

Wednesday, 21 July 2021

Clare Mackail



Georgiana Burne-Jones and Clare Mackail, NPG

The Burne-Jones universe knows about the BJ's' children Philip and Margaret. And Margaret's elder children, Angela [Thirkell] and Denis Mackail.

But there was a third grand-daughter – Clare Mackail – who isn't much mentioned in the biographies. Just a passing reference by Fiona MacCarthy, not surprising since her subject, EBJ, died just a couple of years after Clare's birth, but raising a slight curiosity, since descendants of famous people often feature in their life stories, fleetingly or a source of family anecdotes.

I worked out that Clare is the solemn grand-daughter pictured with GBJ in photographs by Emery Walker taken around 1900 and passed to the NPG in 1960 with a whole lot of glass negatives from the Emery Walker archive.

And she was given GBJ's pen and ink illustration to Thomas Hood's Bridge of Sighs, according to GBJ's inscription on the back.

Prompted by his own curiosity, Tim McGee has published a short account of Clare's life, poignantly titled [Barely Clare](#) , which fills the biographical 'hole'

Born in June 1896, the youngest Mackail started at St Pauls' School for girls at age 12. When she left in 1913 her physical and mental health were causing concern. Through music and art, her friends included the family of Gustav Holst, plus their friends Ralph Vaughan Williams and Myra Hess, and fellow students at the Slade school 'Pegs' Ritchie and Reine Ormond, niece of John Singer Sargent. After war was declared in summer 1914, Clare volunteered as a VAD or Red Cross nurse, serving first in Balham and then at Moray Lodge in Kensington.

At some unrecorded date, she was 'attacked', or possibly sexually assaulted, by her brother-in-law James MacInnes, composer, baritone and violent alcoholic, who married Angela in 1913 and was divorced by her in 1917. Clare's comic sketch of 'Aunt Clare' with nephews Graham and Colin on the 49 bus, taking them out to tea and rebuking their table manners, is reproduced by McGee.

In 1918 Clare received 'electric treatment' for an unidentified condition. In 1921 she returned to the Slade for one term in the Life class. After this, there are few sources of information until 1932 when she underwent thyroid surgery. 'I am exceedingly dull by nature', she told artist Will Rothenstein in 1933, 'and of course for years now, having been completely out of touch with the world through illness, have lived entirely in my imagination.'

By 1934 she was living in Hampstead as an invalid lodging with Louise Orr and her daughter. Soon, she joined friends in the UK branch of a shadowy theosophical network founded by Eugene Milne Cosgrove known as The Group. Osteopath and astrological healer Bertha Orton led the British offshoot as its 'archbishop'; Louise Orr, Hilda Field and Hilda Roberts were among the disciples who gathered monthly, to meditate and allegedly worship the full moon.

The meetings, with a deal of occult performativity and costumes to match, took place at Orton's homes: Four Winds, outside Farnham, and 43 York Terrace, Regents Park. They adopted Sufi-style names, Clare becoming Roshan or Shining Light. Members made several transatlantic trips, evidently to visit Cosgrove in Illinois and California. Angela Thirkell would later characterise the group as Clare's 'peculiar female friends and their dotty religion.' Men were members too, one being an established astrologer from Harrogate.

When World War Two struck, the circle named itself the Group for Sacrifice and Service. On the night of 11 May 1941, ninety-nine members held a 12 hour vigil at York Terrace to pray for peace. It proved to be the last night of the Blitz, and at 1.45am an explosive bomb destroyed a neighbouring building, killing 15 members

of the Group, including Orton, Louise Orr and Catherine Field. Clare Mackail was rescued from the debris with a broken arm and vertebrae. She and Hilda Roberts retired to Four Winds, which later passed to a Sufi group as an inclusive retreat. By the mid-1960s Clare was living in a small flat in Petersfield, where she died in January 1975, aged 79.



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