

HAROLD NICOLSON

In memoriam Michael Bristow-Smith

HAROLD NICOLSON

Half-an-Eye on History

Laurence Bristow-Smith

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## Preface

I knew about Vita Sackville-West before I knew about Harold Nicolson. I was brought up in the Kent and Sussex borderlands, not too far from Sissinghurst and I went there with my parents in the early 1960s. I barely remember the visit, though I do remember a tea shop in Sissinghurst village. I cannot tell whether this was before or after Vita's death, but it was her name I knew first because of Sissinghurst, because of the garden. And because of Knole, which we passed whenever we went to see my mother's brothers and their families who populated the south-eastern edges of London. And because of my Latin master, Mr Williams, who used *The Land* as an illustration of the immense and long-lasting influence of *The Georgics*.

A green, wet country on a bed of clay,  
From Edenbridge to Appledore and Lympne  
Drained by the Medway and the Rother stream  
With forest oaks still hearty in the copse.

Vita was writing about my home, and when literature binds itself to a particular place or region the effect is powerful and enduring. But even then I could see that the work was essentially (if intentionally) backward-looking – *The Land* was published four years after *The Waste Land*. Her novels, too, while popular in their day and technically competent, suffered by comparison with Lawrence, Forster, Huxley, Waugh, Powell – writers of her own or a slightly later generation who were simply that much more adventurous.

Nonetheless, Vita Sackville-West was a figure on my literary landscape, her presence on the skyline reinforced by the geographical connection with home. So that when I eventually came to read Harold Nicolson's work – some years later, while studying literature in Newcastle-upon-Tyne – I saw him against the background of her. It took me a while to understand that he was the more interesting character and the more original writer, whose work had more to offer to later generations. One of the obstacles was Bloomsbury, of whom I shall have more to say later. Bloomsbury did not always see the world outside their confines clearly. They were very wrong about Harold, but I did not immediately see that.

I went on to live in Morocco, where Harold's parents had been based during his adolescent years, and then to join the Diplomatic Service. If that created a link, it was wholly coincidental, and if I picked up his lesser-known writings here and there or works by his contemporaries, works which mentioned or reflected on him in some way, it was out of general interest. Only much later when I was working in Oslo did the interest turn into a project. I had to write a c.v. and, with no forethought that I can remember, I found myself adding a line to the effect that I hoped to write a biography of Harold Nicolson. Even then, I did not begin writing for another five years, until the summer of 2008. By then I was in Milan. My wife was not enamoured of diplomatic life and preferred to spend her time restoring the house we had bought in Scotland and working in the wonderful garden there – which gave me both the stimulus and the opportunity, and, I suppose, suggests another link with Harold, although again it was no more than coincidental. I finished writing four years later, by which time I was a bed-and-breakfast proprietor in Kirkcudbright.

As Harold Nicolson wrote in several of his introductions, this book makes no great claim to original research. Circumstances did not permit it, and, in any case, there are few new facts to be discovered. I have corrected a few minor errors and explored Harold's family background in a little more detail, but my main concern has been with interpretation. I have relied mainly on published and internet sources, plus a few visits to key locations – though I was also able, courtesy of Balliol College, to consult the manuscripts of Harold's early diaries. Previous biographies by James Lees-Milne and Norman Rose have been vital, as has Victoria Glendinning's biography of Vita, and, of course, Harold and Vita's diaries and letters. Lees-Milne's two-volume work is not uncritical, but it is friendly and it was written by someone who knew and shared the social world that Harold inhabited in the second half of his life. Norman Rose's book, published in 2005, looks at Harold from a later and more detached perspective. Rose's more thematic approach suggests a much more enigmatic character.

Yet I felt there was still a story to be told, a character to be uncovered and seen in his proper historical perspective – and by that I mean in relation to the huge historical and cultural movements which were shaping Europe and the world during his lifetime, not simply the list (impressive though it is) of people he knew or had dinner with at one time or another. I felt that Harold's motives and his decisions needed to be probed more, and that in order to do this effectively, his background and his early life needed to be looked at in more detail – not least because of the importance he evidently attached to it. I have also tried to show his and Vita's homosexuality for

what it was, an important factor of their lives which, at one point, provoked a crisis, but in no sense a dominating factor.

I had a lot of help in the process of writing and putting this book together. Above all, I would like to thank Peter Winnington for his incredible editor's eye and his invaluable help preparing the text for publication, and Stan Calder, who read the text chapter by chapter as it came off the computer. Damian Leeson and Stephen Pern also read and made suggestions. And, of course, Jennifer, Ezra and Adam, who had to put up with constant mutterings about 'Harold' this and 'Harold' that for the whole four-year period. I have dedicated this book to my brother, Michael, whose knowledge of the period was phenomenal and who was always at the end of the phone to answer queries about the livery of Southern Railway locomotives or cinema-going in the 1940s. Sadly, he died before he could see his contributions in print.

Laurence Bristow-Smith  
Kirkcudbright, July 2014



Harold Nicolson had a highly developed sense of history. One of his great strengths as a writer was to understand and communicate how the past informs the present. His diplomatic and historical studies such as *Peacemaking* and *The Congress of Vienna* were explicitly intended to draw lessons from past events which could be applied to present and future situations. His biographies have a greater historical purpose than the mere chronicling of the subject's life. *Lord Carnock* and *Curzon: The Last Phase* are part of a trilogy (together with *Peacemaking*) looking at changes in diplomatic theory and practice. *George V* is a biography, but also a study of constitutional monarchy. For Nicolson, the past was more than just facts: history had to be tempered with imagination. When researching his books he would go to key locations – houses, towns, gardens – in order to soak up the atmosphere, to see what his subject saw, to feel what his subject felt, to gain a sense of direct connection with the past. It was this impulse which led him, while in Athens researching *Byron: The Last Journey*, to stand in front of the statue of Byron outside the National Gardens, take off his hat, and explain to the shade of the poet exactly what he was doing there.

This sense of history undoubtedly came from his family and his family background. Three of his best books – *Lord Carnock*, *The Desire to Please*, and *Helen's Tower* – are books of family history. The last two, in fact, are the beginning of a never-completed series of studies in autobiography and family history to be called *In Search of the Past*. There is also, in much of his work, a sense that history and identity are linked: that the interaction between individuals or families and the great events of the outer world in some way creates or conveys identity. So it is worth looking at the family from which he sprang and how family history would have presented itself to him as a boy – the names and locations; the family traditions that he would have been brought up to believe; the stories of his parents' and grandparents' lives that he would have heard as a child. These things are more than just facts: they help explain how the adult Harold Nicolson looked at and understood the world about him.

By most people's standards the Nicolsons were an ancient enough family. As far as anyone can tell, the family which became Clan Mhic Reacail (or MacNeaceil or MacNicol) and was later anglicised as Clan Nicolson, seems

to be descended from Scandinavian – most probably Norwegian – raiders who stopped raiding and began to settle on the Isle of Lewis in the ninth century. Somewhere in the thirteenth century, they arrived on the Isle of Skye and settled in the north-eastern part of the island, the area now known as Trotternish. Most of the region consists of a stubby, dramatic, north-pointing peninsula: a wild and rugged landscape where human settlement, and what little cultivable land there is, are confined to a thin coastal band. South of the peninsula, the district stretches beyond the impressive natural harbour of Portree as far as Loch Ainort; it is bounded on the west by the River Snizort. The precision of these borders, which are still recognised by the local population to this day, reflects the extent and importance of ancient land ownership.

Once they reached Skye, Clan Mhic Reacail put down roots. They farmed; they fished; they undoubtedly fought; and they quite probably sat on the Council of the Lord of the Isles in the fourteenth century. By Skeabost Bridge, near where the River Snizort reaches the sea, is St Columba's Isle. Local tradition holds that twenty-eight Clan Nicolson chiefs are buried there, which – even allowing for shorter or curtailed lifespans – represents a considerable period of continuous occupation. At Bile, dominating the northern side of the entrance to Loch Portree, is a massive crag known as Nicolson's Rock and further up the loch, just on the edge of Portree itself, is the bracken- and bramble-covered site of Scorrybreac or Scorrybreck. A traditional, stone-built clan stronghold, Scorrybreac was probably begun in the fourteenth century and remained the home of the Clan Nicolson chief for some six hundred years – until the nineteenth century when the impact of the Highland Clearances forced the then chief, Norman Nicolson, to emigrate to Tasmania.

Harold Nicolson visited Portree and Scorrybreac in 1938, shortly after his son, Nigel, had bought the Shiantas, a group of uninhabited islands between Lewis and Skye. Even then, nothing survived of Scorrybreac beyond traces of collapsed walls under the vegetation, but Harold was deeply moved by the place and felt a tug of belonging. At the same time – and this is highly characteristic – he balanced such romanticism against a more reasoned assessment of his position.

It is strange how excited I am by my first view of Skye. Before going to bed I gaze at the sunset behind the mountains and watch the sea-gulls wheel, and think perhaps my ill-adjustment to English life has been due to this Celtic strain. I agree with Nigel that nothing is so ridiculous as the Sassenach who pretends to be a Highlander. Yet deep in me is a

dislike of the English ... my joy at knowing that by origin I belong to these solemn proud hills is certainly not anything but deeply sincere.<sup>1</sup>

He was wrong – or so it seems – to speak of 'this Celtic strain'. In his *Clan History of the Nicolsons of Skye*, David Sellar says: 'it seems likely that ... the Nicolsons are of high Norse descent. ... Although a Gaelic origin has sometimes been claimed for the clan, the older and better view is that the Nicolsons are of Scandinavian descent.'<sup>2</sup> A Scandinavian origin certainly seems more appropriate for the rulers of lands which, until 1266, owed allegiance to the Norwegian crown.

Harold was also wrong about his 'ill-adjustment' and his sense of Englishness. Whatever his heredity, he was English through and through.

An alternative version of the family's origins – and one to which Harold alludes in the opening pages of *Lord Carnock* – suggests that Clan MacNicol originated around Assynt in what became Sutherland. When the male line died out at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the MacNicol lands passed through marriage to Torquil MacLeod of Lewis. The remnants of the MacNicol clan then removed themselves to Skye and to Scorrybreac.<sup>3</sup>

This second version – which would, it is true, allow more room for a Celtic strain – is less convincing as an account of the origin of such a widespread and important clan, and the story may perhaps describe the fortunes of a secondary branch of the MacNicol. At this distance, of course, it scarcely matters, except insofar as Harold was sufficiently interested to know and record these family traditions when writing about his father. Indeed, he was sufficiently interested in his genealogy and its implications to exaggerate. It is one thing to state the probability of Norse descent, but quite another to claim, as Harold did, that the Nicolsons 'could trace their ancestry to the ninth century on emigrating from Norway.'<sup>4</sup> To be able to claim such a solid historical pedigree was useful when, as a married man, he needed to balance, if not compete with, the weighty and fully-documented ancestry of the Sackvilles.

The Nicolson baronetcy originated with Thomas MacNicol, who left Scorrybreac for Edinburgh in 1570 and anglicised his name to Nicolson.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of *Lord Carnock*, Harold says that Thomas 'acquired property and riches, bought and embellished the house of Carnock and the estate of Tillicultrie, and in 1637 purchased a baronetcy of Nova Scotia.'<sup>6</sup> The transaction may have been mercenary, but it was also a recognition of social and economic status.

The hereditary Order of Baronets was the idea of King James VI and I. In 1611, he instituted the Baronetage of England, which, reduced to essentials,

granted a title to two hundred men of good birth who were willing to help pay for an army to pacify Ireland. In 1619, the Order was extended to Ireland. Then in 1625 Charles I instituted a third creation, the Baronetcy of Nova Scotia, originally intended to benefit one hundred and fifty men, again of good birth, who were willing to offer 2,000 marks to transport six settlers to Nova Scotia and maintain them for two years. Over time, all three orders outstripped their original size and purpose.

Thomas Nicolson's baronetcy, dating from 16 January 1637 and named for the property he had acquired at Carnock, near Dunfermline in Fife, was a relatively early one. Twice in the course of its history the direct male line failed and the title passed to a cousin. On the second such occasion, in 1806, Harold Nicolson's great-grandfather succeeded as Major General Sir William Nicolson, ninth Baronet. While the title may have passed down the generations, the Scottish estates that went with it disappeared at an early stage. Aristocratic though they might have been in terms of lineage, neither Harold nor any of his immediate forbears belonged to the landed classes – unlike the Sackvilles – which meant that they had little or no income beyond what they earned.

Harold begins *Lord Carnock* with a sketch of his father's character.

Arthur Nicolson, to the depths of his being, was a shy man. Beneath the high spirits of his early manhood, as beneath the courteous urbanity of his later years, was concealed an inner core of self-repression, diffidence and almost morbid reserve. These disabilities were due to his sufferings and humiliations as a child.<sup>7</sup>

Children can misjudge their parents and Harold may well be overstating the case here. There is no doubt that Arthur Nicolson was a reserved, intensely private man – many of his class and generation were – but his reserve may not have been as intense or as morbid as his son suggests. His early years certainly left him with a legacy of unhappiness and self-doubt to overcome, but he overcame it with conspicuous success, exercising, in the course of his later professional years, a not insignificant influence on European, even world, history.

His parents were Captain Sir Frederick William Erskine Nicolson, tenth Baronet, and Mary Clementina Loch, the only daughter of a Scottish MP, James Loch of Drylaw. They were married in 1847. Mary Nicolson bore three children in quick succession – Clementina, Frederick and, in September 1849, Arthur – before dying in July 1851. Arthur was less than two years old.

The family lived in London, in a small and by all accounts grim and unwelcoming terraced house in William Street, just off Lowndes Square in Knightsbridge.<sup>8</sup> Two years after his wife's death, in December 1853, Sir Frederick Nicolson left England for the Far East, commanding the thirty-six-gun frigate, HMS *Pique*, apparently leaving his children in the care of a housekeeper or governess. At some point, the children were rescued by their maternal grandfather with whom they then lived either in Albemarle Street in Westminster or in the tiny village of Golspie in the far north-east of Scotland. Harold ascribes the need for rescue to the circumstances of Sir Frederick's second marriage, in 1855, to Augusta Cullington, whom he describes as 'a tart'.<sup>9</sup> However, the precise sequence of events of is not clear.

In August 1854, in somewhat strange circumstances, following the suicide of his commanding officer, Rear Admiral Price, Sir Frederick led an unsuccessful attack by British and French forces on the Russian city of Petropavlovsk. In the spring of 1855, he took part in a second attack on the same city. By 1856, HMS *Pique* had become part of the British naval force involved in the Second Anglo-Chinese War, sailing between Shanghai and Fuzhou. It seems, therefore, that Sir Frederick's unfortunate second marriage must have taken place in the Far East – though how, and where, and exactly what the lady in question was doing in the region remain a mystery, unless her profession did, indeed, involve following the fleet. In any event, it seems unlikely that a marriage taking place so far from England and two years after his departure would have brought about the sudden need to remove his three children from William Street. It is more probable that they were taken into their grandfather's care at some time shortly after he left England in 1853.

In *Lord Carnock*, Harold Nicolson says that his grandfather returned from the Far East having committed 'some error of judgement at Petropavlovsk' which resulted in him being unable to obtain any further sea-going appointment.<sup>10</sup> It is undeniable that Sir Frederick did, indeed, show poor judgement before Petropavlovsk in 1854 – he chose a poor landing beach and trusted information from an American deserter with the result that two hundred men died in the failed assault. However, in the five years between Petropavlovsk and his return to England in 1859, he seems to have tried hard to redeem himself. He took a prize off Cape Classet; he led a successful attack on the forts on the northern shore of the Peiho, near Tientsin (Tianjin); he made a diplomatic visit to Japan; and he safely conveyed Lord Elgin from Hong Kong to Peiho (surely not a duty to be given to a captain in disgrace).

His children, meanwhile, were being brought up by their maternal grandfather. Arthur Nicolson told Harold that he could

remember the sooted smell of the curtains in Albemarle Street ... watching the hats and bonnets in the street below. He remembered seeing Queen Victoria prancing on a black horse, the scarlet of her riding habit slashed by the blue of the Garter, and how the Guards, bearded from Inkerman, raised their bearskins to her upon bayonets. He remembered talk of Alma, of Balaklava, of the China Wars ...<sup>11</sup>

It seems that only in 1861, after his return to England and the subsequent death of his unacceptable second wife, were the children returned to Sir Frederick's care.

The Admiralty did not forget and, following his return from the Far East, Sir Frederick was effectively removed from the active service list. Under the system as it then existed, any captain who lived long enough would eventually become an admiral as those above him in the Navy List slowly died off. Sir Frederick eventually obtained flag rank, but he never again went to sea, remaining resentfully in William Street, where 'for forty years, he nursed a grievance against the Admiralty,' attended meetings of the Thames Conservancy Board and, according to his grandson, read 'several thousand French novels.'<sup>12</sup>

Arthur Nicolson began his education at a private school in Wimbledon before being sent to the Royal Navy's training ship, HMS *Britannia*. Harold suggests that this move took place in 1861, when Arthur was twelve,<sup>13</sup> but this seems unlikely. The *Britannia* did not accept cadets until they were thirteen years of age and there is no record of his presence there until 1864, when he would have been approaching fifteen. However old he was, life on board the *Britannia* would not have been easy. An old three-decked sailing ship, originally built in 1820, she had been turned into a training ship at Portsmouth in 1859 and migrated down the coast, arriving in Dartmouth in 1863, and later giving her name to the shore-based Royal Naval Training College. By the time she reached Dartmouth, *Britannia* was little more than a hulk. Cadets slept in hammocks in conditions so overcrowded and insanitary that there were frequent outbreaks of sickness and disease. Winter and summer, cadets were roused at five in the morning and their day, a mixture of physical training and courses of instruction in the basics of seamanship, lasted up to fourteen hours.

Nevertheless, Arthur did well and, in 1866, graduated third in his year, but with the clear conviction that he was not cut out for the Royal Navy.

One can only imagine the scenes in the house in William Street. Arthur Nicolson left no direct account of his father, but Harold's description in *Lord Carnock* and *The Desire to Please* seems likely to reflect his views – 'a choleric and egotistic man';<sup>14</sup> 'a fierce and selfish old man with a raucous voice';<sup>15</sup> 'a voice which wounded and alarmed';<sup>16</sup> a man who 'interfered with the liberty and the feelings of his children.'<sup>17</sup> *Britannia* must have furnished Arthur with sufficient self-confidence to defy Sir Frederick, for he won the argument and in the summer of 1866 went to Rugby School.

By the time Arthur Nicolson arrived at Rugby, Thomas Arnold, the school's great and reforming headmaster, had been dead over twenty years, but Rugby remained one of the top schools in the country. Rugby's radical revision of the traditional curriculum – among other things, introducing prefects, and putting a new emphasis on sport and fair play – had reshaped the public-school system and had an impact on the values of the nation as a whole. The school's reputation could hardly have stood higher. Arthur, however, did not succeed. His final report categorised him as 'an absolute failure.'<sup>18</sup> Once again, one can only imagine the 'thunderous gloom' of William Street.<sup>19</sup>

In *Lord Carnock*, Harold relates the bizarre and unverifiable story that, during his last year at Rugby, Arthur was beaten up and kidnapped. The main outcome of the incident appears to have been that his uncle, Henry Brougham Loch, took an interest in him, securing him both a place at Brasenose College, Oxford, and, later, his nomination to the Foreign Office. By 1867, when his interest in Arthur Nicolson began, Henry Loch had already had a remarkable career at the centre of Queen Victoria's expanding Empire. He started life in the Royal Navy, but, like Arthur, did not care for it. (Was this a point of sympathy with his nephew?) He joined the British East India Company and the Bengal Light Infantry; he fought in the Anglo-Sikh War and the Sutlej Campaign; he raised and commanded a force of Bulgarian cavalry during the Crimean War; he was attached to Lord Elgin's mission to China and was present at the capture of Canton during the Second Opium War; he returned to China with Lord Elgin in 1860, was captured by the Chinese and subsequently released. It is much more likely to have been Henry Loch's career than his father's that inspired Arthur Nicolson's interest in imperial and world events.

Unfortunately, Arthur was no more successful at Brasenose than he had been at Rugby. There were problems with the College authorities; there were debts; and it was considered better for all concerned that he should sever his connection with the University without taking a degree. The situation in William Street was 'thunderous in the extreme.'<sup>20</sup>