<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Autobiography, chocolate creams and letterpress printing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Byrne, Anne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Date</strong></td>
<td>2018-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publisher</strong></td>
<td>Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Link to publisher's version</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://www.virginiawoolfsociety.org.uk/virginia-woolf-bulletin/">http://www.virginiawoolfsociety.org.uk/virginia-woolf-bulletin/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item record</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15961">http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15961</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, CHOCOLATE CREAMS AND LETTERPRESS PRINTING

Anne Byrne

In the editorial of the last issue of the Bulletin, Stuart Clarke referred briefly to the four-day Virginia Woolf conference at the University of Reading and to the exhibition on the centenary of the Hogarth Press that accompanied it, which ran from June to the end of August 2017 at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL).1 In response to a call for printed works on paper to ‘recognise the creative contribution made by the Woolfs and the Hogarth Press to printing, art, literature and book culture’, I decided to follow the Woolfs’ design for their first publication and combine text and image in a work of letterpress art. Drawn to one of the suggested themes for the exhibition, ‘author as publisher’ and the theme of the Virginia Woolf conference ‘The World of Books’, I began to think about the possibilities for an artwork based on Leonard Woolf’s autobiography Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918, published by the Hogarth Press. Inspiration was provided by Leonard’s preoccupation with his English and Jewish identities and his evocative description of chocolate creams in that particular volume of his autobiography.

Writing about her birthday on 25 January 1915, a birthday which she enjoyed very much, Virginia records in her diary that she and Leonard ‘decided three things: in the first place to take Hogarth [House], if we can get it; in the second, to buy a Printing press; in the third to buy a Bull dog, probably called John. I am very much excited at the idea of all three—particularly the press’ (D1 28). Along with Caslon Old Face type, they purchased an Excelsior tabletop platen jobber from a shop in Holborn, which was installed in their dining room at Hogarth House in Richmond. The Woolfs launched their press in 1917, supposedly without any clear intention, apart from a ‘manual occupation’ for Virginia ‘to take her mind completely off her work’ (L. Woolf 233). Both were excited about the artistic and creative possibilities that self-publishing might bring. Virginia became proficient at setting and dismantling type, as well as folding, stapling and gluing book pages ready for distribution (she was already an accomplished bookbinder).

The press is distinctive in first publishing the work of Leonard and Virginia Woolf as writers and editors, and, despite the initial small size of the operation, it is renowned for its phenomenal output and longevity, and for the freedom it gave to publish books and pamphlets of their own choice. The press offered writers an alternative to commercial publishing, but with professional printing standards combined with an invitation to innovate and experiment (see Southworth 14). The Woolfs were committed to publishing young, first-time authors, including working-class voices, and to nurturing talent, including their own and those of their Bloomsbury associates.

The press’s first publication was a booklet containing two stories, ‘The Mark on the Wall’ by Virginia Woolf and ‘Three Jews’ by Leonard Woolf, with the imprint of the Hogarth Press, the place of publication given as Richmond, and the date 1917.2 The type for the booklet was handset and printed by the authors. Woodcut illustrations were by Dora Carrington. By including illustrations, the combination of

---

1 http://www.reading.ac.uk/special-collections/exhibitions/se-exhibition-hogarth.aspx
2 Republished by the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain in July 2017 to celebrate the centenary of the Hogarth Press.
text and image no doubt broadened the appeal of these texts to a diversity of readers but was also integral to the Woolfs’ vision for Hogarth Press publications. In a letter to Vanessa, 26 July 1917, Virginia wrote that ‘...we are getting a machine that is specially good for printing pictures as we want to do pictures as much as writing’ (L2 168).

The call for fine art printing included reference to ideas on hand-printed and handset work in the first machine-age, publishing in wartime, art as therapy, women’s writing, modernist printing, and the book arts and aesthetics of the Hogarth Press along with the theme author as publisher. Inspired by the latter and as homage to the Woolfs’ design for their first publication—the artwork would be a combination of letterpress text based on extracts from Leonard’s autobiography and accompanying hand-painted pen and ink images.

Chocolate Creams

In Jacob’s Room, Florinda is also partial to them: ‘She had to wager with herself that she would turn the page before she ate another’ while trying to read Shelley (JR 127). Leonard’s mother, Marie, had a ‘passion for chocolate creams’ (L4 241), and Leonard pronounced himself addicted to them.

On the first page of his autobiography of the years 1911–18, Leonard wrote:

all return journeys are somewhat depressing, even if you are on a year’s leave and terribly eager to arrive and be once more home. You are going back to what you know—the horizon narrows. I feel that somehow my youth ended on Wednesday, May 24, 1911—though I was already 31, I was a young man when I left Colombo, but slightly middle-aged when I reached Marseille.

It was, of course, very strange and exciting to walk up the Marseille street. What astonished and entranced us most in our first view of Europe was the shops full of every kind of chocolate creams; we ate them steadily on the long train journey to Paris. I remember nothing of the France and Europe of my journey home except the chocolate creams. When we got off the boat at Folkestone, my brothers, Herbert and Edgar, were there to meet us—they had become strangers to me in six and a half years. (L. Woolf 15)

His sister Bella who had travelled to Ceylon to visit her brother in 1908 and was returning home for a short holiday, having married R. H. Lock, the Assistant Director of the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens in Colombo, accompanied Leonard. The image of Bella and Leonard sitting in a compartment on the train to Paris, eating chocolate creams ‘steadily’, somehow erases the recent boat journey from Colombo and seals off anticipation of what might lie ahead in England.

After describing the momentous years 1911–18, Leonard concluded this volume of his autobiography with:

It is a strange fact—I have no doubt, discreditable to me, some unsavoury juggling between my scruffy ego and slutish id—that one of the chief things which I remember as connected with the return from those terrible four years of war to peace is chocolate creams. A good many Belgian refugees in the first year of the war settled in Richmond and a large florid Belgian woman opened a kind of delicatessen shop (as they were called in those days) and tea-shop some way up the hill near Richmond Bridge. As the war went on delicatessen became very thin on the ground and chocolate creams vanished. Some months after armistice day, Virginia and I, walking up Richmond Hill, looked into the shop and there upon the counter were slabs of chocolate cream bars. When I was a child, you could buy large fat bars of chocolate cream which cost, I think, a halfpenny the bar. Some were made by Cadbury and some by Fry, and if you were an addict of Cadbury, you regarded the Fry eater as a drinker of Musigny Vieilles Vignes regards the drinker of Australian Burgundy. I belonged to the Cadbury school and have remained an addict of chocolate cream in bars ever since (though I have not
seen any for years). The Belgian chocolate cream bars were un-English, being thin and continental, but when we saw them, the world seemed to change just a little and we dashed into the shop and each bought three bars which was the maximum that Madame X allowed each customer to buy. We carried them back to Hogarth House and ate them silently, almost reverently. The Great War was at last over.

(L. Woolf 256–7)

Many fans wrote appreciatively to Leonard, thanking him for writing his autobiographies in the first instance, admiring their conversational tone, finding joy and pleasure in the vivid recollections of a time and place now past. While trawling through fan mail in the Woolf archive in Sussex, I read a letter of 2 August 1967 from a Mr Braider in Dublin, praising Leonard Woolf’s autobiography and expressing a wish:

I consider the four volumes masterpieces of autobiography … Your attempt at objectivity seems to me exemplary—for it is objectivity rather than detachment. The want of cant. Oh God what a breath of fresh air that is… May you live comfortably and interestingly forever and record that life for us in books that give at once pleasure, a greater understanding of how it was, and how you were…I wish I knew where to find for you those chocolate creams with which you celebrated the war’s end in 1918.

(SxMs-13/3/A/1/Y)

In her biography of Leonard, Victoria Glendinning notes that Margaret Cole, with whom Leonard was having a ‘scratchy’ exchange of letters concerning his Political Quarterly review of her book, The Story of Fabian Socialism, was moved to send gift-wrapped chocolate creams to Leonard. She too had read Leonard’s account of eating chocolate creams with Virginia, marking the end of the First World War (Glendinning 455–6).

Fixing on chocolate creams to begin and end an autobiography, alongside an analysis of Leonard’s own life and psyche may or may not have been deliberate, but from such fragments an artwork combining image and text could be made.

I faced two immediate difficulties. Despite Leonard’s evocative description, I was unsure what exactly constituted a chocolate cream confection in 1918. Anxious to elicit the most accurate description and depiction of a chocolate cream—was it a bar or a sweet? was the chocolate light or dark? what size and shape was it? did it taste of mint or something else?—I consulted various online sources. The result was even more confusing. Dozens of advertised images of boxes of fat chocolate cream sweets in assorted flavours and colours, thin milk chocolate cream bars, delicate cream-filled flat squares in tissue, ‘giant-sized’ dark bars of white fondant from Cadbury’s or Fry’s, or images of a little boy seemingly desperate for Fry’s milk chocolate floated across my horizon. None of these seemed to fit Leonard’s preferred confection.

Somewhat nervously, I approached the Virginia Woolf Listserv, in case this query and line of investigation might be thought too trite, too light, and too trivial. The responses were generous, non-judgemental and helpful. Combining Leonard’s description with the contributions from the listserv, a working definition of a chocolate cream emerged as a bar or bite-sized confection with a hard and glossy chocolate shell around a soft, creamy filling of any flavour. The response would guide the creation and production of an image for the letterpress artwork based on Leonard’s autobiographical reminiscences.
'Heaven knows how one prints'³

Having solved the mystery of chocolate creams, my second difficulty was that the quotations from *Beginning Again*, which would comprise the text, had to be letterpress printed. I knew absolutely nothing about the process of letterpress printing, or where to find a working press in Ireland (where I am located) and whether the work could be done before the exhibition submission deadline. I had three weeks to figure this out.

Letterpress printing is taught as part of art, craft and design courses in Ireland, supported by a diversity of old and new printing presses, working with a mixed collection of letterpress type. My contacts were willing to assist, but the lack of time and a consistent set of lead-type sorts (letters) was an impediment to producing two lengthy texts. The desire to reproduce the text in the original font used by the Hogarth Press proved impossible. The Irish National Print Museum collection includes a range of letterpress machines, and it provides workshops on setting lead type by hand and on the mechanics of printing. Plan B was to take a short course and do the design and letterpress work myself, but the next available course was after my deadline.

A chance conversation with artist Jenny McCarthy led me to Ponc Press in Dingle, Co. Kerry: Tor Cotton and Camilla Dinkel made their c. 1955 Heidelberg Platen available for my Woolf project. Ponc Press prints in Irish and English and specialises in broadsides, limited edition publications and postcards. Over the last century, the type collection has been sourced from Liam Miller’s Dolmen Press (1951–1987), Elizabeth Yeats’s Cuala Press (1908–46) and William Morris’s Kelmscott Press (1890–6). Typesetter Heiko Rolff of Ponc Press set the type and carried out the letterpress work.

³Writing to Lady Robert Cecil on 14 April 1917, Virginia informed her that she and Leonard had bought a printing press, but ‘Heaven knows how one prints’ (L2 149).
The call for artwork encouraged the use of social media to depict work in progress—a novel experience for me. Jenny filmed Leonard’s words as they were being printed on the Heidelberg in Dingle; the whirring, soughing, click, clack sounds of the press, with music playing in the background, bring the atmosphere of letterpress printing a little closer. The black ink is painted onto the roller, the machine is switched on and the noisy rhythm commences as rollers ink the carefully set type, moving in synchronous perpetual motion, as the plate strikes the paper and an impression is made onto the blank page (see http://ventrybeach.com/woolf2017/). Leonard would not have enjoyed the same motorized convenience, but would have pressed each page by hand.

We used 24 pt. Perpetua for the titles and 18 pt. Perpetua for the body, and the footer was set in 12 pt. Baskerville Italic. The chocolate cream quotations are set out on the left-hand side of the page, printed on white Conqueror laid paper, 300g/m2 in weight. Ten copies of each were printed and Jenny was ready to commence the artwork. Hand-drawn, coloured images of chocolate creams with train tickets accompany the first quotation, a ration book and chocolate creams accompany the second. The prints were carefully wrapped and sent by registered post to the MERL. Framing, exhibition space, hanging and placement were then left in the good care of the Hogarth Press exhibition curators Rachel Rogers and Nicola Wilson at the University of Reading.

‘I belonged to the Cadbury school’

Founded by Quaker families, both Fry’s and Cadbury’s chocolate companies were regarded as British with a distinctive ethos of co-operative work, social reform and loyalty to workers’ education and well-being. Perhaps these attributes also appealed to Leonard but his declared addiction was for Cadbury’s. While the Woolf Listserv members responded to my queries on chocolate creams, a link to an article on the contemporary demise of Cadbury as a family industry was also posted, describing the deleterious consequences of the closure of a UK-based factory for employees whose families had worked for Cadbury for generations (see Meek). In reading the account of the relocation of the chocolate factory to a site in Poland and its association with a nearby Second World War airfield that had been a slave-labour camp for thousands of Jews, I wondered how Leonard might have responded. The references to chocolate creams no longer seemed as trite as I first thought.

The Exhibition

The MERL is a large red-bricked rambling building in Reading, home to an extensive collection of artefacts on country life as well as a Special Collections archive that includes an archive of the Hogarth Press. The exhibition was located in the Staircase Hall, an in-between space joining the museum to the archive reading room. Doors open onto other corridors and rooms; an imposing staircase leads up as pale window-light filters down. The participating artists who created the contemporary hand-printed and letterpress artwork were James Freemantle, Martyn Ould, Michael Black, Dennis Gould, Lucy Guenot, Emily Lucas, Adeliza Mole, Mark Haddon, Helen Westrop, Connel McLaughlin, Shirley Jones, Ane Thon Knutsen, Jenny McCarthy, and myself. Also included in the exhibition was Hogarth Press book-jacket designs, printing ephemera and memorabilia. Woodblocks by Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Dora Carrington were exhibited alongside photographs of the Woolfs, as well as an
order book from the early years of the Hogarth Press in Leonard’s careful script. Dusty travel bags belonging to Virginia and Leonard drew comments from visitors. The second impression of Roger Fry’s Twelve Original Woodcuts was also on display; this was his first publication with the Hogarth Press, of which 150 copies were hand printed in 1921.

The first chocolate cream artwork (Laniakea One⁴) was influenced by Leonard Woolf’s realisation, in the process of returning home to England from Ceylon, that he had become a stranger to himself. The artwork quotes Leonard’s implication that his return journey was ‘somewhat depressing’, that his brothers had become ‘strangers’ to him (and presumably he to them). On arrival, he had to become somebody other than the colonial administrator and ‘begin again’ as a single, middle-aged, Jewish, English man in England.

The second piece (Laniakea Two) marks another kind of displacement—the end of the war—but one that is freighted by the ambiguity, anxiety and uncertainty of the coming peace for Virginia and Leonard. The in-between space of the Staircase Hall at the MERL was precisely the location that gave best expression to Leonard’s clever and insightful reflections on himself in his autobiography at two different points in his life. As I left the exhibition space for the last time, I wished for a longer conversation with the other artists and wondered what they thought about as they made their work, what ideas about the Hogarth Press inspired them, and what it was about the lives and works of that singular woman and that singular man that continue to absorb us all.

Works Cited


SxMs-13/3/A/1/Y. Woolf Archive, University of Sussex.


Woolf, Virginia. D1.


——. L2, L4.

⁴Laniakea is the name of the galaxy super cluster in which the Milky Way is located.