

(London: Macmillan, 2001)

<sup>11</sup> **Anthony Blunt: His Lives** by **Miranda Carter**

xviii pp 590 16pp plates  
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January

Thursday November 15, 2001

(New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002)

For a man whose posthumous reputation would be mired in myths and rumours, Anthony Frederick Blunt had prosaically conventional beginnings. He was born on 26 September 1907, the third of three boys, in Bournemouth. The town's reputation was much the same then as it is now. In 1914, after attending a service at Holy Trinity church - where Blunt's father had formerly been vicar - Rupert Brooke wrote to a friend, "I have been in this quiet place of invalids and gentlemanly sunsets for about 100 years, ever since yesterday week." Blunt's father, Stanley, came from a family of impecunious but respectable and devout churchmen on the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church; his mother, Hilda, was from a well-to-do family of civil servants in the Indian Colonial Service. The Blunts were pious, austere, fiercely teetotal, anti-gambling and keen on charitable works. They had no money, but they did have good connections, both inside and outside the Church. They were a junior branch of the Blunts of Crabbet Park, landed gentry with a large estate near Horsham in Sussex, whose incumbent at Anthony's birth was the infamous poet and anti-imperialist Wilfrid Scawen Blunt.

Stanley Blunt was one of nine children, three of whom had died in infancy. Born in 1870, he had grown up in the shadow of his father, Frederick - whose biography (a "sacred privilege") he had later written - and of his elder brother Walter. Frederick Blunt was a hard-working and successful career churchman who, after being made a canon of the archbishopric of York, had risen to become Suffragan Bishop of Hull in 1891, having turned down an invitation to become Archbishop of Melbourne, Australia. He had no money - he had scrimped and saved to send his two sons to public school - but he had a talent for making a good impression (a useful quality in a Church in which patrons were still very important) and for public speaking. He was made a chaplain to Queen Victoria in 1881 - an honour given in recognition of impressive preaching skills rather than intimacy with the royal family. "One of his greatest friends" was Lady Sitwell (aunt of Edith), who travelled round Italy with him in the 1890s; a "doting German Princess" followed him round the catacombs in Rome. When Stanley was born, Frederick selected a couple of influential Anglican churchmen - Dean Vaughan, a one-time headmaster of Harrow, and Dean Stanley, author of the *Life of Dr Arnold* and champion of the Broad Church movement - as godfathers. At home, however, his children "saw but little of him except at midday dinner", and on Sundays at teatime, when he spent an hour grilling his children with Bible questions, a practice Stanley continued with his own sons. When the Bishop was home, he was lavished with attention by Stanley's four "adoring" unmarried sisters and mother, who spent much of the rest of their time in charity work.

According to Stanley, his brother Walter, seven years his senior, "was acknowledged to have a remarkable personality and brilliant gifts". The Bishop "had formed the highest hopes" of his career. As a student at King's College, Cambridge, he had been taken up as a protégé by one of the university's most famous and influential dons, Oscar Browning. (Walter was rather less flattering about Stanley; writing in 1890 to Browning about his undergraduate brother after he had committed some petty misdemeanour, "He always seemed to me not deeply attached to work or thought but with a right appreciation of what is manly and Christian.") In 1898 Walter died suddenly of scarlet fever, "the greatest sorrow" their father "had ever known". Stanley, who had followed his father and sibling into the Church, slipped into his brother's shoes once again, taking over the parish of Ham, near Richmond in Surrey, where Walter had previously been vicar. Perhaps it wasn't entirely accidental that, as a child, Anthony's brother Wilfrid confused family photographs of Walter with pictures of Jesus.

Stanley was a "good mixer" who liked company, an enthusiastic sportsman, and not uncultured: he was an avid concert-goer, and had inherited from his father a taste for history, art and travel. He was "an effective preacher" with a line in Browning quotations, and he enjoyed performing.

He was liked by his parishioners, and when he left Ham he was presented with a rather sugary portrait of his two eldest sons by the painter James Byam Shaw. He was kind to small children, and a soft touch. His eldest son, Wilfrid, felt he had the classic Blunt characteristics: he was "emotional, sentimental, gullible". At the same time, all his life Stanley held to the stiff Victorian values that had been instilled in him, and there was little evidence of the liberal thinker he believed himself to be. (Even in the 1920s he regarded the delicate verses of the 19th-century aesthete Ernest Dowson as "degenerate".) In Stanley's world there was no moral ambiguity. He was sure, as his son Wilfrid recalled, "that right was right and wrong was wrong, that he knew them apart, and that the twain could never meet".

In October 1900, at the age of thirty and within two years of becoming vicar of Ham, Stanley married Hilda Master, the twenty-year-old youngest daughter of John Master, a retired magistrate from the Indian Colonial Service. Master had returned to England in 1877 with his formidable wife, Gertrude, and his family lived in a large and elegant late-seventeenth-century William-and-Mary mansion, Montrose House, in the next-door village of Petersham.

The Masters were certainly richer and, in the wearisomely precise class stratifications of England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, slightly grander than the Blunts. Scottish by origin, they could trace themselves back to sixteenth-century gentry, the Masters of Barrow Green. Hilda was, moreover, second cousin to the Earl of Strathmore, the father of the future Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother. (There was also a distant link with the Mosleys, whose youngest scion, Sir Oswald, would head the fascist Right in the 1930s.) They were quietly proud of their friendship with their near-neighbours the grand, but appallingly spendthrift, Duke and Duchess of Teck. Mary Adelaide, Duchess of Teck, a first cousin of Queen Victoria, was the famously ungainly daughter of the Duke of Cambridge, the youngest son of George III; her husband, Franz, Duke of Teck, was an underemployed German princeling, a member through a morganatic marriage of the royal house of Wurtemberg. Their daughter May, through her marriage to George, Duke of York, the future George V, would become Queen Mary. The Tecks had moved into White Lodge in Richmond, just up the road from John and Gertrude Master, in 1870. The families became friends and John Master taught Princess May how to skate. Throughout her life Queen Mary remained on familiar terms with all the Master daughters. The great secret of the family was that the Queen passed her cast-off dresses on to the Master women, who altered them and wore them with suppressed pride.

In the opinion of her eldest son, Wilfrid, who wrote two volumes of witty and candid autobiography, Hilda Master had had an unhappy childhood. Born in 1880, she was the youngest of four daughters and had been dominated by her mother, Gertrude, and bullied by her two eldest sisters, Mabel and Millie. (She was once discovered chalking "Millie is a bully" on the walls of a summer house in Richmond public gardens.) Wilfrid thought Gertrude a bit of a monster: "of a domineering disposition, my grandmother had been glad enough to leave home to marry a man whom she could dominate to go to live in a country where there were plenty of natives to bully". As a memsahib in the Indian famine 1876-8 she had poked the bellies of starving children, to check if they might be sucking them in to fake starvation. As a grandmother she forced her grandchildren to ingest every last vile piece of gristle on their plates: "If you had seen what I have seen, you would never waste food again." Her husband, John, a kindly, mild-mannered man who stuffed Harrogate toffees into his grandchildren's hot little hands and took them out boating, was banished to the smallest, darkest room in the house and coerced into giving up the solitary bottle of beer he drank at lunch because she thought it would corrupt the staff. If her friend the Duchess of Teck failed to answer her letters by return, she would send a servant to White Lodge with a pencil and paper. The two women shared "the same brand of evangelical piety and the same sense of social duty", and together engaged in a perpetual stream of philanthropic projects. "Together they bludgeoned the shopkeepers of Richmond into providing stools for their employees . . . together they waged a ceaseless war against drunkenness and cruelty and vice." This did not stop Gertrude renaming her own servants if she thought their real

names too pretentious. She spent the last thirty-three years of her life lame because after a fall in 1891 she refused to let a doctor near her coccyx.

Hilda had been a sickly child, educated at home by a second-rate governess and then at boarding school in Margate, where she had been forced to drop out of school activities and had been miserable. A bungled operation left her completely deaf in one ear. This, along with a feeling that she had missed out on a decent education, contributed to a sense of isolation, and what Wilfrid divined was an "inferiority complex".

Socially, Hilda's marriage to Stanley might have been construed as a step down. Though he was utterly respectable, her sisters had all married richer, better-connected men. The union seems to have been happy, however. Despite the ten-year age gap, the couple had a great deal in common. Both had taken on the religious beliefs, puritan attitudes, and near-obsession with performing charitable works manifested by both their families; in a quiet way, both had had sad childhoods. This had left both of them with a streak of melancholy and implicit or potential rebellion, a feeling that life did not have to be quite as uninteresting as it seemed. Hilda, moreover, was not merely dutiful, she worshipped Stanley: she "interested herself in his interests, supported him in everything, did the work of two unpaid curates and towards the end of his life, waited on him hand and foot". They honeymooned in Venice, and on her return Hilda defeated her older sister Mabel's attempt to foist her taste on the marital home. Mabel - generally held in the family to be the 'artistic' one, on the grounds that she had heard of William Morris - came in one day when Hilda was out and rearranged the furniture. Partly against his better judgement, Stanley sided with his wife. It was a story she repeated to her children.

Anthony's oldest brother Wilfrid was born at Ham almost exactly nine months after the wedding, in July 1901. The name 'Wilfrid' was in some respects a startling choice, and showed in Stanley and Hilda a streak of romanticism and a usually hidden dash of contrariness. It was a reference to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt - Stanley's most famous, exotic and embarrassing relative. He was then aged sixty-one, and notorious as an atheist, libertine, Lothario, anti-imperialist, adventurer, and not a bad poet. During the 1860s he had seduced his way across Europe, before destroying a budding diplomatic career by running off with the most celebrated prostitute in Paris (Catherine Walters, aka 'Skittles'). He had married Byron's granddaughter, to whom he was systematically and publicly unfaithful. During his travels he had become militantly anti-imperialist and virulently anti-British. He encouraged dissent among the natives in Egypt, and stood in Ireland as a Home Ruler, going to prison in 1889 for inciting Irish tenants to resist eviction. In 1906, the year before Anthony's birth, he published *Atrocities of Justice under British Rule in Egypt*. He called the First World War 'The White Man's Suicide', and corresponded with Roger Casement as he awaited execution as a traitor in 1916. Casement was stripped of his knighthood; the next man to suffer the same indignity, sixty-three years later, was Anthony Blunt.

The Blunts' second son, Christopher, was born at home in July 1904. Two years later, in 1906, the family moved to Bournemouth where Stanley had been appointed vicar of Holy Trinity, the second most important, but perhaps the most fashionable, church in the town. Anthony was born here in 1907.

The first traces of his existence are to be found in photographs of the Bournemouth rectory, a large, ugly, red-brick building next door to a home for dying consumptives. Hilda and Stanley took many photographs of the rectory garden, and the pictures have an idyllic, prosperous, Edwardian feel. As babies, the Blunt boys sit swaddled in lace; then as boys they stand unselfconsciously in sailor suits, surrounded by toys and pets, in the rectory's flower-filled garden, with its roses and artichoke grove planted and tended by Hilda, who was an enthusiastic horticulturalist. Nurse Delling, a large lady in a wide-brimmed hat and little round glasses, watches benevolently, and a large Samoyed dog called Ivan, whom nobody liked - he was a wedding present - cavorts.

There are no pictures of the rectory's interior. Inside, the Blunt home was a spartan place. Hilda had inherited her mother's frugality. Anthony's schoolfriend Tom Mynors vividly remembered

the Blunts' home in Paddington, where they moved in the 1920's, as "bleak and cheerless", and after he left home Wilfrid found his mother's domestic habits infuriatingly dismal. Hilda nursed a maddening obsession for "economising": gas fires barely glimmered, light bulbs were of the lowest wattage, and chairs and mattresses were rock hard. "You mustn't get soft, dear," she would say when it was suggested the heating might be turned up. Though able to afford the basics of middle-class life - domestic help, for example, was comparatively cheap - the Blunts lived modestly. Church incomes, like congregations, had been dropping since the 1880s, and, in comparison with those of equivalent professionals such as doctors and solicitors, vicars' earnings were declining sharply. Holy Trinity, a newly endowed parish in a wealthy part of town, yielded an adequate but far from lavish living of £150 a year, plus the same again or more in pew rents; the rectory came too. To this was added Hilda's small private income. "Never marry for money, but there is no harm where there happens to be a little," Stanley would say.

One respectable outlet for Stanley and Hilda's appetite for a little adventure was travel. Stanley had inherited his father's passion for it - the Bishop had journeyed as far as Russia in the 1870s; after her engagement, Hilda had intrepidly gone to Bad Natiheim for the waters and to Oberammergau for the Passion play. Together they had visited the Holy Land. Stanley paid for family trips by taking holiday chaplaincies at Lake Como or in the South of France, administering to British travellers.

In 1912, when Anthony was four years old, his parents' love of travel would bear professional fruit. One morning in April, Wilfrid later recalled, as he was "putting his spoonful of Sanatogen into a tumbler full of cold water", Stanley announced that the family were moving to Paris. In January he had been chosen from a shortlist of three as chaplain to St Michael's, the British Embassy church in Paris - though "with some hesitancy" according to the relevant minutes of the Colonial and Continental Church Society (CCCS), in whose gift the position was. Stanley accepted the post, "deeply sensible of the honour that had been conferred". The Blunts moved to Paris a few months later.

It was a flattering appointment: the previous incumbent had been a bishop. Notionally at least, the chaplaincy's sphere of control spread over the whole of central and northern France - though there were twenty full-time chaplains in that area. (Anglican parishes abroad are often disconcertingly large: when the Bishop of Gibraltar described the extent of his diocese to Pope Pius VI, His Holiness observed, "Then I'm a parishioner.") To the Blunts, as for most of the Edwardian English middle class, Paris was exotic, exciting, the centre of all creative things: where artists went to learn how to paint, where books, plays, fashion and music originated. But it was also a place of worrying moral laxity. Stanley told the CCCS that one of his main tasks would be to keep "young Englishmen in Paris" on the straight and narrow. "Up to the present it had been very difficult to get into touch with them, but we hope that now we shall be able to welcome them on week-nights, and by personal intercourse with them, to keep them from the temptations which all great cities provide."

To welcome the new incumbent, the CCCS agreed to buy an enormous house on the rue Jouffroy in the seventeenth arrondissement. The house had a ballroom that could take 500 people for church gatherings, and Stanley received over £1,000 - an enormous sum - to renovate and redecorate it. The Blunts' new residence was officially opened by the British ambassador, Lord Bertie of Thame, in 1913. Relations with the Embassy were cordial, but the Blunts were not really Lord Bertie's kind of people, and vice versa. Bertie was generally viewed at the Foreign Office as completely ineffectual, though he was much appreciated by the French for his fancy wardrobe. He spent his time in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, among the grander echelons of French society, and his main interests were dirty stories (he owned a huge collection of pornographic prints) and society. His wife, Fedorewna - "a dear old thing, very ugly" - was a keen poker player. Not an exact match with Stanley and Hilda Blunt, but over the years the Embassy was responsible for providing a number of holiday jobs for the Blunt boys. Embassy contacts got Wilfrid the post of secretary to the elderly Comtesse Greffuhle, one of several titled

ladies said to have been Proust's inspiration for the Duchesse de Guermantes; he was to work on a doomed project to put into a livre d'or the signature of everyone in France and England who had done anything important during the war. Another introduction led to Anthony spending a summer as tutor to the children of the art dealer Rene Gimpel. However, the family's best friend was a rich American spinster, Miss Vandervoort, who adored Stanley and bought the Blunts lavish cream teas - of which Hilda disapproved - at Pd Catalan, and gave Wilfrid his first taste of Chateau d'Yquem.

For Anthony the move to France was "an event which I think undoubtedly coloured the whole of my later development... I spent the next ten years there, almost entirely living in Paris, and therefore developed a very strong French leaning which has coloured my whole attitude towards things ever since. " Paris was the place where he began to love art. It seems particularly apposite that the streets around the Parc Monceau where he played are all named after painters: Rue Rembrandt, Rue Murillo, Avenue Ruysdael. His introduction to art came not so much from his father, but from Wilfrid, "who was six years older and was becoming a painter by the time I was growing up, and had far closer contacts, naturally, with the artistic world". Wilfrid, eleven years old when they arrived in Paris, took Anthony on expeditions to explore the city, wheeling him round on the handlebars of his bicycle. "I was the guide and my brother Anthony the eager pupil; roles that were subsequently to be reversed. " Wilfrid and Anthony went to Versailles, Saint-Cloud, Saint-Germain and Malmaison, and wandered around the Marais and the Latin Quarter. Underneath the Place Denfert-Rochereau they visited the catacombs filled with skulls; another time they travelled on a barge on one of the huge underground sewers that criss-cross Paris, passing underneath the Place de la Madeleine.

"My earliest recollection connected with works of art, " Anthony wrote, "is that I can just remember going to Louvre before the 1914-18 war. I cannot remember any of the pictures, I can merely remember the fact. " When the war started and the Louvre closed, "one was automatically compelled to look at architecture and it was perhaps for that reason that I developed an-interest in architecture which I have never lost". He later winced at his conventional early enthusiasms, which he connected with his father's taste. Walking through Paris in 1960, he told Michael Levey, a future director of the National Gallery, that as a child he had been very fond of the Pont Alexandre-III, one of the most extravagantly ornate of the Seine bridges. He spoke, Levey remembered, "as though admitting a heinous sin. More than a mock shudder went through him when I asked if his childhood taste had been so mistaken. " The Blunts were, like most of the Embassy staff, entirely oblivious of the Parisian avant-garde and its achievements in those last two years of the belle epoque: Matisse painting *La danse* and *La musique*, Picasso finishing his greatest experiments in Cubism, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* being mocked at the Armory show. They had not even heard of the Impressionists, recalled Wilfrid. They would, in any case, have entirely disapproved of them. In later years Hilda would complain that her youngest son had been taken in by that "charlatan" Picasso.

Anthony was an appealing, well-behaved, bright, skinny little boy. Wilfrid wrote, "Anthony was so obviously brilliant and successful and attractive. " The older brother - open, good-humoured and something of an innocent - would always be impressed and slightly bemused by his youngest sibling. Anthony was his mother's favourite, her 'Benjamin'. Years later she would tell people how as a very small boy he had been solicitous of her, always trying to carry her heavy luggage, and performing other small feats of gallantry. She coddled him. "My mother was very close to Anthony, " Christopher Blunt later told an interviewer. "He was slightly delicate as a child but my mother exaggerated this and would give him tonics all the time. " Christopher was left out of the Paris jaunts. Maybe he and Wilfrid were too close in age, or perhaps Wilfrid sensed in some way that Anthony and he - both homosexual - were similar and Christopher different. "I think both Anthony and I thought him a shade pompous, " Wilfrid later mused. "We had our own little private jokes about him. "

With the outbreak of the First World War on 1 August 1914, Stanley and Hilda's industry and good works came into their own. When the Germans advanced on Paris and the Embassy staff evacuated to Bordeaux in September, they sent the children to stay with Hilda's favourite sister, Winifred, in Warwickshire, and remained behind to help stranded English tourists get home. They arranged for coal and food to be delivered to the 200-300 poor English families stranded in Paris, and visited the wounded. Hilda, otherwise a model of composed industry, hid the silver in the attic of the Rue Jouffroy and saw German spies everywhere.

Once the war was under way, and the German invasion threat had abated, life returned to a semblance of normality. The children came back to Paris - Wilfrid and Christopher just for the school holidays. Hilda retrieved the silver from the attic, and Stanley signed on as an army chaplain. His reports back to the CCCS were cheerful, high-minded and patriotic. Hilda started a series of sewing circles: "Mrs Blunt... reports that in the first year, 4,289 articles were made, " ran the CCCS's 1914-15 annual report. In 1917 Stanley and a glamorous English actress called Decima Moore started a club for British soldiers on leave in Paris. At the huge hall at the Rue Jouffroy they held 'patriotic concerts', and even a recruiting meeting. According to Wilfrid, the club's main purpose was to distract soldiers from the "traditional pleasures of the French capital". In fact it was probably one of the most practically useful things Stanley ever did. The club produced 40,000 meals a month and was, according to another eyewitness, "a tremendous success", banking the soldiers' money, writing letters for them, and providing billiards, records, books and city tours - some conducted by the Blunt children. In 1917 the CCCS reported, gratifyingly, that "the chaplaincy is at all times the most important on the continent and its value had never been more evident than since the war began".

For the Blunt children the war had exciting unreality. Over Christmas 1914 Stanley took the boys on a day trip to Senlis, within earshot of the Western Front. He and Wilfrid were shown a bloodstained wall against which prisoners had apparently been shot. During Zeppelin raids the family hid in the cellar with their neighbours, and in 1916 the guns on the Somme could be heard in Paris on still nights. They even took three holidays in France between 1914 and 1918: one in Normandy (where the family are pictured on the beach, with spades and fishing nets), one in the Auvergne, and one in Fontainebleau. Some things were less fun. The winter of 1916-17 was bitterly cold and fuel was scarce, and a shell shattered the windows of the house in the Rue Jouffroy. Rationing meant that sugar, flour, butter and meat were in short supply. Money was tight. Stanley had written to the CCCS in October 1914 explaining that he and the church were seriously short of funds. Church collections had fallen from 700F to 160F and he had had no income since June; 4000F was owed on the Rue Jouffroy, and he had hundreds of "English poor" to feed. The CCCS sent him £40 a month until the end of the war.

The war served as a partial excuse for Hilda to keep Anthony with her in Paris instead of sending him off to prep school in England like his brothers. Instead he was educated by a governess and then attended the Ecole Villiers, a rather uninspiring local school, where Anthony's brother Christopher remembered they did little but recite nursery rhymes and read La Fontaine. It was a solitary life for him: his father was often travelling, his brothers came home only for the holidays. In the family album, for 1916-17 - inscribed, "To dear Mummy with best wishes from Tony, Xmas 1916" - Anthony is usually pictured on his own, a rather solemn, grown-up looking boy, occasionally joined by his brothers. In the latter, Wilfrid often has his arm protectively over his brother's shoulder.

At moments of particular danger Anthony and his brothers were sent back to England to stay with Hilda's sisters. For Wilfrid, at least, the experience was a constant reminder that the Blunts were not quite members of the club. An Easter at Baschurch in Shropshire with the domineering Aunt Mabel and her husband, Uncle Charlie, a retired soldier who had lost one of his three soldier sons in the war, left him with a sense "that the three Blunt boys had been correctly marked down as not of the stuff of which heroes are made". Christmas 1916 was spent at Downham Hall in Lancashire with Aunt Mildred and her husband Sir Ralph Assheton (whose

brother, Will, was married to Hilda's sister Winifred). Downham was a grand country house with a butler and footmen. Aunt Mildred had once berated Stanley Blunt for asking his wife to 'chuck' him a piece of toast: "We don't chuck - at Downham, " she told him. There was a family pew in the local church, talk of Eton, dressing for dinner, and a family tree going all the way back to Adam, explained at great length by cousin Ralph (pronounced 'Rafe'), who struck the Blunt boys as "so poised, so clever, so self-assured, so man-of the world". The Blunts - "or at least I", said Wilfrid - felt like poor relations, "inferior, ungrateful and even rebellious... Anyone familiar with LP Hartley's *The Go-Between* will understand how I felt. " He locked Ralph - the future Lord Clitheroe and Financial Secretary to the Treasury - in his bedroom and threw away the key.

In November 1918, the month the Armistice was signed, Stanley was awarded an OBE in recognition of his work with the troops. For Anthony, who was just eleven, the most memorable consequence of the end of the war was the reopening of the Louvre. He began to collect coloured postcards of paintings - particularly, as befitted the good son of devout parents, of religious subjects such as Botticelli madonnas. Hilda also consented to send him to prep school in England - St Peter's in Seaford, Sussex - but he seems to have spent only a short time there before returning to France, where in 1920, despite what appears to have been a fairly limited formal education, he won a scholarship, as both his brothers had done, to Marlborough College in Wiltshire, to start in January 1921.

Despite his reputation as an easy-going man, Stanley's sons did not warm to him. Wilfrid, in his memoirs, struggled to give him his due: "he was a good father to us, but I could never get close to him. His heartiness continued to jar and his views were alien to me. " The very adjectives Wilfrid used were dismissive in their faint praise: he was "mildly intellectual", "efficient" in his church work, "a very normal person". Wilfrid found his father narrow, and resented Stanley's attempts to make a man of him by making him take more exercise and cold baths. As for Anthony, he never spoke of his father, and his schoolfriends found Stanley noteworthy aloof. Tom Mynors, who stayed with the Blunts in the early 1920s, said of him, "I didn't like him at all, I found him vain and rather pompous, and in fact he paid very little attention to either of us. I felt he had a bit of folie de grandeur, he'd met a lot of high-flying types, and his latest parish was a bit of a come down. " Another friend spoke of Anthony's "silent father".

But Stanley did pass on to his sons his love of travel, history, music and art. It was a sign of his influence that Wilfrid became an artist and art teacher, Christopher an expert on Anglo-Saxon coinage, Anthony an art historian. Anthony later wrote, "I was brought up from an early age, really almost unconsciously, to look at works of art and to regard them as of importance. " Stanley's tastes were conventional. He was "a strict Ruskinian" - not Ruskin the radical thinker, the one-time critic of Victorian greed, exploitation and industrialism, but Ruskin the devout evangelical-Protestant champion of the Gothic, the hectoring voice of Victorian sanctimoniousness, who tied beauty and nature to morality. "I was not encouraged to look at anything later than medieval architecture, but that I did look at with great enthusiasm," Anthony added; and Wilfrid remembered that on a holiday to Belgium in 1925 he was "rapped over the knuckles for enticing Anthony away from the Gothic, which alone it was respectable to admire". Hilda, Wilfrid felt, was "a far more remarkable person" than her husband. "Most mothers help us, wittingly or not, to see through our fathers," he added. Unlike her husband, she was extremely shy, but she had her mother's toughness and puritanism. She strove always to do the right thing, especially when it was painful to her. She persevered in the constant social round of being a vicar's wife, even though her shyness and deafness made it excruciating for her. Wilfrid remembered her reproving him for trying to avoid children's parties: "'You mustn't become a hermit, dear boy,' my mother would say... Perhaps the very fact that [parties] were distasteful meant that they were good for one. " She also possessed an "aggressive truthfulness", which seemed almost physically to impel her to speak her mind. She once told a woman behind her in the Embassy church in Paris to sing more quietly. The woman replied that the Psalms encouraged one "'to make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob!' 'Yours,' replied my mother, 'is

not a joyful noise." Her forthrightness was accompanied by a profound dislike of losing any argument: "her sharp little cry of triumph at having outwitted her opponent betrayed how much the victory meant to her".

The Blunt boys adored her - "a woman of infinite goodness and almost puritanical simplicity, incapable of the whitest of lies" - and, as they grew up, were infuriated by her. Wilfrid found himself exasperated by her conservatism and crankiness: her manic frugality, her neurotic fear of non-existent burglars, her disapproval of all physical comforts. All these traits may have been a manifestation of a deeper disquiet. After her death in 1969 her sons discovered a series of poems that she had written in the 1920s, at a time when the family was still all together, and ostensibly all was well. They expressed a deep pessimism about the world as a place of irreparable iniquity and misery.

She certainly never knew that two of her three sons, Wilfrid and Anthony, were homosexual. According to Wilfrid, she realised that Anthony was agnostic only in the early 1960s, when she read the autobiography of his old schoolfriend Louis MacNeice. Both sons knew that their parents' views would make any acceptance of their sexuality impossible. In his memoirs, Wilfrid jibed at his parents' unquestioning certainty of their own rightness in all things, and the narrow strip of opinion that their world view occupied: those stricter than they were "sadly narrow"; those more "advanced" were to be "regretted". He relished the occasions when their naivety and stiffness prevented them from seeing the world as it really was. He particularly enjoys telling the reader that a Medici print of a Vermeer "girl in a yellow bodice", sent to him along with devotional works by his Blunt aunts, in fact portrayed a prostitute receiving payment, and that his father's favourite godfather, Dean Vaughan, had been sacked from Harrow for paedophilia.

How ambiguous, how complicated was the impact on Anthony of his childhood's constricting respectability, narrow morality and physical austerity is evident in just a few examples. By the time he was a teenager he had developed a loathing for all sport as strong as his father's love for it, as well as a deep and lifelong antipathy to the works of John Ruskin. However, he remained an absolutely dutiful son to his mother. He was in thrall to her - as an adult he visited her at least once a week, invited her without fail to his lectures and exhibition openings, and never complained about his obligations towards her as Wilfrid did - and at the same time longed to escape from her. Outside her company he drank and smoked and was fiercely anti-religious, actively homosexual and opposed to her morality and values. But when his spying was threatened with exposure he contemplated suicide rather than subject her to the shame of his disgrace. He never shook off the spartan habits of his parents, never developing a taste for physical comfort, let alone luxury. At least one friend was convinced of the connection between his austere childhood and his later Marxism. "Anthony and his brothers had been brought up in an atmosphere which combined strictness with a strong missionary urge," wrote Cecil Gould. "He himself was always zealous in supporting what he considered good causes. "