

SQUARE HAUNTING

by Francesca Wade

391 pages Tim Duggans/ Random House

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Imagine! Five iconic feminists, scholars, pioneer writers assembled between the covers of one enchanting group portrait: American poet, classicist, memoirist Hilda Doolittle (1886-1961); Novelist, poet Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)-- author of world famous detective stories which introduced Lord Peter Wimsey; Cambridge don, inspiring classicist Jane Ellen Harrison (1850-1928) -- Russian linguist, bold passionate visionary, Virginia Woolf's mentor and model; medievalist, globalist, revolutionary Eileen Power (1889-1940) -- best known for restoring women to medieval studies; and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) -- whose words, work, legacy changed everything for women in literature and public life.

They have been brought together because they all lived in Bloomsbury, on Mecklenburgh Square. One imagines them walking arm in arm in nearby Russell Square Park, or reading together down the street at the British Museum. But they lived upon the square at different times, and except for Virginia Woolf and Jane Harrison it is unclear if they ever met. Still, they were contemporaries who embarked upon the path to women's fulfillment Virginia Woolf heralded -- economic independence and a Room of One's Own.

Francesca Wade chose them as she explored the freedom, independence, education they sought to enhance creativity and enlightened vision. Wade's vivid writing and profound research gift us with portraits of five radical, peace loving, inspiring women, much needed at this moment. The book is filled with surprises. One learns, for example, that Freud told HD she was "the perfect bisexual." HD reported his analysis to Bryher with relief: "I have tried to be man or woman.... but I have to be both." Five years before, Woolf wrote in A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: "a great mind is androgynous" and women writers erase gender confinements. [86]

Wade presents her subjects in order of their residency. Hilda Doolittle moved to 44 Mecklenburgh Square in February 1916 -- while World War raged and her marriage to Richard Aldington began to unravel. It was a bitter, introspective, defining time for HD -- which generated self-understanding, powerful poetry and luminous novels -- many not published until decades later. HD had moved to London to be with her husband, then in the military. But the war unleashed fluidity -- affairs, transgressions, duplicity, confusion, pain. Wade pursues HD's journey beyond the limits imposed on her by the arrogant men in her life -- her astronomer father Charles Doolittle, Richard Aldington, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, John Cournos, Cecil Gray -- to her liberated woman-loving true self with stunning detail. Readers may enjoy the unhappy complexities. Then, on 17 July 1918 HD met Bryher.

Born Annie Winifred Ellerman, "daughter of a shipping magnate said to be the richest man in England," Bryher changed her name to publish anonymously, express her

affiliation with the Scilly Isles, "and to escape ready identification with a single gender." Enchanted by HD's poetry, Bryher considered HD "a Greek come to life again," and was simply in love. Curiously, Wade identifies their 40 years of love and commitment as an "open relationship." The details are dramatic, but more complicated than presented here. Significantly, Bryher's love for HD and her daughter Perdita, born on 31 March 1919, freed HD to combine "motherhood and creative work" which evolved into new subjects and many books for 40 years. Bryher was married to her second husband, novelist Kenneth Macpherson, also in love with HD -- and the couple adopted Perdita Aldington, renamed Perdita Macpherson. They lived together for many years, dividing their time between Switzerland, London, and Paris. Home schooled mostly by Bryher, Perdita became fluent in French, German and Italian -- which served her well during World War II when she volunteered for military service and was assigned to famous intelligence headquarters at Bletchly Park; she was later transferred to London and worked for the Office of Strategic Services. After the war, her OSS American friends suggested she visit her mother's home country, where she remained.

HD's commitment to breaking barriers for women soared, and her creative power flourished -- culminating in *BID ME TO LIVE* (1960) and *HELEN IN EGYPT* (1961). Ultimately Perdita Macpherson Schaffner printed her mother's unpublished novels written during the 1920s, and reprinted all HD's works with her introductions and stunning commentary. Later, she created a library to celebrate the life and works of her two mothers, filled with books they wrote and read, on the greensward of her home in East Hampton, New York.

Wade presents Dorothy Leigh Sayers, one of England's famous and most private writers, with much previously unknown information. She moved into HD's very apartment in December 1920 shortly after her graduation, with a First in Modern Languages, from Somerville College, Oxford. Although she had completed her studies five years before, it was Oxford's first graduation to acknowledge women. Vera Brittain, in *THE WOMEN OF OXFORD*, named Sayers the one pre-war Somerville graduate "who made the most lasting impression on her contemporaries and on the world." Brilliant, musical, and interested in theology, Somervillians were "astonished" when her interests turned to detective stories. But they were immediately celebrated, "renowned as the kind great minds use for relaxation." [VB 123)

Sayers loved London, cherished her independence, did not want to teach, and sought a life in publishing. Quickly her imagination filled with the antics of one Lord Peter Wimsey -- and by 1922 *WHOSE BODY* was launched in Britain and the US. (119) Wade details Sayers' complicated journey -- her fierce independence, her complicated relationships, her often grotesque imaginings through many novels and essays with perception and jollity. Wade is particularly clear about Sayers' life-long secrecy regarding her rejection of newly available birth control and the birth of her son in 1924 -- presented to her cousin "who made a living fostering children." [124}

In 1926 Dorothy Sayers married Captain Atherton (Mac) Fleming, an infirm journalist -- who suffered from what today might be called PTSD. Ultimately they lived separately, and after intense discussion decided neither wanted their creative time disturbed by the presence of Sayers' son John Anthony -- who was told Sayers was his cousin. He discovered she was his mother "by accident" when he applied for a passport. [137] Sayers wove her many agonies into her novels. Lovers of Sayers' works from *WHOSE BODY* to *GAUDY NIGHT* will be delighted by Wade's portrait.

Like Dorothy Sayers, too little is known about Eileen Power -- even by those of us who benefited from her splendid work on medieval women. According to Wade, when a lecturer at Girton College, Cambridge, Power received a traveling fellowship for a year's global exploration -- funded by French banker Albert Kahn who sought "to widen [the] narrow academic mind." At 31 she embarked alone in 1920 for an "intrepid journey" to Egypt, India, China, Japan, and North America. Generally, the only woman present, in India she met with journalists, politicians, anti-colonial activists. Already a pacifist and member of the Labour Party, Eileen Power was delighted to meet with Mahatma Gandhi -- and discuss possible futures. From Delhi, she traveled north to the Khyber Pass along the Silk Road -- closed to women by British law. Border officials wrote her hosts that she broke the law, and "made the crossing in male disguise." [196] She spent two months in China, and reported to the fellowship trust: "my heart is irrevocably given to China" where young women agitated for the vote "more stridently than ever did the suffragettes." Actually her heart was given to people, all the people of the world, now with new empathy informed by her travels. [197]

While away she read in the *TIMES* of INDIA "the perfectly disgusting news" that Cambridge refused to follow Oxford's example of admitting women to full university membership. Shortly thereafter she was surprised by an invitation to join the economic history faculty of the London School of Economics -- where she had spent two years as a student. Founded by Fabian socialists, LSE was and remained "the center of London's left-wing activities." [207] While sailing from Japan to Canada, after conversations with Bertrand Russell and Dora Black, she decided it was time to change her life. She returned to London via New York in September 1921 -- began her new job, and found her home on Mecklenburgh Square.

Although Wade tells us her sisters mysteriously "burned most of her personal papers" after her sudden death, Wade explores her historical and economic works from medieval people to world citizenry, and her acclaimed international lectures and BBC broadcasts with intense research and insight. We learn that she loved fashion, jazz, and dancing; she resigned from Soho's Gargoyle Club when she and her African-American friend Paul Robeson were denied entrance; and she was determined to extend education for all -- through public lectures, broadcasts, children's books. She rejected the idea of a "woman's perspective," and insisted on "the outlook of a PERSON." The issue is "good books or bad books" not male or female books. She demanded that history be the subject of all people, "a living history" of everyone -- on behalf of equal rights for people of "all races, nations, classes."

According to Beatrice Webb, LSE during the 1920s and 1930s was comprised of a "circle of rebellious spirits and idealist intellectuals," who sought democratic socialist change. [211] Unlike Girton, women were not "separate and subordinate" at LSE. Power's work flourished, her home was a social center, her dinners and "kitchen dances" attracted scholars, students politicians, literary notables -- including Virginia Woolf. [213]

One outstanding student particularly attracted Eileen Power -- a socialist activist born in Russia, Michael Moissey Postan, called Munia. She enhanced his studies, and hired him as a research assistant. Subsequently, she proposed him for a lectureship and invited him to co-teach her popular medieval economic history seminar. Student, collaborator, companion for 20 years, she and Postan became lovers. When Power was 48 and Postan 39 they were "quietly married" in 1937. [240-24] Readers will enjoy every detail of their journey.

Wade's research into Eileen Powers' peace activism is particularly notable. Treasurer of the Cambridge branch of the pacifist Union of Democratic Control (UDC), she joined the League of Nations Society and agreed with her friend HG Wells that the League might fulfill "the great idea of World Peace and a unified mankind." Power sought to transform historical study to teach a "common history" to recognize the reality of what Wendell Willkie subsequently named: ONE WORLD. After MEDIEVAL PEOPLE, Power focused on international studies: If the League of Nations were "ever to become real" children must understand their shared humanity. The goal was to educate for "world citizenship." She and her sister Rhoda introduced BBC educational broadcasts to achieve that goal.

By 1935 as war loomed, the League of Nations seemed doomed and Power despaired. She feared a return to barbarism, the triumph of horror -- the end of empathy and freedom, the quest for a global community. The war devastated Eileen Power. In 1939 she prayed "this blasted war were over. My mind has been blown out like a candle. I am nothing but an embodied grumble, like everyone else." On 8 August 1940, while shopping at a department store, she died of a heart attack.

[303=5]

Wade concludes with Virginia Woolf -- who along with her mentor Jane Ellen Harrison changed the story for creative women. Harrison moved to Mecklenburgh in 1926 when she was 75, having left her illustrious but embattled Cambridge career (1898-1922). Her life as a classicist began in 1874 when as "the best performing candidate" on Cambridge's General Examination for Women, she was awarded a scholarship to become "one of the first twenty boarders" in Newnham College's pioneering "Lectures for Ladies." But Victorian male chauvinism continued. Women were refused degrees, remained barred from the university library, and only men were recognized as scholars. In her splendid essays and book, VIRGINIA WOOLF, JANE ELLEN HARRISON AND THE SPIRIT OF MODERNIST CLASSICISM, Jean Mills provides many connections: Women were not admitted to degree programs at Cambridge until 1923; they were not officially members of the faculty until 1926. At the turn of the century, Harrison worked to create and expand

new "fields of psychology, anthropology, and archaeology." She traveled widely, her research was stellar, her findings in Greece monumental, but she was rejected even when enthusiastically nominated for academic appointments.

For decades Harrison studied with archaeologists, gave popular lectures throughout England and across Europe -- generating public enthusiasm for Greek art and the classics everywhere she spoke. Finally, when 48, she was invited to return to Newnham as a research fellow. According to Wade, Harrison was intensely popular among the students -- "who would flock to her rooms" for "cigarettes and whiskey" and aspects of her exciting research -- subsequently published as *PROLEGOMENA TO THE STUDY OF GREEK RELIGION* (1903) and *THEMIS* (1912). Harrison had evidence of a different world order -- which included long ignored matriarchs -- with mysterious powers and respect. Dionysus was not merely the "Son of Zeus." His mother -- "Semele, an ancient Thracian earth goddess," was erased by the patriarchy. Moreover, women were "the heart of community life" and religion. They were powerful, and dangerous. It was time to look at antiquity through our mother-lines. [152f]

In 1904, while in Cambridge recovering from a suicide attempt, Virginia Woolf's cousin Florence Maitland took her to Newnham to meet Jane Harrison. It was the beginning of their 24 year friendship, collaboration, publishing alliance. Over the years, Harrison became more embattled at Cambridge -- criticized as a free-thinking heretic, who defied tradition. Her insistence on women's "freedom to know" -- to learn, to argue -- shattered boundaries and limits. Then, during World War I, "like Woolf and HD," Harrison connected militarism with "the tyrannies of patriarchy." She joined the UDC, defended Bertrand Russell, and wrote blunt essays: "With Every Nerve in My Body I Stand for Peace." She also established a relationship with poet/novelist Hope Mirrless, initially her student. During spring break in 1915 they traveled to Paris and studied Russian -- which introduced "new life" to Harrison's writings.

Wade's coverage of the Harrison-Mirrless relationship, including Virginia Woolf's jealous response, is extraordinary. In 1922, when Harrison left Newnham, they returned to Paris -- close to the Russian exile community -- and Harrison embarked on a translation of 17th century archpriest Avvakum's autobiography, written in prison. Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press published it in 1924, and encouraged Harrison's new work, the *Book of the Bear*. As Modernist international culture globalized, Harrison felt triumphant: We had long "aspired to be citizens of the world," and as we celebrate difference peace may be won.

In 1926, they returned to London -- Mirrless at work on her novel *Lud-in-the Mist*, and Harrison's interests expanded further. She returned to the classics, learned Icelandic, and studied Persian, "the richest civilization I have touched yet." After she read *ISLAM AND THE DIVINE COMEDY*, she began to explore the historical/literary roots of Orpheus, Dante and Eastern religious writings. [355] But her body betrayed her -- and she died on 15 April 1928. For the next 30 years Hope Mirrless worked on her biography, but gave up. Harrison virtually disappeared until the work of Jane Marcus and Jean Mills- Wade notes that her "lasting memorial" was in *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*, which

Woolf initially delivered as a lecture at Newnham on 20 October 1928. Certainly **THREE GUINEAS** published in 1938 remains their enduring contribution to hope for peace and survival.

THREE GUINEAS, Woolf's explicit pacifist-feminist essay, embraces Harrison's vision and legacy. Jean Mills suggests their works should be read together "as significant texts" to build the international movement for peace studies and conflict resolution. [37] Leonard and Virginia Woolf moved into Mecklenburgh Square in August 1939 on the eve of World War. The "preposterous masculine fiction" of war had haunted her; and **she called** Britain's declaration of war "the worst of all my life's experiences." [249-51]

According to Wade, during their year on the square, throughout the blitz and mounting horror, Virginia Woolf completed "astonishing" works -- which enabled her momentarily to keep her mind off Hitler: A splendid biography of Roger Fry, a memorable novel **BETWEEN THE ACTS, and other works**. In addition, Woolf lectured to women's clubs and feminist symposiums about the war. In 1914 Harrison denounced "the herd mentality" that enabled an uncritical community to follow a treacherous leader into war and disaster. In August 1940 Woolf's essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air-Raid" defined Hitlerism as the aggressive manifestation of a society's "desire to dominate and enslave." The war could only be won by "destroying aggressiveness, tyranny, insane love of power" everywhere -- in the home, where women are diminished, in politics where brutes triumph.[267-8] Such change required a new history, new considerations -- to "look back through our mothers" and discover a time when "art drew communities together." As the bombs fell, it was clearly time "someone invented a new plot" that followed the concerns of women in history and work to regenerate creativity, civility, cooperation, harmony. [291]

On 7 September 1940 the blitz began. The nightly bombing lasted over a year, incinerating Mecklenburgh Square and killing over 13,000 people in London. The Woolfs were "marooned" to the country. By January Virginia Woolf was in despair, and everywhere they traveled the bombings followed. On 28 March 1941, she walked into the River Ouse -- leaving notes to comfort her beloveds and her opus to inspire the future.

In this moment of self-isolation, Wade had gifted us with a perfect book to look back through our creative mothers and find hopeful paths to the Voyage Out -- and join their rebellious journeys for peace, freedom, justice.

18 March 2020