

Elizabeth Crawford: ‘Spirited Women of Gower Street: The Garretts and their Circle’

The spirit that imbued the women I shall be discussing was that of enterprise and – as a corollary of enterprise - reform. For during the last quarter of the 19th century – and well into the 20th - from two Gower Street houses Agnes Garrett, her cousin, Rhoda, her sister, Millicent Fawcett, and their friend, and later sister-in-law, Fanny Wilkinson, worked to transform not only the political and educational status of women, but also the home surroundings of Britain’s burgeoning middle class, the nature of the accommodation available to middle-class working women, and last – but by no means least – the physical geography of London.

No 2 Gower St today bears an English Heritage blue plaque commemorating it as the home of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who led the campaign to enfranchise women. But in the late 19th century the house announced itself as the home of a very different enterprise. As a journalist from the *Women’s Penny Paper* observed in 1890, it bore ‘a neat brass plate upon the dark green door [informing] the public that here is the residence of A & R Garrett’. By this time ‘R. Garrett’ - Rhoda Garrett - had been dead for eight years, but the firm of ‘A & R Garrett House Decorators’ lived on, conducted by her cousin, Agnes, who continued to live at 2 Gower Street with her widowed sister, Millicent, and her niece, Philippa. It was from 2 Gower Street that Philippa embarked on her studies at Newnham, the college of which her mother had been one of the founders. Her resulting success - placed ‘above the senior wrangler’ in the 1890 Mathematics finals - was hailed as a milestone in the history of women’s education. The Garrett connection with 2 Gower Street continued until 1938 when, three years after Agnes’ death, Philippa gave up the tenancy. We know that next-door-but one there was no advertising plaque on the door of

6 Gower Street, but, from 1896, here lived and worked Fanny Wilkinson, landscape gardener to the Kyrle Society and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. Sharing the house was her sister, Louisa, soon to marry the youngest Garrett brother. The proximity of these two households was no coincidence, their members for years having shared a close friendship and a similar outlook.

Agnes and Millicent were daughters of Newson Garrett, a Suffolk maltster, whose entrepreneurial adventurousness brought prosperity to his family and who, with the notable assistance of his wife, Louisa, produced daughters of spirit and determination. In 1865, after a single-minded struggle, his second daughter, Elizabeth, had become the first woman to qualify in Britain as a doctor and had opened a dispensary in Marylebone that had developed into a hospital, housed, from 1890, in a carefully-designed building on the fringes of Bloomsbury, opposite St Pancras Church.

Rhoda Garrett, Agnes and Millicent's cousin, was the daughter of an impoverished Derbyshire vicar. Since he was unable to support her at home, she had seemed doomed to a lifetime of governessing, the only respectable 'profession' open to young women of middle-class upbringing, little education and no training. Rhoda was, indeed, employed as a governess for a short time, but clearly felt that life held greater possibilities. What she lacked in family fortune she made up in personality. Ethel Smyth, the composer, for one, was smitten: 'How shall one describe that magic personality of hers, at once elusive and clear-cut, shy and audacious - a dark cloud with a burning heart'.

Compared to Rhoda, her Suffolk cousins were comfortably off. None of Newson Garrett's girls had any need to work, each being given an allowance of about £100 a year. Once married, three of the daughters devoted themselves to family life. Although

Millicent also married - at 19, she ensured an entrance to the public world of politics by choosing as a husband Henry Fawcett, professor of political economy at Cambridge and a future Liberal MP. Agnes, considered one of the more tractable of the Garretts, was for some years left to occupy the position of the eldest 'daughter-at-home', a position from which correspondence shows she was keen to escape. In 1871 this she achieved, by joining forces with Rhoda to begin a professional training for a new career - as a 'house decorator'.

Why 'house decorating'? Well - why not? Here were two women, still young, who clearly - in the words Elizabeth Garrett once used of herself - had 'felt an increasing longing for some definite occupation, which should also bring in time a position and a moderate income'. Although, apparently, there were no other women house decorators working professionally at this time, it was a very suitable area of trade in which women might engage. Rhoda Garrett, who had already achieved a certain renown as a speaker for the suffrage cause, in 1876 remarked to the audience of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, 'that 'woman's sphere and woman's mission is one of the most important problems of the present day, but here, at least, in the decoration and beautifying of the house, no one will dispute their right to work. If woman would rightly undertake this work and would study to understand the principles upon which all art - decorative art as well as the higher branches of art - is based, they would not only thereby increase their own sources of happiness, but in thus extending the gracious influence of the home, they would help to raise the position of household art, and thus render a real service to the nation.' In this way house decoration might be considered an agent of reform - both carrying with it a moral imperative and furthering the woman's

cause. It was this lever that Agnes Garrett used to prise open the door of the paternal home and escape into the world. In a similar fashion Elizabeth Garrett had neatly finessed middle-class society's expectations, by training for work that carried with it a professional status while, by ministering to the sick and poor, not transgressing too flagrantly woman's gendered role.

The 'studying' that Rhoda mentions translated itself into an apprenticeship. And the necessity of apprenticeship – of a professional training - runs as a motif through the Garrett approach to the task of reforming women's work opportunities. In 1875 Agnes made clear her views on the subject: 'I think the thing which it is most important to impress upon women is the necessity of a thorough and systematic training in any work which they intend to do. The *bete noire* of women has hitherto been the idea that they "can do anything". Upon examination this generally is proved to mean that they can do nothing well, not from natural incapacity, but from want of training.'

Rhoda and Agnes Garrett were received as apprentices by John McKean Brydon, who was to reap the benefit of the Garrett connection, becoming the architect of several Bloomsbury-based Garrett enterprises – the New Hospital for Women in the Euston Road, the London School of Medicine for Women in Handel Street, and the Ladies' Residential Chambers in Chenies Street. He ensured the women received a very practical apprenticeship and at its end, in mid 1874, 'R & A Garrett' began their fledgling business in a flat behind Baker St station, moving, in mid-1875, from there into no 2 Gower Street. By doing so they demonstrated their independent spirit – for at the time Bloomsbury was a distinctly unfashionable choice of neighbourhood, Gower Street's late-18th-century brick architecture being deemed dull and monotonous compared with the stucco

splendours of Kensington. But in their book, *Suggestions for House Decoration*, published in 1876, the Garretts set out their reasons for preferring Bloomsbury, specifically comparing the construction and finish of a house in, for instance, Bedford Row, with one in South Kensington, approving the former's 'solid fittings inside, the mahogany doors, the wooden wainscots that never chip, and the carefully-constructed joinery of the window frames and sashes', and wishing that 'the fashionable world of London may one day return and live in the houses which were built in the solid and unpretentious style so much in accordance with the best characteristics of the English people'. This sympathy with the 18th-century was a reflection of the Garrett political philosophy - liberalism. Free-thinking individualism was best realised in domestic surroundings that eschewed aristocratic glitter and glamour.

But by the 1870s Gower Street had come down in the world and it was not only its architectural style that was unfashionable; most of the houses were in multi-occupation, nearly every one a boarding house. In order to restore the reputation of the area the Bedford Estate began to require that new leases were granted only to private tenants. Thus in May 1875 a new 21-year lease was granted on 2 Gower Street to Edward Clarke (who owned other leases in the vicinity) and Rhoda and Agnes Garrett became its tenants. They required a house of that size in order to accommodate not only themselves - and their office - but also, in the school holidays, several of Rhoda's half-siblings - now orphans - as well as a housekeeper, a housemaid, a cook and Charles Essam, their live-in painter/decorator. When the lease ended in 1896, it was renewed jointly by Millicent Fawcett and Agnes Garrett.

Between 1875 and 1879 Rhoda and Agnes Garrett worked entirely from 2 Gower Street but in 1879, after achieving some success at the 1878 Paris Universal Exhibition, they opened a warehouse at 4 Morwell Street, just across Bedford Square from their home. Tucked behind Tottenham Court Road, then London's furniture centre, this entire road, formerly Tavistock Mews, had been torn down in 1878/9 and rebuilt. Rhoda and Agnes Garrett were the first tenants of their building and here they held stocks of furniture, carpets, wallpaper, and textiles – all of which they themselves designed – and here they held occasional exhibitions. As Agnes was to continue paying rents and rates on the warehouse until mid-1900, we can assume that for over 20 years the firm of 'R. & A. Garrett' generated sufficient work to justify this outlay.

But the work of interior designers is ephemeral. That of artists and architects such as Whistler, Godwin, and Wilde may possibly lend itself to reconstruction, their papers- and those of their patrons - having been preserved. Agnes Garrett did not fare so well. A chance to save a collection of her letters was lost when the British Museum Library (as it then was) agreed to take the letters written to her by her cousin, Edmund, but specifically declined those she had written in return. As the period covered was that of Edmund's editorship of the *Cape Times* around the time of the Boer War, his letters were considered of worth, Agnes' insignificant. However, intermingled with the South African politics, Edmund's letters contain tantalising mentions of Agnes' decorating commissions, allowing one to regret the loss of information about her work that might have been gleaned from the other half of the correspondence. So, as it is, the work of the Garretts, whose intention was to banish surroundings that were obtrusive or strident - anything that, in fact, shouted out 'preserve me', has all but disappeared from view.

Of those of their clients whom it has been possible to identify, most were either members of the extended Garrett family or close friends. However, a business could not have been run for so long on such a basis and must have attracted a wider range of clients. It is known, for instance, that Agnes Garrett decorated the home of the eminent scientist, Lord Kelvin, but the decoration of his house is not a subject on which his biographers dwell. We know, too, that they decorated the London home of Mrs Catherine Buckton, who, before moving to the capital, had been a member of the Leeds School Board and who, in her book, *Comfort and Cleanliness*, mentions that ‘The Misses Garrett, who decorated the house for us, greatly improved the entrance and staircase by artistic windows, to admit both light and air, and made every room, from the basement upwards, look cheerful and pretty by covering the walls and woodwork with light papers and paint, that have proved most durable, to the great surprise of those who use dark papers and paint on the plea of economy and to hide the dirt’. No record of the Garretts’ decoration of the Holland Park house of James and Margaret Beale has survived, although some of the furniture they designed for it has, removed to the Beale’s country house, Standen in Sussex, now run by the National Trust. The most comprehensive surviving description of the Garretts at work comes from the diary of Hubert Parry, the composer, who, with his wife, Lady Maude, employed Rhoda and Agnes to decorate their London home. Lady Maude was not particularly sympathetic to the Aesthetic style, remarking in 1888 of a Garrett exhibition room set ‘.. saw Agnes’s dowdy room. All her furniture covered with old men’s trousers and the walls painted a bilious yellow – of a different shade than the carpet.’ However, her husband had written in 1876 of a fortnight’s stay at 2 Gower Street, that ‘to live in their house is a very great deal of

happiness in itself. The quiet and soothing colour of the walls and decoration and the admirable taste of all things acts upon the mind in the most comforting manner. I was quite excised of the vulgar idea that everything ought to be light & gaudy & covered with gilt in London.’. When the Garretts were in his employ Parry recorded in his diary fascinating details of the attention they paid to drains as well as drawing rooms.

But what did these rooms look like? Every mention of the Garretts’ own house echoes Parry’s verdict, stressing the comfort of the surroundings, a marriage of artistic taste and practicality, and it is here in Bloomsbury that we can best catch traces of the Garrett spirit as rendered in furniture and furnishings. When a journalist interviewed Millicent Fawcett for the *Women’s Penny Paper* in 1890 she described how, ‘Being rather early for my appointment I had a few minutes’ leisure in which to observe the apartment where Mrs Fawcett evidently passes a good deal of her time, for an old-fashioned bureau was standing open covered with papers and writing materials...The bureau was cunningly ensconced in a corner by the fireplace, beside which projected a gas bracket holding a couple of opal-coloured globes, though the rest of the room appeared to be lighted with candles. Artistic and tasteful as the room was, comfort was evidently a primary consideration; the drapery, which was so pleasant to the eye, served to keep off possible draughts; the seats were low and easy, the floor was warm and soft with bright-coloured rugs, and above all one felt able to move about without the risk of upsetting some valuable ornament. There was plenty of china, but it was safely reposing in a chiffonier.’ This last being a reference to the china-mania that was the mark of the ‘Aesthetic’ decorator, the Garretts could take quiet satisfaction that even in their positioning of china they were deemed judicious.

You can see how well this description accords with these pictures - used to demonstrate 'the right way to organise the room' – as set out in the Garretts' book, *Suggestions for House Decoration*. My researches have convinced me that these illustrations – and others in the book – were taken from real life – that the Garretts illustrated their book with views of rooms in 2 Gower Street. Here are the bureau, the gas globes, rugs and the china cabinet, as described by the journalist. But within the pictures there are even more specific references to Garrett designs. We can see here items of furniture known to have been designed by the Garretts. In this drawing we can see, to the left, a corner cabinet. An identical piece survives at Standen, originally part of the Beales' London house. Also at Standen are a daybed and a chair both of which appear in the illustration from *House Decoration*.

Although the details of the plaster work on the frieze and of the pattern of the painted ceiling are only hinted at in the Garretts' book illustrations, the frieze and the ceiling of the first-floor back room of 2 Gower Street are still in place, conserved by the University of London, which owns the building. The ceiling was the work of Rhoda and Agnes Garrett and a writer records that, 'Some friend, calling upon them, reported that, though the interview was interesting, the ladies could not be seen, as they were up on a scaffolding, lying flat on their backs close to a ceiling which they were painting'. The ceiling of the back room is painted with, in the centre, a delicate pattern of flowers, with portraits of poets around the edges. At first sight the ceiling decoration might appear at odds with one's idea of the Aesthetic home of the period. However the Queen Anne revival was nothing if not eclectic and what might, very loosely, be termed the 'Adam style' of ceiling decoration fitted well with the Sheraton-influenced furniture that the

Garretts were then designing and which conformed to their idea of what best exemplified the values of the bourgeois ascendancy.

One of Agnes Garrett's specialities was the design of chimney pieces and panelling, probably the largest single items approximating to 'architecture' that a woman at that time was likely to design. No identifiable trace of panelling remains but by chance it has been possible to uncover (literally) one chimney piece that can be proved to have been designed by Agnes Garrett, having been presented by her in April 1890 to the newly-built New Hospital for Women, the fiefdom of her sister Elizabeth. Investigation in the photographic records reveals that, as originally designed and installed, its 10-foot width was balanced by a high overmantle. The room in which it was placed was, in its original incarnation, lined with bookcases designed by Agnes Garrett to complement the fireplace. The aim here, and in her domestic interiors, was to recreate the effect of a late 17th or early 18th century panelled room. One of her pupils, Millicent Vince, wrote much later of Agnes Garrett: 'her most beautiful work was, I think, in her panelled rooms. When you look at one of her rooms – its mantelpiece, its cupboards, its panelling and its mouldings – you see at once how a room should be, and become, a single work of art; and then, when you live in it you discover that each thing within that work of art has been made also to serve exactly its own purpose and use. A decorator's work, like an architect's is unsigned, but I should always know a Garrett room as soon as I went into it'.

Of the range of artefacts designed by the firm of 'R & A Garrett', it has been possible to trace only one example of a wallpaper – 'Garrett Laburnum' - reproduced by Millicent Vince in her book on interior design as a sliver of a black and white photograph. From

this tiny piece of evidence, a wallpaper artist has created a length which is included in the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Gallery, due to open in June at the new UNISON Centre which incorporates some of the former Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital building in the Euston Road.

The Garretts also designed carpets and metalwork. Of all their light pendants, candle sconces and door finger plates, information on only two has survived – 1887 wall lights, photographs of which are held in the Design Register of the National Archives. Of the carpets, other than a description there is no trace. Some of these and some of the wallpapers are known to have been manufactured by women, presumably a patronage extended by one woman-only firm to another.

It was not only from domestic buildings associated with her family that Agnes Garrett's business benefitted. As already noted, she was involved with the interior design of the New Hospital for Women, having been successful – against firms such as Crace and Shoolbred – in tendering for its first decorating contract. In June 1891 the Managing Committee of the hospital recorded that. 'In sending in the tender Miss Garrett proposed that casts [should be put] in the four large wards,' Italian plaster casts – mainly of women and children – were, indeed, hung in the wards. It would appear that it was to give to the patients an experience that she herself enjoyed at home that Agnes suggested this addition to the hospital's decoration scheme. For at 2 Gower Street similar casts can still be seen, both inside, and on the back wall of the house, easily viewed from Malet Street.

Agnes Garrett was involved not only in house decoration, but also with supplying, for working women like herself, purpose-built accommodation, providing a like-minded community with safe and comfortable dwellings. In 1888, the *Englishwoman's Review*,

giving notice of the formation of the Ladies' Residential Chambers Ltd, of which the directors included Agnes Garrett and James Beale, stated that 'It is proposed to erect in the first instance a block of building somewhat on the plan of industrial dwellings.' The site chosen was on Chenies Street, running between Gower Street and Tottenham Court Road. The Ladies' Residential Chambers Company, which was to prove effective for over 50 years, held its first directors' meeting at 2 Gower Street in March 1888 and agreed that 'a book be opened in which the names and addresses of applicants for rooms be entered in order of application, and that in allotting rooms the Directors reserve the right to give the preference to women earning their own livelihood'. This was a policy that was to underlie the vetting of applicants at least until the beginning of the First World War. A temporary notice board for the Ladies' Residential Chambers was erected at the Garrett warehouse, and their former pupil-master, John McKean Brydon, was appointed architect of the Chambers, which was opened by Millicent Fawcett in May 1889. The block was rebuilt after the Second World War, having been badly damaged by bombing, and is now rather plainer than the original, having lost its Queen Anne detailing, turreted corner, round-headed dormers and hooded shell doorcase.

The Ladies' Residential Chambers proved so popular that in 1896 it was extended down Huntley Street, increasing the number of sets of rooms from 22 to 37 and creating a new dining room in the basement of this addition. The concept of a communal dining room was central to the ethos of the Chambers and every care was taken to make the room as attractive and artistic as possible. A bas relief, depicting 'Hope, Charity, Faith and Heavenly Wisdom', which had been commissioned from Ellen Rope, the sculptor, to decorate the Women's Building at the Chicago 1893 World Columbian Exposition and

which had now been brought back across the Atlantic, was bought by the Chambers Company and erected over the two fireplaces and in the intervening alcoves of the new dining room. 'Hope' remains, over a fireplace, with 'Charity' in the alcove. Quite recently a change of ownership of this flat, which is one of two which, with an intervening passageway, now comprise what was the dining room, revealed the dado of tiles that was part of the original decoration. The dining room was maintained until at least the 1930s, causing those in charge endless trouble.

Among those with shares in the Ladies' Residential Chambers Ltd was Fanny Wilkinson who, from 1885 conducted her business as a landscape architect, first, from 15 Bloomsbury St (later renamed as 241 Shaftesbury Avenue) and then, from 1896, from 6 Gower Street. The daughter of a socially-concerned Manchester doctor, she and her sisters had been close friends of the Garretts since at least the early 1880s. They were also well acquainted with Bloomsbury; in 1881 Fanny's sister, Louisa, an art student, was lodging in the Gordon Street home of the clerk to All Saints Church. There is no doubt that Fanny Wilkinson could have remained comfortably at home, living in Middlethorpe Hall, the family's lovely early-18th century house on the outskirts of York, but instead she chose to forge for herself an independent career. For, after inveigling herself onto a course at the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening, a course intended for male artisans rather than an upper-middle-class woman, Fanny Wilkinson became Britain's first female professional landscape gardener, acquiring employment with both Octavia Hill's Kyrle Society and the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association. Both bodies were intent on reclaiming London's overgrown burial grounds – bringing dead ground back to life to provide pleasure and rational recreation for the living.

In the course of a practical career lasting 20 years, Fanny Wilkinson was responsible for laying out over 75 public gardens for the MPGA, spanning London from Wandsworth to Plaistow and from Camberwell to Haverstock Hill. The gardens ranged in size from large parks, such as Vauxhall Park, Myatt's Field in Camberwell and Meath Gardens in Bethnal Green, to small spaces such as the garden of the Ironmongers' Almshouses, Hackney (now the Geffrye Museum). Because the Bedford Estate administered most Bloomsbury squares Fanny Wilkinson had less opportunity to effect change here than in, say, the East End. But it would seem that her very first project was undertaken in Bloomsbury, helping the Kyrle Society lay out of St George's Gardens, just north of Coram Fields. For the MPGA in Bloomsbury she tidied up odd corners, planted trees and re-designed Red Lion Square and the disused burial ground of St Giles.

Both Fanny Wilkinson and Agnes Garrett practised what they preached, offering younger women the opportunity of training for a career by welcoming pupils into their offices. So, one must imagine those two Gower Street houses busy with the comings and goings of a succession of pupils, as well as those of clients, family, friends, journalists, politicians and the members of the innumerable committees – political, educational, horticultural, business and medical – that were supported by the Garrett circle. *Pace* the blue plaque, it was not only through the Westminster House that the reforming spirit of these Gower Street women breathed, but through the middle-class house and flat and through the hospital ward, and, even more literally, through the parks and gardens of London.