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Book Review: Francesca Wade, *Square Haunting: Five women, freedom and London between the wars* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020; ISBN: 978-0-57133-065-2)

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Mecklenburgh Square is a leafy and unobtrusive location at the eastern edge of Bloomsbury. It sits just above Lamb's Conduit Street, abutted by Coram's Fields on one hand and Grays Inn Road on the other, and between 1916 and 1940 it was the home – at one time or another – to the Imagist poet H.D., the crime novelist Dorothy L. Sayers, the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, the economist Eileen Power and the novelist Virginia Woolf.

Francesca Wade's *Square Haunting* is a collective biography of these women, focused on the years each spent in Mecklenburgh Square. The setting is emblematic, and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* emerges as the guiding principle of the book. In Bloomsbury the women found the cheap rents and vibrant intellectual communities that gave them the freedom to write. Crucially, several of them found boarding houses, recently and reluctantly sanctioned, in which respectable young women could live alone for the first time. An advertisement for lodgings in the square described a 'Boarding House for lady workers and students: breakfast and dinner, full board on Sundays: gas fires and rings on own meters: moderate terms'. Thanks to Woolf and her circle, Bloomsbury has become synonymous with a specific kind of artistic bohemianism. By allowing the device of Mecklenburgh Square itself to choose her subjects, however, Wade illustrates that Bloomsbury was, as the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand recalled, 'a much wider area than Virginia Woolf's drawing-room in Tavistock Square'. In the interwar years it was the home not only of

UCL and the Slade School of Fine Art, as well as The London School of Economics, but also of the Ladies' College in Bedford Square and the Reading Room at the British Museum. At the end of *Square Haunting* Wade finds each woman's application for admittance to the Reading Room; there is something moving, even intrepid, about their private declarations of ambition.

Wade argues that the time spent in Mecklenburgh Square, no matter how brief, marked each of her subjects and represented a turning point in their lives and careers. For many of them it was the stage for a conflict between the artistic and professional lives they wanted and the possibilities of a fulfilling domestic life. Each found herself confronted with those compromises necessary for women 'cursed with both hearts and brains'. H.D. only lived in Mecklenburgh Square for two years, at the height of the First World War. She found herself reluctantly caught up in a *ménage à trois* between her husband Richard Aldington and his lover, who lived upstairs. D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda lodged with them for a while, and he recommended that H.D. 'kick over [her] tiresome house of life' if she wanted to be a successful writer. She returned to this period again and again in her later work, rewriting it in a series of autobiographical novels, trying to parse out what exactly about that time had affected her so deeply.

In 1920 Dorothy L. Sayers moved into the very same room that H.D. had left two years before. It was where she had the idea for her Lord Peter Wimsey novels and the address she later gave to their heroine, Harriet Vane. She fell in love with her neighbour, a writer named John Cournos (a one-time friend of H.D.'s), who dismissed her novels as 'lowbrow nonsense' and refused to countenance a relationship on anything other than his own exacting terms. Years later she conceived a delicious revenge by killing off his thinly veiled avatar in the novel *Strong Poison*. Sayers' detective fiction is notable (and beloved) for her careful handling of the love affair between her two protagonists. She would not allow Harriet Vane to be married on 'unequal terms', and so worked hard to imagine for her a domestic relationship that would support her artistic ambitions – ambitions not so different from Sayers' own.

For Jane Ellen Harrison, the move from Newnham College, Cambridge to Paris in 1922, and then to Bloomsbury, was an opportunity to raze and reinvent herself. She spent the last two years of her life in what she called a 'queer little house' on Mecklenburgh Street with her younger companion Hope Mirrlees. Together they consorted with Russian exiles and translated folktales. With Harrison, Wade introduces

the other major theme of *A Room of One's Own* – the lack of a ‘tradition’ of female writers into which a woman might imagine herself. In that lecture Woolf invoked Harrison (alongside Vernon Lee and Gertrude Bell) as a rare example of a female scholar, and one engaged in correcting the limitations of prevailing historiography. Harrison’s books, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908) and *Themis* (1912), were dynamic reassessments of the classical goddesses and how they reflected the changing status of women in ancient Greek society.

Another denizen of Mecklenburgh Square dedicated to the discovery of alternative histories was Eileen Power, who emerges as one of the unexpected heroines of the book. While the other women’s time in the square amounted to a handful of years between them, Power lived there for almost two decades. She moved to Number 20 to take up a lectureship at The London School of Economics in 1922 and filled the house with ornaments brought back from her travels in China. A famously glamorous academic, Power presided over an alternative, political Bloomsbury set and hosted regular parties in her kitchen. When asked to give an account of herself for *Who’s Who*, she described her interests as ‘travelling and dancing’ – she was known to fly to Paris to buy a new dress whenever she had an article published. Power had begun her career in Cambridge, but said, when she left for London, ‘I don’t know whether Girton or the study of medieval nunneries did more to convince me that I was not born to live in a community!’ The study was published in 1922, the same year that she arrived in Bloomsbury, under the title *Medieval English Nunneries*. It was followed in 1924 by *Medieval People*.

In an article in the *Paris Review* (‘A Good Convent Should Have No History’, 6 February 2020), Wade notes the influence of *Medieval English Nunneries* on Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *The Corner That Held Them*. This influence emerges not only in the nuts and bolts of period research, but also in an entire historical project that Warner and Power shared – one which privileged those people, often women, whose lives had been obscured from the historical record. *The Corner That Held Them* is historical fiction concerned with the kind of history that, as Power had written, encompassed ‘not only great individuals, but people as a whole, unnamed and undistinguished masses of people, now sleeping in unknown graves’. These alternative histories were also to be the subject of Virginia Woolf’s planned ‘Common History’ of literature, begun at Mecklenburgh Square along with her unpublished essay ‘Anon’. She intended to follow ‘the progress of Anon from the hedge side to the Bankside’ and to account for both ‘the germ of creation’ and ‘its thwarting; our society; interruption:

conditions'. It was a project she never completed. Mecklenburgh Square was to be Woolf's last home in Bloomsbury, but Wade shows that it was her home during a period of ferocious creativity.

Square Haunting is not a 'group biography' in a traditional sense, nor does it attempt to be. In fact, precisely because direct relationships between her subjects are not Wade's focus, the few times that they do interact are thrilling, almost novelistic. The women's lives intersect unexpectedly – a shared landlady, a lover, a book exchanged. Woolf once spent an evening sharing chocolate creams with a civil servant at one of Eileen Power's 'kitchen dances', and when Power married her long-time colleague and lover Michael 'Munia' Moissey Postan in 1937, friends proposed a toast 'to Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey'. More than a group, Wade sets out to capture an entire generation of women who were born in the nineteenth century but came of age in the twentieth, at the moment when the possibilities of an independent life had just begun to open up.

This is a hugely readable book, and one subtly working within the same tradition of alternative history that it celebrates. In 1913 Jane Ellen Harrison wrote that 'there still remains in the minds of many thinking persons a prejudice to the effect that only certain kinds of knowledge are appropriate to women ... the province of women was to feel: therefore they had better not know'. *Square Haunting* suggests that the provinces of women – hard-won and easily forgotten – are often hidden in plain sight, if only we take the time to check the census records.

Note on contributor

Hester Styles Vickery is a bookseller at John Sandoe Books in London. She was the winner of the Keats-Shelley Essay Prize 2017, and has introduced and selected several collections of poetry for the Crane Classics series, published by Mount Orleans Press.