DISINHERITED by Robert Sackville-West Lymington u3a Reading Group

In the small hours of the morning of 3 June 1914, a woman and her husband were found dead in a sparsely furnished apartment in Paris. It was only when the identity of the couple was revealed in the English press a fortnight later that the full story emerged. The man, Henry Sackville-West, had shot himself minutes after the death of his wife from cancer; but Henry's suicidal despair had been driven equally by the failure of his claim to be the legitimate son of Lord Sackville and heir to Knole. The Disinherited reveals the secrets and lies at the heart of an English dynasty, unravelling the parallel lives of Henry's four illegitimate siblings: in particular his older sister, Victoria, who on becoming Lady Sackville and mistress of Knole, by marriage, consigned her brothers and sisters to lives of poverty and disappointment.

When *Pepita*, Vita Sackville-West's book about her Spanish dancer grandmother, was published in 1937, the tangled circumstances of Pepita's muddled legacy were still fresh in the public memory. Pepita's daughter **Victoria, Lady Sackville**, Vita's mother, had died only the year before, the most prominent of five sad siblings whose pathetic attempts to secure their inheritance, indeed their very identity, are the subject of this book.

Born Josefa Duran in 1830 in the slums of Málaga, Pepita was famous for her waist-length black hair and tiny feet. She became the mistress of **Lionel Sackville-West**, later the second Lord Sackville, and bore him five children. The family was established in a comfortable house, the Villa Pepa, in the new spa town of Arcachon in south-west France. There, Lionel and Pepita went by the names of Count and Countess West. This apparently cosy set-up was beset from the first by complications. Illegitimacy was a stain: neighbours gossiped and tradesmen snooped; local children were forbidden to play with the Wests lest they be tainted by association. **Vita** had painted a picture of an extravagant passion between an English peer and a hot-headed Spanish Gypsy. The reality, as Robert Sackville-West's immaculately written account makes clear, was altogether more dismally prosaic, the story of "the crotchety courtesan and the perjurious peer". His vivid account of life at Arcachon, a watering hole inhabited by a temporary population of stateless in-betweeners, makes an airless backdrop to the events that unravelled after Pepita's death in childbirth in 1871.

Lionel Sackville-West emerges badly from this book. A family photograph of him lounging against a pillar in mutton-chop whiskers and bowler hat shows him droopy-eyed and long-faced. Lazy and self-indulgent, his job in the diplomatic service gave him long stretches of time off – excuses both to spend time with Pepita and the children and to escape them. He was always complaining about debts, his sister remarking: "How wonderful is Lionel's inaccuracy and forgetfulness about money!" When Pepita died, he left his children in the care of guardians in Paris and legged it to Argentina, where a fellow diplomat's wife described him as deadly dull, a "nullity". Cultivating a useful vagueness about the position and security of his five children (which was later to prompt the lengthy court cases that beleaguered them), the only one of them he

showed any real affection for was **Victoria**, on whom he became unhealthily dependent. He seems to have attracted very little censure over his messy and selfish domestic set-up, but his children lived with it all their lives.

Victoria turned out a beauty in the straight-nosed, lantern-jawed Edwardian manner. Her father summoned her to Washington when he was posted there and she was a soaring social success. Returning with him to England, she eventually married in 1890 her first cousin Lionel, her father's heir, becoming Lady Sackville and chatelaine of Knole, the Sackville-West's vast house in Kent. Charming but manipulative and "greedy for gold", Victoria queened it over her siblings. Illegitimacy did not impede her social triumph but the awful shadow left her constantly fearful of poverty and exclusion.

In the 1920s Vita and Virginia Woolf share a passionate and transformative love affair. This decade-long intimacy inspired one of the most famous literary romances of the 20th century and led to Woolf's masterpiece – *Orlando.*

This book is a chronicle of lives wasted, squandered on grievance, vindictiveness, squabbles over money, lengthy and pointless litigation and, above all, dreams of acceptance that were dashed with very public humiliation. Lionel's legacy to his illegitimate children was ambivalence and half-truths – they were never quite sure of exactly who they were. Max, the eldest, even believed himself for a time to be the son of Pepita's long discarded husband, a stout dancer called Juan Antonio de Oliva – and expressed some relief that this would free him from the burden of unrealisable expectations. Surrounded by partisan hangers-on, the siblings ended up fighting each other. Victoria at one point, with terrible irony, was even forced to prove in court her own illegitimacy in order to stop her brother Henry's attempt to claim the Sackville title.

The lives of Pepita's children were spent in the sad shadowlands of the in-betweeners: not quite socially acceptable; not quite English; not quite equipped to look after themselves; not quite anything. **Max** was shipped off to South Africa where he spent the rest of his life working on farms that never made money – and died in poverty**. Flora** married a gold-digger, then in her 40s became an oriental dancer billed as "the honourable Flora Sackville-West". **Amalia**, Vita's "vinegary spinster aunt", was tied like a tin can to Victoria's coat-tails, living with her at Knole in mutual loathing. At 51, she suddenly married a French diplomat and Victoria was furious. When Amalia died in 1945, she was living in a cottage in Hythe, still ranting against her sister and making wild claims to her parenthood. Saddest of all was **Henry** whose halting letters in awkward English make pathetic reading. He spent fruitless years trying to claim his legitimacy as the rightful heir of Knole and ended up committing suicide in a Paris lodging house.

Robert Sackville-West, the current Lord Sackville, is descended from a more sober strain of the family. He has written this book with both objectivity and empathy. But though it is a fascinating picture of a forgotten underside of English aristocratic and public life, it is hard not to find it ultimately a thoroughly melancholy tale. As Max, writing to his estranged sister from South Africa, put it: "It was indeed a load of sorrow and shame that Father left us. How it has eaten into the heart of us all."