

IMAGINARY BLOOMSBURY: DYNAMITE AND PETER PAN

In 1864 a Working Women's College opened at 29 Queen Square, a typically philanthropic and educational Bloomsbury institution where the lecturers were such as Dr Furnivall and Harriet Martineau, and the pupils typically a laundress called Miss S., who could quote Browning and Tennyson and give chapter and verse.¹ For this worthy College Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a note, published in *The Academy* in October 1874, describing the College and announcing that it was now liberally opening its doors to men as well as women, but in a draft of this piece he included an appropriate description of its location, Queen Square, a place, he wrote, which

seems to have been set apart for the humanities of life and the alleviation of all hard destinies. As you go round it, you read, upon every second door-plate, some offer of help to the afflicted. There are hospitals for sick children, where you may see a little white faced convalescent on the balcony talking with his brothers and sisters and the baby, who are below there, on a visit to him and obstruct your passage not unpleasantly...There is something grave and kindly about the aspect of the Square that does not belie the grave and kindly character of what goes on there day by day.²

The children's hospital that Stevenson is describing is not the famous and surviving one in Great Ormond Street, but another in Queen Square, imagined and then realised by two nurses at the Great Ormond Street Hospital, round the corner. They noticed that children with chronic joint diseases could not be afforded the prolonged bed-rest they needed at Great Ormond Street, so the two nurses contacted leading luminaries in overlapping medical and social circles and organised an appeal which raised enough funds to purchase a house, 19 Queen Square, on the other side from the Working Women's College. There in 1867 they opened 'The House of Relief for Children with Chronic Diseases of the Joints', which expanded into two more houses, Nos. 17 and 18, and acquired the patronage of the Princess of Wales, becoming in consequence The Alexandra Hospital for Children with Hip Disease.³

Queen Square, we know, was a location for institutions of a 'grave and kindly character', as Stevenson noticed, but why did Stevenson know the Square and write about it? The solution to this mystery, as often, is a love story.

In July 1873 he visited a rectory in Suffolk where a cousin lived, the wife of a Reverend Cambridge Professor Babington, a rector and teacher. There by chance Stevenson

encountered another guest, Frances Sitwell, a lady separated from her husband for reasons now obscure, although Mr Sitwell was described as 'a man of unfortunate temperament and uncongenial habits' - whatever light that may dimly shed.⁴ Mrs Sitwell, the estranged wife, was considered a lady of fascinating charm, although this is not obvious or even apparent in photographs. Stevenson, aged 23, 'a slim youth in a black velvet jacket', was more than a decade younger than Mrs Sitwell, and he made friends first with her young son, aged ten, then with herself, and soon with her friend, Sidney Colvin, whom she summoned to the rectory 'to meet a brilliant and to my mind unmistakable genius called Robert Louis Stevenson'.⁵ Stiff and difficult Sidney Colvin was to become Stevenson's closest supporter and friend over the course of his life and Mrs Sitwell was to become - eventually - Mrs Colvin, Lady Colvin. Meanwhile, Stevenson fell passionately in love with her, as we can tell from the effusions in his letters to her (hers to him were destroyed at her request).

About a year after her meeting with Stevenson, Mrs Sitwell got a job as Secretary of the Working Women's College at 29 Queen Square, a job Stevenson did not at first approve of: 'it sounds like coarse work - work not good enough for you'.⁶ She took the job which he thought beneath her, nevertheless, and moved to a new address nearby, in Queen Square, where Stevenson wrote to her in July 1874, so that she 'would get a note in your new lodgings'.⁷ Her new address was No. 2 Brunswick Row, a little byroad off the side of the north-west corner of Queen Square, part of the square but separate, a little byway no longer in existence, lost somehow, somewhere, beneath the President Hotel, although still existent fictionally in the modern *A to Z*.

That summer of 1874 a crisis seems to have been reached in their relationship, for which we have no detailed explanation, although Colvin did notice his wife's tendency to kindle dangerous flames which he called 'masculine combustions', which she would gently quench and turn into 'grateful and contented friendship'.⁸ Stevenson's letters to Fanny Sitwell are convincing evidence of such 'masculine combustions' and have naturally aroused suspicions of some possible 'carnal congress' between them, a crude physical reality that has been rudely but credibly rebutted.⁹ In any case, whatever the carnal facts that can be imagined or denied, we can now see why Stevenson knew Queen Square.

In October 1874 he published his piece about the Working Women's College at Queen Square, and we know from his letters to Fanny Sitwell that he visited her at her lodgings in Brunswick Row, Queen Square.¹⁰ His long letters to her continued after the apparent emotional

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crisis, and she was called Madonna, presumably to transfer her from lover to mother, if not exactly saint, and distance her from 'masculine combustions' let alone 'carnal congress'. From cold, windy, autumnal Edinburgh in 1875 he wrote to her that 'I hope the trees of Queen Square shake off their red leaves in still air'.¹¹ The next summer in 1876 he wrote from Swanston Cottage, the Stevenson family summer home in the Pentlands, confessing that in the previous Spring (of 1875) he had haunted her vicinity:

I was several times very near Queen's [sic] Square, but went away again. I once went down Southampton Row, and felt in a fine flutter in case you should come out of Cosmo Place. But you didn't.¹²

Cosmo Place was - and is still - the pedestrian passageway between Queen Square and Southampton Row, the passageway from which Fanny Sitwell did not emerge to R.L. Stevenson. So much, then, for the real Queen Square.

Fanny Sitwell became the consort and later wife of Sidney Colvin, hostess of social and professional events at his lodgings in the British Museum - another Bloomsbury institution, of course - and Stevenson met and married another separated Fanny, the American Fanny Osbourne, in 1880. In the autumn of 1884 Stevenson's wife collaborated with him in some fantastical and silly stories he formed into a publishable shape. The resulting feeble thriller does anticipate later London literature - the terrorist bomb-plot novel (Conrad's *The Secret Agent*) and detective fiction (Conan Doyle's first outing for Sherlock Holmes, *A Study in Scarlet*) - but all the brief references to Stevenson's novel in his correspondence are about the mundane necessity of making money. In the concocted result, some stories based topographically in London are connected artificially by a fascinating lady with too many aliases and disguises and not enough personality to achieve credibility as a character. In the concluding episode, 'Desborough's Adventure: The Brown Box', she is encountered at the lodgings of an impecunious young man named Harry Desborough, who is trying to make some money by working as a detective:

Mr. Harry Desborough lodged in the fine and grave old quarter of Bloomsbury, roared about on every side by the high tides of London, but itself rejoicing in romantic silences and city peace. It was in Queen Square that he had pitched his tent, next door to the Children's Hospital, on your left hand as you go north: Queen Square, sacred to humane and liberal arts, whence homes were made beautiful, where the poor were taught, where the sparrows were plentiful and loud, and where groups of patient little ones would hover

all day long before the hospital, if by chance they might kiss their hand or speak a word to their sick brother at the window.¹³

This is recognisably the Hospital for Children with Hip Disease, as described in Stevenson's draft of his piece for *The Academy*, so we may notice that, although Queen Square has moved from fact to fiction, it has kept its poor attendant children on the pavement. 'Desborough's room was on the first floor and fronted to the square', Stevenson's story continues, but his hero liked 'to sit and smoke upon a terrace at the back, which looked down upon a fine forest of back gardens, and was in turn commanded by the windows of an empty room'.¹⁴

At one of these commanding windows appears a fascinating lady, Señorita Teresa Valdevia, a mysterious Cuban who has taken the empty room and tells mesmerised Desborough a tale, originally imagined by Fanny Stevenson, American but not Cuban, about pirates, voodoo and treasure. Desborough is taken in by this tale, which does not deceive or please the reader nearly so much, and he is enraptured by its fascinating narrator, who is not Cuban either, for the factitious Señorita is an alias for a Clara Luxmore, a member of a secret society of incongruously evil and bumbling terrorists. In her room at Queen Square the brown box of the episode's title ticks ominously.

'Is it', he asked hoarsely, 'an infernal machine?' Her lips formed the word 'yes'... 'God in heaven!' cried Harry. 'And the children's hospital! At whatever cost, this damned contrivance must be stopped!'¹⁵

But 'from the box...

a sudden catch was audible, like the action of a clock before it strikes the hour... Harry, throwing one arm over his face, with the other clutched the girl to his breast and staggered against the wall. A dull and startling thud resounded through the room; their eyes blinked against the coming horror; and still clinging together like drowning people, they fell to the floor. Then followed a prolonged and strident hissing...; an offensive stench seized them by the throat; the room was filled with dense and choking fumes.¹⁶

The bomb made by a simultaneously desperate and incompetent bomb-maker, inconsistently imagined but significantly named Zero, has failed to detonate. 'Oh, poor Zero!' cried the girl with a strange sobbing laugh' (an appropriately incongruous effect). 'Alas, poor Zero! This will break his heart!'¹⁷ Such is the conclusion of Stevenson's novel, *The Dynamiter*, except that the bungling bomb-maker, Zero, supposedly both comical and horrible, explodes himself by accident at St.

Pancras Station.

The Dynamiter, 'Price One Shilling', was published in April 1885 and the next episode in the story of Stevenson's Queen Square came later that year, with a letter from James Payne, a popular novelist and literary editor, who passed on to Stevenson the humorous protest of Payne's daughter, the wife of the editor of *The Times*, that Stevenson had made fictitious use of her factual house in Queen Square, No. 16, which was indeed, like Desborough's house in *The Dynamiter*, 'next door to the Children's Hospital', which occupied Nos. 17, 18 and 19.¹⁸ Stevenson's reply to Payne took up and reworked this joke about the interaction of real and imaginary Bloomsbury. 'I beg to explain', he wrote:

how it it came about that I took her house. The hospital was a point in my tale; but there is a house on each side. Now the true house is the one before the hospital: is that No. 11? [No: it's No. 16.] If not, what do you complain of? If it is, how can I help what is true? Everything in the *Dynamiter* is not true; but the story of the Brown Box is, in almost every particular; I lay my hand on my heart, and swear to it. It took place in that house in 1884; and if your daughter was in that house at the time, all I can say is she must have kept very bad society. But I see you coming. Perhaps your daughter's house has not a balcony at the back? I cannot answer for that; I only know that side of Queen Square from the pavement and the back windows of Brunswick Row. Thence I saw plenty of balconies (terraces rather); and if there is none to the particular house in question, it must have been so arranged to spite me. I now come to the conclusion of this matter. I address three questions to your daughter.

1. Has her house the proper terrace?
2. Is it on the proper side of the hospital? [Yes.]
3. Was she there in the summer of 1884? [No: she married in 1885.]

You see I begin to fear that Mrs Desborough [the former fake Señorita] may have deceived me on some trifling points... If this should prove to be so, I will give your daughter a proper certificate; and her house property will return to its original value.¹⁹

So Stevenson's story about a house in Queen Square was derived from a point of view in Brunswick Row, and perhaps Harry Desborough and the enticing, but not Cuban, Clara Luxmore derive from a real couple, Stevenson and Fanny Sitwell, at that Brunswick Row address, and not from the other real couple, Stevenson and Fanny Stevenson, joint authors of the desperate *The*

Dynamiter? In passing we may note that Stevenson's first question, about the balcony or terrace at the back of No. 16, cannot easily be answered by a walk in the Square, round the corner from where I live. That house at No. 16, and those at Nos. 29, and at No. 2 Brunswick Row, are no more, no more in reality, that is.

In March 1885, while Stevenson was in Bournemouth negotiating the publication of *The Dynamiter* and then correcting its proofs, another Scotsman arrived at St Pancras Station. In Gray's Inn Road he bought a copy of the *St. James's Gazette* containing a piece he had written, which he read several times (he says) over a breakfast he bought in the same road, before walking into Bloomsbury down Guilford Street (which runs past Queen Square) where he found some temporary lodgings. He stayed there in Guilford Street briefly before moving more permanently to a cheaper room at No. 8 Grenville Street, 'a room', he wrote later in his third-person memoirs, 'not much larger than a piano case':

it was merely the end of a passage, and it was only able to call itself a room because it had a door. It looked on to a blank wall, two or three yards away, with a dank tree between him and the wall. When he stood on the window ledge, as he sometimes did for company, he could count the leaves on the tree. It is there still.²⁰

Barrie's room and the house in Grenville Street are no longer 'there still'. (Or is that his room, on top of the kebab shop?) But the tiny street where he emerged from his room to eat four 'halfpenny buns from a paper bag', or 'baked potatoes from the oven in the street', is still there, although lacking these amenities.²¹

That room with its view of a blank wall was once, if not still, in real Bloomsbury, and one can only wonder about its relation to imaginary Bloomsbury, which is the location, 'in a rather depressed street', for the house of the Darling family in Barrie's most famous play:

It is a corner house whose top window, the important one, looks upon a leafy square from which Peter used to fly up to it...The street is still there, though the steaming sausage shop has gone...That is what we call the Darling house, but you may dump it down anywhere you like, and if you think it was your house you are very probably right. It wanders about London looking for anybody in need of it, like the little house in the Never Land.²²

We have authorial licence to dump the Darling house anywhere we like, therefore, but Barrie says he has placed it in Bloomsbury because he lived there too, and it is tempting to pretend that the

square it was on the corner of was Queen Square, but the street he lived in ran into Brunswick Square, not Queen Square, so perhaps, translating a street oven into a sausage shop, we may imagine the Darling house on the Brunswick Square corner of Grenville Street - perhaps, if we want imaginary Bloomsbury to be true. What is striking, in any case, is the two windows in supposedly real and imaginary Bloomsbury, in Barrie's memoirs and his play, one looking out onto a 'blank wall' and the other opening the way to Peter Pan - and Neverland.

The two Scotsmen never met - in Bloomsbury or anywhere - but Stevenson in Samoa corresponded with Barrie, by then in his house, which is still there, at the north of Kensington Gardens, where he wrote *Peter Pan*. Repeatedly, humorously, Stevenson made the call to Barrie to 'Come to Vailima', the name of his house (meaning five streams or waters, 'vai').²³ Again in July 1894 he continued the invitation, a friendly, familiar running joke: 'I tell you frankly, you had better come soon.'²⁴ When it was too late, Barrie wrote in memoriam:

When I came to London there was a blank spot in it; Stevenson had gone. It could not be filled till he came back, and he never came back...Had he lived another year I should have seen him. All plans arranged for a visit to Vailima...²⁵

So they never met in Bloomsbury but planned to, or imagined to, in Vailima - not exactly Neverland, but nearly there. Back in Bloomsbury, of course, there is still a children's hospital round the corner from Queen Square, in Great Ormond Street, where there is a little statue of Peter Pan, in memory of a perpetual inheritance from Barrie - the profits from *Peter Pan*.

- ¹ See Godfrey H. Hamilton, *Queen Square: Its Neighbourhood and Its Institutions* (London, 1926), 52.
- ² Stevenson, draft, quoted in Hamilton, op. cit., 53. This passage was not included in the less picturesque piece in *The Academy*, 10 October, 1874, p. 406.
- ³ See Hamilton, op. cit., 79-81.
- ⁴ E.V. Lucas, *The Colvins and Their Friends* (London, 1928), 64.
- ⁵ Lady Colvin, 'My First Meeting with R.L.S.', in *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Rosaline Mason (Edinburgh and London, 1922), 87, 88.
- ⁶ Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (New Haven and London, 1994-5), I, 457.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 29.
- ⁸ Sidney Colvin, quoted in Lucas, op. cit., 341.
- ⁹ J.C. Furnas, *Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* (London, 1952), 84, who finds such congress unlikely, and see Ernest Mehew, *Letters*, I, 48.
- ¹⁰ See, e.g., Stevenson, *Letters*, II, 125.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 164.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 177.
- ¹³ Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, *The Dynamiter* (London, 1885), 138.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188-89.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ¹⁹ Stevenson, *Letters*, V, 173-4.
- ²⁰ J.M. Barrie, *The Greenwood Hat* (London, 1937), 20.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ²² J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, I, in *'Peter Pan' and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 87.
- ²³ Stevenson, *Letters*, VIII, 206, and see 321-2, 325.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.
- ²⁵ J.M. Barrie, 'An Echo', in *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. cit., 291-2.