieutenant-Governor of the Central Provinces. At this time he was suspected of a bias towards the Indians because of his skilful settlement of land disputes. Two years later he became Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, receiving the KCB in 1862. He found further outlet for his formidable administrative powers as Governor of Jamaica between 1866 and 1874, earning himself the honour of KCMG and lasting esteem among Jamaicans.

In 1893 his grandson, Duncan, two weeks short of his eighth birthday and staying with his mother at Sir John's London home in Norwood, had a premonition that his grandfather would die the following day. Sure enough, on the night of 6 January Sir John passed away in his sleep. 'I was told,' Duncan Grant later recalled in a memoir, 'that he had been a great and good man but that God had been merciful and taken him at a great age. So all was more or less satisfactory and rather exciting. The only thing was that it was so easy for me to imagine my grandfather as a corpse - he was always white as wax, silent and laid out at full length.'

Duncan was also anxious about his grandmother's state of mind. At half-past eleven she sent for him. He walked into her large, bright bedroom in the Norwood villa and found her sitting up in bed, wearing a very pretty bonnet trimmed with ribbons, drying her eyes, but talking and laughing with his mother. She flung her arms around the small boy and told him not to be unhappy. 'I soon forgot the horrors of death in the company of this vivacious old lady to whom I was devoted and, warmed back to life, I went

through my tricks which never failed to make her die of laughing . . .'<sup>3</sup> His tricks involved the impersonation of various characters, conveyed through gesture, facial expression and the tone of voice in which he uttered complete gibberish. Even his mother, though on this occasion she tried to restrain him, found herself laughing.

Sir John's sister, Elizabeth Grant (Duncan's great-aunt), wrote a private memoir for the Grant family, part of which was edited for publication in 1898 by her niece, Lady Strachey, as *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*.<sup>4</sup> In it Elizabeth Grant tells of her childhood and adolescence in Rothiemurchus and elsewhere, and of her father's attempts to pursue his legal and political ambitions and to improve the family fortunes. This man, the first John Peter Grant (1774-1848), spent more money than was wise in becoming Member of Parliament for the 'rotten borough' of Great Grimsby, and still more on alterations and additions to the Doune and the estate. Like other Grants, he was very aware that the family could trace its lineage back to John Grant, Fourth of Freuchie, Chief of Grant and, therefore, through his marriage in 1539 to Lady Marjorie Stewart, to the Scottish throne. With such ancestry it is not surprising that the first John Peter Grant's ambitions exceeded his means, and that at the age of fifty he once again had to work for his living. He resumed his career as advocate at the Scottish Bar and then became a judge in Bombay, eventually becoming Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Calcutta.<sup>5</sup> He, too, earned a knighthood and was on his way home to enjoy a well-earned retirement at Rothiemurchus when, catching a chill from a cold bath, he died at sea in 1848, aged seventy-four.

Despite the success that accompanied the careers of father and son, both were financially hard-pressed. In 1887, six years before Duncan's grandfather, the second Sir John Peter Grant, died, a loan had to be raised upon the entailed estate. The Doune had frequently been rented out, Sir John



reluctantly taking up residence elsewhere, in Kelvinside Gardens, Glasgow, as well as in London, at Clifton Lodge, Upper Norwood, where he spent his winters.<sup>6</sup>

When the second Sir John died, his estate amounted to over £7,000, but almost one-third of this was claimed by unpaid debts. His widow received many letters of condolence which, in the memories they revived, returned her to better times. Before long Lady Grant moved to Bedford House, The Mall, Chiswick, where she was able to provide a home for Duncan during the school holidays while his parents were abroad.

She, too, was descended from an eminent Anglo-Indian family, and as Henrietta Isabella Philippa Sophia Chichele Plowden had married the second John Peter Grant in 1835.<sup>7</sup> She was then a tall, dark-eyed beauty, with a love of books, drama, music and painting. Her letters, which are numerous, reveal a lively, intelligent woman, on close terms with artistic and musical figures of the day and able to discuss matters of policy with the governing Lords of India. Her first son, John Peter the third, was born a year after her marriage. Eight more children followed - one, a daughter, being stillborn. By the time her youngest son, Bartle, was born in 1856, Lady Grant, after twenty-six years in India, had returned to live in England. In time, Bartle's son Duncan became one of Lady Grant's thirty-eight grandchildren.

With five boys and three girls, Lady Grant was familiar with the mixed blessings of motherhood. The boys caused her the most trouble, either by performing abysmally at school or by the readiness with which they fell into debt. Their failings were never venal, more the result of weakness and eccentricity. George, the third son, was nicknamed 'Mad Grant' at Eton, a soubriquet shared with his younger brother, Charles, at Rugby. School reports make dispiriting reading. Charles, for example, was described as shiftless, idle, unpunctual and untidy, his

failure to excel being linked to his energetic pursuit of amusement. Even the 'Record of Family Faculties', kept for private amusement by their sister Jane Maria, gives a poor account of the boys. Duncan's Uncle Trevor, for instance, emerges as charmingly hopeless:

Very weak in will; deficient in persistency and self-assertion. Easy going and indifferent, with an over-sensitive shrinking from annoying any one ... has an active and clear intelligence; but energy so far below [average], that it is impossible to point to any achievement. Hardly ever writes a private letter, and even when doing his administrative work [in the Bengal Civil Service] well, gets into disgrace for neglecting official correspondence.<sup>8</sup>

In the eyes of other Anglo-Indians, he slid from grace when he married a Eurasian girl, who gave him four sons, one of whom died in the embrace of a bear. Uncle Trevor never brought this wife home and the official pedigree of the Grants lists only his second wife, Clementina Gouldsbury, by whom he had three more sons.

Jane Maria was far less censorious about her sisters, Duncan Grant's aunts. The eldest, Frances Elinor, is described as generous, simple, frank and warm-hearted. She inherited her parents' love of music, played the piano well and had a charming voice; she married Sir James Colvile, had no children and enjoyed friendship with artists and musicians, among them Sir Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy. Through his Aunt Elinor, Duncan caught a glimpse as a young man of the late Victorian art world, but he owed more to Aunt Janie and her liberal attitude to education. He also had a special affection for his third aunt, Henrietta, who was mildly demented - allegedly owing to a fall when she was two.

But, as this generation of Grants knew, no Highland family was altogether free from the taint of madness.

One recurrent characteristic among the Grants was an undemanding gentleness which, paradoxically, had a powerful effect on others. This quality was apparent in the eldest of Lady Grant's children, the third John Peter Grant, a member of the Bengal Civil Service, who came of age in 1857, the year that the great Sepoy revolt broke out. Trouble had begun in March with the XIXth Bengal Infantry, who mutinied prematurely and were promptly disbanded. In the interval before the general revolt, many of these disbanded men took up service in the police force. With the spread of the mutiny, the small outlying stations in Bengal, lacking any form of defence, were exposed to danger. At the same time considerable sums of public money were stored in their treasuries. An order was therefore issued that all such money should be transferred to Calcutta.

John Peter Grant received an order to collect treasury money from a station about a week's march from Calcutta. He was given a police escort composed entirely of disbanded mutineers from the XIXth Bengal Infantry. These men, still smarting from recent punishment, heard daily how their comrades elsewhere were murdering officers and plundering the treasuries. Now they found themselves protecting a sum of £25-30,000, with no one to withstrain them but a very young, solitary British youth, who marched with them by day, sat and joked with them by their camp fires and slept an untroubled, fearless sleep in their midst every night.

The temptation to rob and murder must have been enormous. The remarkable fact that these soldiers, who had been disloyal in March, became trustworthy in May, can be accounted for, to some degree, by the serenity of their young commander. He gave no sign that any idea of danger had occurred to him and this had its effect on the

men. And he must have had some very real and assured sense of security for no sense of fear to have affected his demeanour. Duncan inherited this inner certainty, a capacity to defuse difficult situations, to arouse loyalty in the most unlikely people, and in general to quieten, charm and disarm.

Duncan Grant's father had a small head and hands and very small feet. This would not have been so noticeable were he not also unusually stout. He became so at the age of twenty-four and thereafter did not significantly alter in shape. His love of food made him interested in the recipe book, inscribed 'Rothiemurchus 1770', compiled by his great-grandmother, Elizabeth Raper, mother of the first John Peter Grant. He not only admired it as a model of neatness, with its alphabetical index at the end, but also recognised that the type of cuisine recommended, particularly the marinating of meats and the treatment of vegetables, came closer to French than English cookery.

During the last year of his life Bartle Grant prepared this recipe book for publication by the Nonesuch Press. As his introduction reveals, he was fascinated by his great-grandparents - William Grant, who practised medicine and whose writings on fever were translated into both German and French; and his wife Elizabeth, a plain, short, warm-hearted and quick-tempered woman who, though musical and accomplished, had a touch of coarseness in her nature. She was famous (among other things) for riding pillion from Elgin to the Doune behind her husband's cousin, James Cameron, wearing high-heeled, pointed-toed shoes with large rosettes, a yellow silk quilted petticoat, a chintz farthingale bundled up behind and a little black hat with a feather stuck on one side of her powdered head. Throughout the journey she sang aloud songs from *The Beggar's Opera* with such vigour that they remained lodged in her cousin's memory for ever.

Bartle Grant's admiration for his intrepid great-grandmother, who left behind not only recipes but also fragments of journals and some poetry, emerges clearly in his introduction to her cookery book. Her journals, he claims, display 'the force and directness of her language, her untiring energy and shrewd common sense'. But what he most admires is her keen enjoyment of life and its good things. 'I cannot improve upon her description of herself,' he concludes, 'my great-grandmother must have been indeed . . . "vastly agreeable".'<sup>9</sup>

A readiness to enjoy life was also a part of Bartle's character. 'Rather self-indulgent,' the 'Record of Family Faculties' states, to which is added the tart remark that he was given to brooding over supposed offences. Though his family thought him eccentric, Bartle possessed quiet determination and considerable sensitivity. From an early age he excelled at music, picking up tunes by ear and playing the piano. 'Joachim has arrived,' wrote Lady Grant to her husband of the famous Hungarian violinist in 1868. 'I think I told you in my last he asked immediately after Bartie.'<sup>10</sup> Then twelve years old, Bartle had for some reason started school late, was backward in Latin, had done no Greek and, in his mother's opinion, was unlikely to do well at public school. Despite this, she assured her husband that 'in general and out of the way information he will beat most lads of sixteen'.<sup>11</sup>

He was destined for the army. At Edgeborough School, Guildford, he worked reasonably hard, learnt the piano and organ, and irritated his housemaster with his habit of slinging his slippers across the room. At the age of sixteen he was sent home for idleness and impertinence, and a tutor in mathematics prepared him for the entrance examinations to the army school at Woolwich. Lady Grant was distressed by his insubordination and want of self-control, but eventually Bartle reached Sandhurst and in 1875 became a Sub-Lieutenant with the VIIIth Hussars.

After three years in Afghanistan, where he was awarded an Afghan Medal, he spent the next part of his career in India. In 1883 he was made Captain and the following year, while stationed in Meerut, he married Ethel Isabel McNeil at Gurdaspur, where she was living with a cousin, Georgina Willis, wife of Colonel Alfred Harcourt, a civil officer in the Punjab.

Ethel, who had been born in Victoria, Australia, seems to have moved in with the Harcourts after the death of her father, Nathan McNeil, left her and her two sisters orphaned. At the time of her marriage she was just under twenty-one years of age. The McNeils were descended from lairds of Ayrshire,<sup>12</sup> with distant connections through Archibald McNeil and Grizzel Stewart to Banquo (though not accepted by some as an actual historical character) and earlier still to Kenneth I or MacAlpin, King of the Scots, who died in 843. It is an impressive lineage. Certainly, to have even a putative ancestor commemorated by Shakespeare is something about which to boast. Another McNeil family tradition was that a Spaniard wrecked from the Armada had married into the family, and their olive complexions and black hair were supposed to derive from him.

Though descended from Highlanders, Ethel McNeil's immediate forebears came from Ireland, where they had settled after the Battle of the Boyne and whence they had emigrated to Australia. However, in the way of immediate relatives, all that she had were two sisters - Violet and Daisy. Ethel was extremely fond of Colonel Harcourt (Uncle Fred), a man of perfect integrity, an able administrator and a proficient watercolourist, a great many of whose sketchbooks remained in Ethel's (and afterwards Duncan's) possession.<sup>13</sup> Yet she wrote calmly, at the time of her engagement, to Bartle's sister, Jane Strachey, 'I assure you I do not feel at all overwhelmed at the claims of Bartle's