

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a black, long-sleeved, textured dress with a ruffled waistband and large black earrings. She is standing in front of a large, abstract mural with geometric shapes and a figure on the right side. The text is overlaid on the image.

British Art Studies

March 2019

**Theatres of War: Experimental
Performance in London, 1914–1918 and
Beyond**

**Edited by Grace Brockington,
Impermanence, Ella Margolin and
Claudia Tobin**

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Cover image: Film still, *The Ballet of the Nations*, 2018.. Digital image courtesy of Impermanence.

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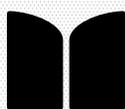
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Performing Pacifism, Grace Brockington



Performing Pacifism

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Introduction

The Ballet of the Nations was an odd book to publish in the midst of the First World War, when pacifists were a persecuted minority and the publishing industry was struggling under the pressures of paper rationing, censorship, and mobilization.¹ The story of its production points to an intersection between the peace movement and the London little theatres and is worth recounting as evidence of those overlapping networks. The author, Vernon Lee (1856–1935), was a cosmopolitan writer, known for her essays on travel and aesthetics, her ghost stories, and her erudition as a polyglot and scholar of the Italian Renaissance. She was also politically radical, a pacifist and campaigner for women’s suffrage whose outspoken objections to war alienated much of her readership and exacerbated her later obscurity as a writer.² She joined the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), a pressure group which formed in 1914 to scrutinize British foreign policy and war aims, and which opposed conscription, censorship, and the restriction of civil liberties that were increasingly a feature of the war.³ It was through the UDC that *The Ballet of the Nations* came to the attention of publishers. In the first instance, Lee brought the script to her friends, the writer Constance Smedley Armfield (1876–1941) and her husband, the artist Maxwell Armfield (1881–1972), whom she knew through the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers, which Smedley had established a decade earlier.⁴ The Armfields arranged for Lee to recite *The Ballet of the Nations* at a UDC meeting, which they hosted in their studio in Chelsea, and then at another meeting in the more public forum of the Margaret Morris Theatre on the King’s Road, which the peace campaigner Kate Courtney noted in her diary as follows:

UDC Meeting in theatre, corner of Flood St. “Vernon Lee” gave her striking allegory, “The Ballet of the Nations”, for second time. Ch. Trevelyan spoke, and a Miss Cooper Willis gave us an interesting selection from Burke and Fox about peace with revolutionary France—very apt. I was in chair. Very so-so. Audience interested—all polite.”⁵

Amongst the audience was Geoffrey Whitworth, a theatre critic and editor at Chatto & Windus, who commissioned the book for publication (Fig. 1). Armfield illustrated the text with a “pictorial commentary”, which gives the book its striking appearance. This exhibition takes the making of *The Ballet of the Nations* as the starting point for an exploration of the overlapping networks and working relationships that formed around Armfield, Morris, Whitworth, and their students and collaborators, in and beyond Chelsea

during and after the First World War. The excavation of visual and aural material begins here with Lee and Armfield's book, and with the record of the personal and political commitments that drew them together.

Exhibition

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Figure 1.

Vernon Lee, *The Ballet of the Nations: A Present-Day Morality, with a Pictorial Commentary* by Maxwell Ashby Armfield (London: Chatto & Windus, 1915). Digital image courtesy of Digital facsimile courtesy of Chatto & Windus, Penguin Random House UK, and The Estate of Maxwell Ashby Armfield.

Vernon Lee did not like Maxwell Armfield's "pictorial commentary" on her *Ballet*. A letter from her publisher suggests a showdown between artist and author: the illustrations did not "altogether meet with [Lee's] approval", because she felt that "the pictures should be realistic embodiments of the dancers in the Ballet", and "thoroughly *expressive*" as well as "decorative" in their treatment of the subject matter.⁶ Armfield proposed his friend, Norman Wilkinson of Four Oaks, as an alternative,⁷ and later commented that Lee would have preferred something in the manner of the Victorian Symbolist, George Frederic Watts.⁸ He himself felt that his rendering was faithful to the narrative. "I tried to give a sense of the horror of the bombing (not yet seen in London)," he explained, "the streams of fugitive women and children going this way and that; the exhaustion, and the final starting all over again."⁹ Yet contemporary reviewers were struck by the discrepancies between text and illustration, and by what they called Armfield's "exaggerated avoidance of the brutal".¹⁰ A century later, it is these very differences of subject matter and visual aesthetic that make the book such as a powerful witness to cultural debates during the First World War. They expose fundamental disagreements about the role of art as a weapon against war and point our attention to the world of experimental theatre in which Armfield operated.¹¹



Figure 2.

John Singer Sargent, Vernon Lee, 1881, oil on canvas, 53.7 × 43.2 cm. Collection of Tate (N04787). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 [Unported]).

John Singer Sargent inscribed his portrait of Vernon Lee: "To my friend Violet". They had met as children in Nice where their families were spending the winter, and they had in common a childhood spent travelling in a leisurely way across Europe, moving with the seasons between France, Germany, and Italy. Lee spent most of her life in Florence, moving to Chelsea only for the duration of the First World War. Her objections to war grew out of her cosmopolitan sensibility and way of life. She experienced, deeply and at first-hand, the European civilisation that seemed to be self-destructing through the waste of war and the breakdown of international relations.

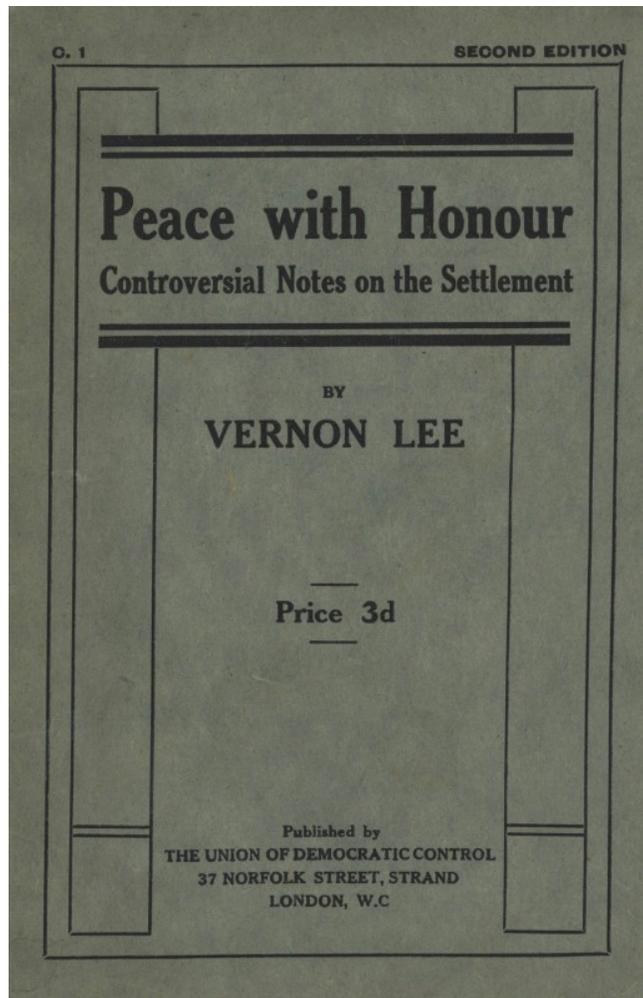


Figure 3. Vernon Lee, *Peace with Honour: Controversial Notes on the Settlement*, (London: Union of Democratic Control, 1915), front cover. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Lee campaigned against war in pamphlets and newspaper articles, as well as in the fictional form of *The Ballet of the Nations*. Her views were controversial and often unwelcome, particularly her contention that both sides of the conflict were equally to blame. She complained about the censorship of German liberal opinion in Britain and made a point of reading the German press—even when it became hard to obtain. Her pamphlet *Peace with Honour*, published by the UDC, made a long-sighted case for a non-punitive peace settlement with Germany and for freedom of debate as an active measure against war.



Figure 4.

Unknown photographer, Maxwell Ashby Armfield and Constance Smedley Armfield, undated, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

The Armfields formed a close creative partnership, as shown in this photograph of the couple at work together. Here we see her sewing and him typing, although she is better known as a writer, feminist, and founder of the Lyceum Clubs, and he as a painter in tempera. Both had attended the Birmingham School of Art at the turn of the century, then a centre for the Arts and Crafts Movement, and their work was deeply informed by Arts and Crafts techniques and ideas, as well as by Smedley's commitment to Christian Science and her encounters with European symbolism. Their move into theatre began after their marriage in 1909, when they settled in the Cotswolds and established the Cotswold Players, a company which survives to this day. At the outbreak of the First World War, they moved to Chelsea and became closely involved with the London little theatres through their new company, the Greenleaf Players.

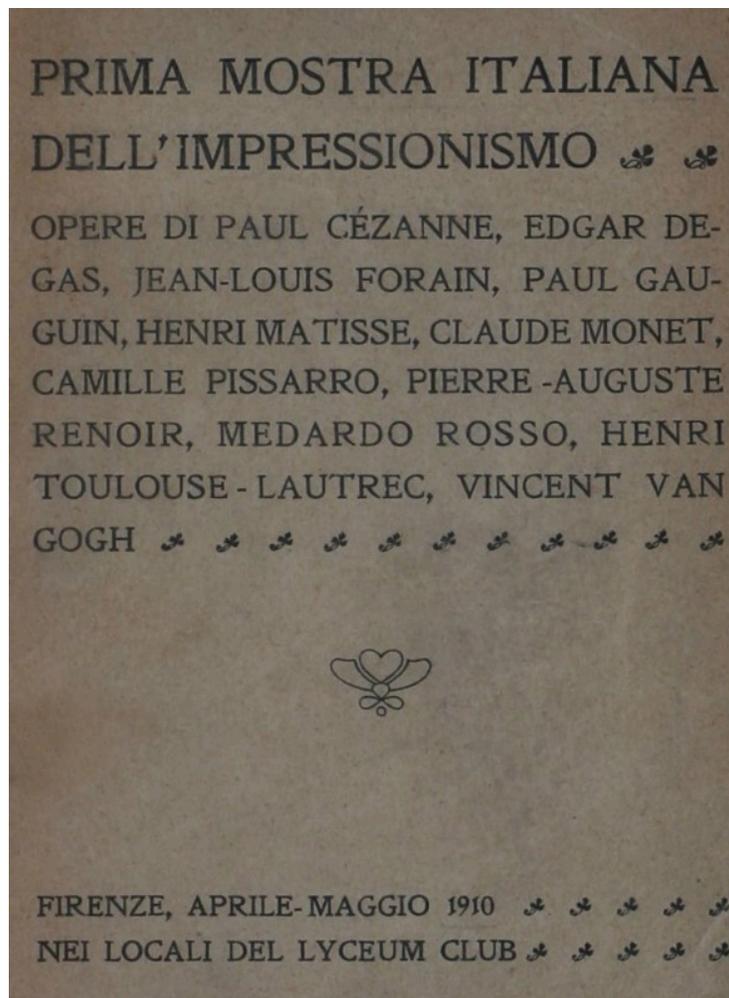
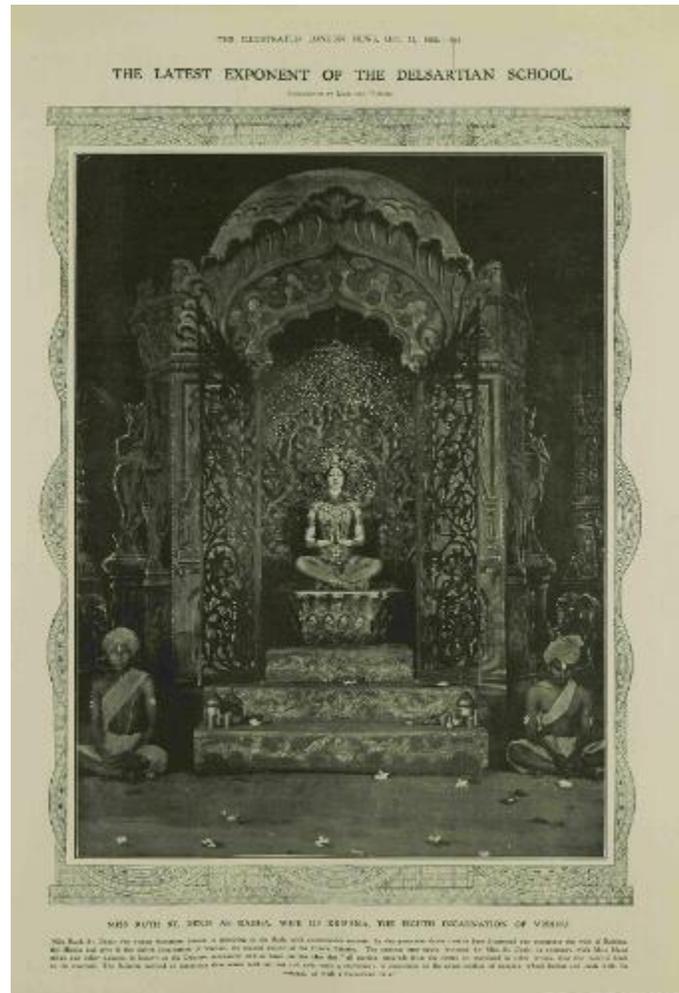


Figure 5.

First Italian Exhibition of Impressionism, Lyceum Club, Florence, April-May 1910, front cover. Collection of The Lyceum Club, Florence. Digital image courtesy of The Lyceum Club, Florence.

Vernon Lee first met Constance Smedley and her fiancé Maxwell Armfield in Florence in January 1908. Smedley wrote to her parents that she found Lee “very clever and charming and exclusive” and that they “talked about the Club”—in other words, the new branch of the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers, which was shortly to open in Florence.¹² Smedley had founded the Lyceum in 1903 as a global resource for educated women, a worldwide network of cultural and professional centres which promoted female emancipation and international cooperation, and which spread across Europe, Australasia, and North America.¹³ The image shown here is the catalogue for the *First Italian Exhibition of Impressionism*, which took place at the Florence Lyceum Club in spring 1910, and included work by Cézanne, Degas, Forain, Gauguin, Matisse, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Rosso, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Van Gogh—a mixture of Impressionists and those

whom we would now classify as Post-Impressionist, a term coined by the critic Roger Fry for his exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, which opened in London six months later. ¹⁴ It is a measure of the Lyceum's cultural ambition that it was prepared to host this pioneering display of modern art from France.



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Figure 6.

Eliss and Walkry, "The Latest Exponent of the Delsartian School: Miss Ruth St Denis as Radha, Wife of Krishna, the Eighth Incarnation of Vishnu", photograph, *The Illustrated London News*, 31 October 1908, 16. Digital image courtesy of Illustrated London News Group.

Constance Smedley's shift into theatre began during her tenure as Honorary Secretary of the Lyceum Club. Ruth St. Denis, pioneer of modern dance in the United States, was a crucial influence; they had first met through the Berlin Lyceum in 1905. ¹⁵ In 1908, Smedley promoted St. Denis's season of Indian dances at the Scala Theatre, London by organising a celebrity Gala night. ¹⁶

Smedley remembered St. Denis as “the broadest-visioned artist I have ever met”.¹⁷ St. Denis was equally impressed, calling Smedley “a radiant personality [...] In her presence nothing was impossible.”¹⁸ This is notable, because, in most other cases, there is little to corroborate Smedley’s own account of her life’s work—she has largely fallen out of the historical record.

[mul]

The “Music of the Passions” is important to Satan’s scheme to incite war in *The Ballet of the Nations*: hatred carries a “huge double-bass”, Rapine, Lust, Murder, and Famine are “fitted out with bull roarers and rattles and other cannibalistic instruments”, Science has “a first-rate gramophone tucked under her arm”—between them, they stir the Nations to a frenzy; and when they flag, it is the voice of Pity “like the welling-up notes of many harps” that revives them to a fresh lease of slaughter. Music was key to Lee’s thinking about art and it permeates her writing—both fiction and non-fiction.¹⁹ In her ghost story, *A Wicked Voice*, a composer is haunted by the voice of the eighteenth-century singer Zaffirino, which was said to be so ravishing that it could kill a woman—another case of art wreaking destruction in human lives.²⁰ Running through the story is the old Venetian air *La Biondina in Gondoleta*, which the composer sings at a soirée and then hears being sung by an unidentified, androgynous voice “of intense but peculiar sweetness”—the ghost of Zaffirino himself?

Footnotes

- ¹ For an account of the economic problems facing publishers during the First World War, see Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women’s Literary Responses to the Great War 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 52–87; and Imogen Gassert, “Collaborators and Dissenters: Aspects of British Literary Publishing in the First World War, 1914–1918” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2001).
- ² The literature on Lee is considerable, but see in particular Gillian Beer, “The Dissidence of Vernon Lee: *Satan the Waster* and the Will to Believe”, in Susan Raitt and Trudi Tate (eds), *Women’s Fiction and the Great War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 107–131.
- ³ Sally Harris, *Out of Control: British Foreign Policy and the Union of Democratic Control 1914–1918* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1996); Marvin Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Foreign Policy During the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- ⁴ Smedley and Armfield both give accounts of their collaboration with Lee in their memoirs, which are broadly, though not entirely, consistent with each other. Constance Smedley Armfield, *Crusaders: The Reminiscences of Constance Smedley (Mrs. Maxwell Armfield)* (London: Duckworth, 1929), 223; and Maxwell Armfield, “My World and I—the Cotswolds and London in War”, (1970, unpublished), Tate Gallery Archives, Tate Archive: TGA 976/3/2/10, 49–52.
- ⁵ Kate Courtney, *Extracts from a Diary During the War* (London: privately printed by the Victor Press, 1927), 50. Charles Trevelyan was a Liberal politician who founded the Union of Democratic Control together with Ramsay MacDonald. His brother, the poet R.C. Trevelyan, sheltered John Rodker when he was on the run as a conscientious objector (see the section on the Choric School part three of this exhibition). Irene Cooper Willis was Lee’s friend and eventually her executor, who published a study of the British liberal press during the First World War; see Irene Cooper Willis, *How We Went into the War: A Study of Liberal Idealism* (Manchester: National Labour Press, 1918).
- ⁶ Geoffrey Whitworth, letter to Violet Paget, 29 July 1915, University of Reading Modern Publishing Archive, Chatto & Windus, 86: 1034.
- ⁷ Whitworth, letter to Violet Paget, 29 July 1915.
- ⁸ Maxwell Armfield, “My World and I—the Cotswolds and London in War” (unpublished, 1970), 50, Tate Archive: TGA 976/3/2/10.
- ⁹ Armfield, “My World and I”, 51.

- 10 Anon., "Various War Books", *The Manchester Guardian*, 27 November 1915, 4. The book was also reviewed in *The Evening Standard*, *The Athenaeum*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*.
- 11 These debates are discussed in more detail in Grace Brockington, *Above the Battlefield: Modernism and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1900–1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 116–129.
- 12 Constance Smedley, letter to William T. Smedley, 26 January 1908, quoted in Armfield, "My World and I", 37c. In 1911, they met again, when the Armfields spent the summer in Florence, "renewing and improving our friendship with 'Vernon Lee'"; Armfield, "My World and I", 24. The history of the Lyceum Club in Florence is narrated in Donatella Lippi, "The Story of the Lyceum Club Internazionale di Firenze", 2016, <https://lyceumclubfirenze.it/chi-siamo/history-lyceum-club-firenze.html>, accessed 10 December 2018.
- 13 Grace Brockington, "A World Fellowship: The Founding of the International Lyceum Club for Women Artists and Writers", *Transnational Associations* 1 (2005): 15–22. Clubhouses opened in London (1904), Berlin (1905), Paris (1906), Florence (1908), Athens (1910), Stockholm (1911), Geneva (1912), Melbourne (1912), Auckland (1922), Amsterdam (1923), Toronto (1930), Helsinki (1932), and Vienna (1937). This list is not exhaustive. In many of these countries, more clubhouses were to follow in other cities; see www.lyceumclubs.org.
- 14 The Lyceum exhibition is discussed in Flavio Fergonzi, "Firenze 1910—Venezia 1920: Emilio Cecchi, i quadri francesi e le difficoltà dell' Impressionismo", *Bollettino d'Arte* 6, no. 79 (May–June 1993): 1–26; and Jean-François Rodriguez, *La réception de l'impressionnisme à Florence en 1910* (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 1994).
- 15 Smedley, *Crusaders*, 134–140.
- 16 Smedley, *Crusaders*, 184–185. Supporters included Auguste Rodin and George Bernard Shaw.
- 17 Smedley, *Crusaders*, 140.
- 18 Ruth St. Denis, *An Unfinished Life: An Autobiography* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1939), 92, 116.
- 19 See Shafquat Towheed, "'Music is not Merely for Musicians': Vernon Lee's Musical Reading and Response", *Yearbook of English Studies* 40, nos 1–2 (2010): 273–294; and Shafquat Towheed, "The Science of Musical Memory: Vernon Lee and the Remembrance of Sounds Past", in Katharine Ellis and Phyllis Weliver (eds), *Words and Notes in the Long Nineteenth-Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 104–122.
- 20 First published in Vernon Lee, *Hauntings* (London: W. Heinemann, 1890).

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