

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE SUFFRAGETTES

The women's suffrage movement started in earnest in 1897 when Millicent Fawcett founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage (NUWS) and began campaigning – patiently and peacefully – for votes for women. Fawcett and her 'suffragist' followers were suspicious of violent or heated protests as they seemingly lent credence to the long-held belief that women were too 'emotional' to be trusted with the vote. Instead, they used logical argument to emphasise the important role of (predominantly middle class) women in public life and to reason that women should be involved in the process of lawmaking if they were expected to pay taxes and obey the law. Fawcett did make some progress, but it was very slow and in 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia founded a rival organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).



Also known as the 'suffragettes' (originally a derogatory term coined by the *Daily Mail*) the WSPU and other radical and militant groups sought fast, decisive change and they were prepared to use violence means to effect it. In a bid to draw attention to their cause suffragettes chained themselves to boxes, smashed shop

windows, set off bombs and went on hunger strike when imprisoned. At the height of their campaign in 1913 one suffragette, Emily Davidson, died after she stepped out in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby. Although most World War I, it was from 1914 to 1918 that the political movement for women's suffrage gathered pace, perhaps fuelled by many women's bold engagement in traditional male roles on the home front. In 1918 the UK parliament granted the vote to propertied or university-educated women over the age of 30, although it wasn't until 1928 that women achieved suffrage on equal terms with men.

Continued from front:

As Nell and Rupert's dual narrative unfolds, we discover a memorable tale of love in many guises, of a Britain fraught with huge unrest and social change, and of a Rupert Brooke far more interesting, complex and troubled than the romanticised versions would suggest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jill Dawson is the author of *Trick of the Light*, *Magpie*, *Fred and Edie*, which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel Award and the Orange Prize, *Wild Boy* and *Watch Me Disappear*, which was longlisted for the Orange Prize. Born in Durham, she now lives with her family in the Fens.



JILL DAWSON Photograph © Timothy Allen

IDEAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Forever England: Life of Rupert Brooke* by Mike Read
- The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke*
- Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* by Siegfried Sassoon
- The Longest Journey* by E. M. Forster
- Goodbye to all That* by Robert Graves
- Mrs Woolf and the Servants* by Alison Light
- Carrington* (FJ) J. Á., | { D

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READING GROUP GUIDE



THE GREAT LOVER by Jill Dawson

Nell Golightly is an old woman when she receives a strange letter from Arlice Rapoto, a Tahitian woman claiming to be the daughter of the poet Rupert Brooke. How did he sound? Arlice asks. How did he smell? Why does all of England remember him?

Turning her mind to the summer of 1909, Nell relives her the new housemaid at the Orchard Tea Gardens in Grantchester and he was the new tenant – modern, handsome and controversial. Watching from the sidelines, Nell observes Rupert's friends and myriad admirers come and go in a blur of punts, picnics and fashionable hats. Intrigued, she witnesses society challenged, taboos broken and at the centre of it all a man, Rupert, adored by everyone he meets but closer into Rupert's life, if not his circle, even she feels her good sense waver. But could Rupert ever love a housemaid? Is he, in fact, capable of love at all?

Continued on reverse ...

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE FABIAN SOCIETY is a British intellectual socialist movement, founded in 1884, whose purpose is to advance the principles of social democracy via gradualist and reformist, rather than revolutionary, means. It is best known for its initial ground-breaking work prior to World War I on a socialist cause, including George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Ramsay MacDonald, and others. At the core of the Fabian Society were Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Together, they wrote numerous studies of industrial Britain, including alternative co-operative economics that applied to ownership of capital as well as land. Whilst coinciding with the zeitgeist of Liberal reforms in the early 1900s, Fabian proposals for social justice were considerably more progressive: the Fabians lobbied for the introduction of a minimum wage in 1906, for the creation of a nationalised healthcare system in 1911, and for the abolition of hereditary peerages in 1917. The society laid many of the foundations of the Labour Party and other members including Ramsay MacDonald, Clement Attlee, Tony Benn, Harold Wilson and, more recently, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The society is still a vanguard 'think tank' of the New Labour movement.

THE CAMBRIDGE APOSTLES is an intellectual secret society at the University of Cambridge founded by twelve undergraduates in 1820. The society is essentially a weekly discussion group where one member gives a prepared talk on a topic, which is later thrown open for discussion. During the meetings, members used to eat sardines on toast, called 'whales'. The Apostles retain a leather diary dating back to the 1820s, which includes membership records and handwritten notes on each week's debate. Every few years, amid great secrecy, all the Apostles past and present are invited to a dinner at a Cambridge college. The Apostles became well known outside Cambridge in the years before World War I with the rise to eminence of the Bloomsbury Group. John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey and Rupert Brooke were all Apostles and subsequently prominent as members of Bloomsbury. Other famous members include Alfred Tennyson, Bertrand Russell, E.M. Forster, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Eric Hobsbawm. Women only gained acceptance into the society in the 1970s.

FOR DISCUSSION

What did you make of Nell's stark introduction of herself in chapter one? Does she change over the course of the novel? If so, how?

Why do you think Jill Dawson introduces the novel with a letter? How does the knowledge they impart affect our subsequent reading of the novel?

Why do you think Nell evades the question of whether Rupert was 'a good man?' (p.10). Was he a good man? Is he a likeable character in the novel? How might a modern audience judge him differently to his contemporaries?

How effective a way of communicating their story? How do they differ, both in terms of style and content? Is Jill Dawson successful in capturing their different voices?

'It's funny how people here remember the *Titanic* sinking but not the *Empress of Ireland* ... The *Titanic* was full of toffs, of course, whereas the *Empress* was just ordinary people' (p.6). What is the relevance of this observation of Nell's? What does this book have to say about the 'hard facts' (p.8) that make history, and those that are omitted?

How does the novel describe Rupert's sexuality and his feelings about sex? What might account for them? How do they compare with others' in the book? One hundred years on, does society have a 'healthier' attitude towards sex and sexuality?

What is the relevance of Rupert Brooke's poem 'The Great Lover' in the novel? How does Rupert's understanding of being a 'great lover' take on new meaning as the novel progresses?

Were you surprised by Nell's views on female suffrage? Why are she and Kittie at odds on the subject, considering their similar social positions? What means do the female characters have at their disposal to control their lives?

FOR DISCUSSION

Rupert Brooke is often remembered as a great 'poet-patriot' and yet Arlice believes 'his heart belongs to Tahiti' (p.2). Where did Rupert 'belong'?

Nell perceives that she 'knew Rupert as well as anyone' (p.10). Would you agree with this? If so, what is it about Nell that allows her this special insight? And does Taatamata share it? What do Nell and Taatamata have in common in their roles as Rupert's lovers?

Were you surprised by Rupert's interest in socialist politics considering his fear of 'the lower classes' (p.149)? How do Rupert and Nell aim to overcome poverty, and what do their different approaches reveal about them?

Arlice wants to know 'why did all of England remember [Rupert]?' Why did they? And how do public remembrances of Rupert Brooke differ from the type Arlice seeks on p. 2? Would Rupert have approved of his legacy, and of Jill Dawson's portrait? Does it matter?

Jill Dawson explains that 'of course I made Rupert up ... he is "my" Rupert Brooke' (p.301), but is there any historical value in a novel such as *The Great Lover*? What are its advantages and limitations when compared to historical accounts?

What is the role of Nell's bees? What might they represent?

To what extent does *The Great Lover* bear the hallmarks of a historical novel? How does it differ from a historical novel? What does it tell us about Rupert Brooke's life? If so, how?

What did you make of the historical source material – the letters and diaries – that the novel is based on? What did it bring to the story?

Edwardian Britain is often depicted by historians as one elongated hot summer of good times and giddy young people sleep-walking towards war. Did this novel challenge your understanding of this era? If so, how?