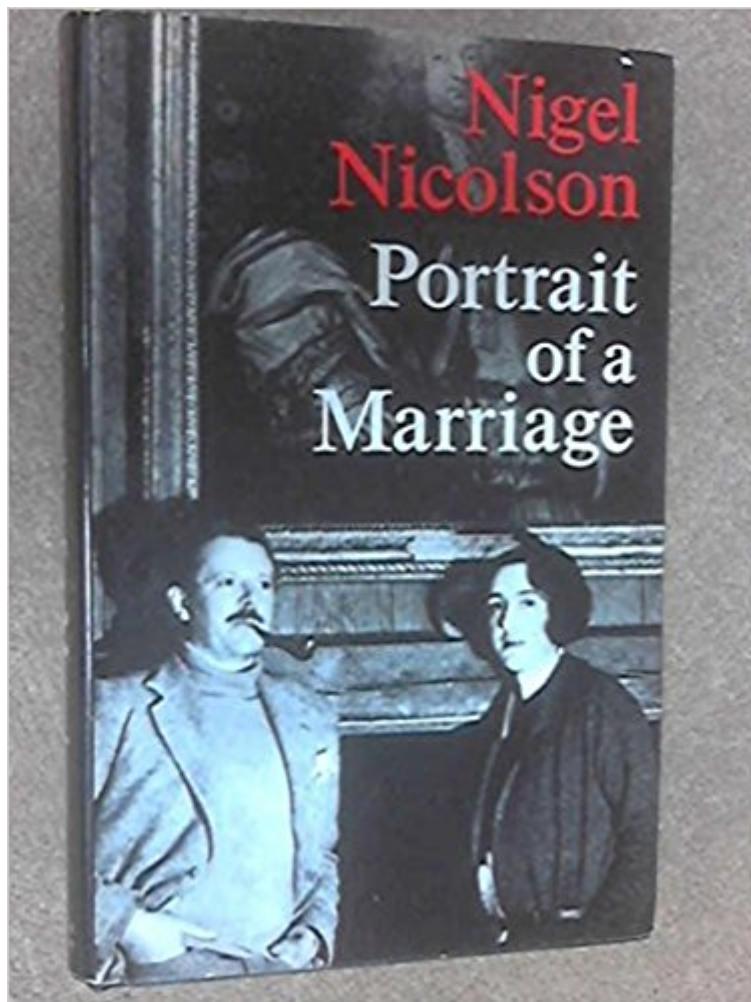


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# Portrait Of A Marriage



## **Synopsis**

One of the love stories of our century which has become a literary classic.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Nigel Nicolson is the son of the politician, diarist and biographer Harold Nicolson, and the poet and writer Vita Sackville-West who restored Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, now a property of the National Trust. The family were close friends with Virginia and Leonard Woolf. Nicolson was the co-founder of Weidenfeld & Nicolson, was a Conservative MP in the 1950s and is the author of fifteen previous books. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

After the death of his mother Vita Sackville-West in 1962, author Nigel Nicolson stumbled upon her private notebook containing details of her tumultuous love affair with Violet Trefusis. Using this diary as a springboard, Nicolson boldly endeavored to unearth and lay bare the facts of his mother's life. Sackville-West was a fiercely independent woman, raised in the lap of lavish luxury. The author takes pains to illustrate not only his mother's life, but that of her own mother. Sackville-West grew up at Knole, the largest privately owned estate in England. Her every whim indulged, at yet she perceived herself the proverbial "poor little rich girl." Vita was a crossing-dressing lesbian. However, society demanded a marriage. Thus it was that she married Harold Nicolson, a homosexual friend working in Her Majesty's Foreign Service. The marriage was based on a mutual genuine affection, and not without romantic love (they did produce two sons); Vita and Harold were indeed the very portrait of the "a happy couple" - when they were together. The Foreign Service often demanded

that Harold be away from home and country for great stretches of time, and during such times each engaged in extramarital affairs with members of their own sex. While Harold's assignations tended toward discreet one night stands, Vita entered into an emotionally volatile affair with Violet - a relationship which nearly brought her marriage to a scandalous end. Nicolson paints Trefusis as a grasping, emotionally desperate villain, indeed this reader wanted to reach through the pages of history and strangle her. Not that Vita, or Harold were without fault, but Violet is drawn as a manipulative neurotic bitch and would-be home wrecker. The Nicolson's not only survive, they endure; flourishing at their great estate called Sissinghurst, though they continue to have their affairs (Vita most notably with Virginia Woolf) for the remainder of their lives. "The Portrait of a Marriage" was hailed as a classic of biography and self-examination from the moment it was published. No fiction is quite as rich as well documented reality, and this volume proves that a hundred times over.

Interestingly, in her tribute and spoof of her dear friend Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf framed the questions that Nigel Nicolson attempted answering by surrounding his mother's confession of her affair with Violet Trefusis with his own apologia for her various affairs. Toward the end of *ORLANDO*, Woolf placed these thoughts in the mind of Vita's personification, Lady Orlando: "She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?" She answered, "She had her doubts." Of course, Woolf was writing fiction and a humorous tribute, a well as a send up of Victorian biography, so she probably didn't believe her answer, and certainly Vita, Harold, and Nigel didn't. Doubtless, Nigel's parents had a decidedly unconventional marriage. It was a marriage, though, and something of a perfect one for them, one conducted much times at a distance, in obsessive letter writing, often from necessity as Harold Nicolson served as a diplomat until 1929 and then as a politician and writer, and laced on both sides with homosexual affairs. Vita and Harold wrote constantly, both producing numerous highly regarded works of fiction, criticism, she poetry, as well as diaries, and Vita's gardening books (the National Trust now owns and maintains their second home Sissinghurst Castle and its gardens, a passion they shared). And writing, by its nature, is a solitary profession. In *PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE*, Vita works out her own feelings about her just concluding affair with Violet Trefusis, an impassioned three-year romp through England and over Europe that came within a hare's breath of ruining her marriage; that would have sunk any ordinary marriage if not for upper class social convention (ironically, what she and Violet professed to be rebelling against),

strong-willed mothers, and an almost unbelievably tolerant and loving husband. She came to understand fully Harold's love for her and her for him, and suffered and wrote of her guilt for tormenting him. That is the crux of *PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE*: in their own ways, Vita and Harold loved each other. It may not have been a conventional love or marriage; nonetheless, the foundation of their relationship was love and respect for each other. Nigel brings out their love in what must have been a difficult assignment for a son. Highly recommended to be read with an open mind. For more on Vita, an ever-fascinating woman, read the standard biography by Victoria Glendinning, *VITA: THE LIFE OF V. SACKVILLE-WEST*. For more on her affair with Violet Trefusis, who became a fine writer herself, see Professor Mitchell A. Leaska's introduction to *VIOLET TO VITA: THE LETTERS OF VIOLET TREFUSIS TO VITA SACKVILLE-WEST, 1910-1921*. And do read Vita's works, still worthy of your attention. Finally, a picture is worth a thousand words. This edition contains perhaps my favorite photo of Vita and Harold. They are on their way to the Scott hearing (Vita's mother's contested inheritance of a fortune from Sir John Murray "Seery" Scott) on July 4, 1913, where Vita is to present testimony. A paparazzi of the era snapped it a few months preceding her marriage to Harold on October 1, 1913. From left to right, are Harold, a very great space, Vita tightly next to Rosamund Grosvenor, then Lord Sackville slightly ahead. Nothing special you might say, except that Rosamund and Vita were lovers, though few viewing the photo at the time would have known.

The Book Discussion group met at the LGBT Center in NYC and discussed this book in January 2011. Everyone liked this book, some liked it a lot. It was a good book for discussion. We found the second section of journal entries to be openly sexual, rather "purple" and very erotic, which is amazing considering when they were written. While most liked the structure of the book (Vita's journal entries; discussion by her son, Nigel; more of Vita's journal entries; more explanation by Nigel; and, finally, a summary by Nigel), others found it to be rather "block-like," especially compared to Vita's lively and passionate prose. It must be difficult for a son to read his mother's unsparing diaries, and Nigel often paints his parents in glowing terms. Vita's struggle with her sexuality was richly explored, but we had to notice that her class and easy access to money must have contributed to the constant traveling and her ability to maintain lovers. (When the manipulative Violet fell ill, Vita dashed to France to feed her chicken and champagne.) We were glad that Nigel dealt with the racism of the period. But we would have liked to have known more about Harold, who also had same-sex liaisons but apparently lacked the passion that drove Vita. Only a queer pair, such as Vita and Harold, could have forged such a bond and understood and encouraged each

other's affairs in a largely open marriage.

## OK IF ONE LIKES ALTERNATIVES!!

I loved this book. It was so honest and showed the complexity of love. One of the other reviewers commented that the son never even read the letters of Vita and Violet. To clear it up, he actually has quite a few in the book so that isn't accurate. It was great through and through. I learned a lot about Vita which left me wanting to read more of her books. Buy it!

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