

Background information in connection with a blue plaque proposed by the Marchmont Association to commemorate the residence of Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957), Writer, at 2 Woburn Buildings (subsequently restored and renumbered as the present 6 Woburn Walk) from 1905 to 1906:

Adapted from a paper written by Richard Ekins (17.11.14)



Dorothy Richardson had long term connections with Bloomsbury, living at 7 Endsleigh Street from 1896 until she moved to 2 Woburn Buildings (now 6 Woburn Walk) in 1905, where she stayed for some eighteen months before returning to 7 Endsleigh Street for a further period. It should be noted that two of the most expert living authorities on Richardson initially disagreed as to the years Richardson was at 2 Woburn Buildings. Professor George Thomson stated that we would be 'fairly safe' with 1904-05, whereas Professor Scott McCracken, after a detailed re-examination of all the literary evidence concludes 1905-06 (most probably May/June 1905-September/October 1906). Professor Thomson is now happy to concur with the above conclusion.

Dorothy Richardson was a major writer of the 20th century and a central figure in the emergence of modernist prose fiction. She moved to Bloomsbury in 1896 and worked as a receptionist/secretary/assistant in a Harley Street dental surgery while developing a career as an author and freelance journalist. She associated with the Bloomsbury group and had a brief affair with her friend H.G. Wells which led to a pregnancy and miscarriage. She was to become famous as a pioneer of 'stream of consciousness' writing, and for the development of an innovative and specifically 'feminine prose style'.

Her novel *Pointed Roofs* (1915) is the first volume in a sequence of 13 novels (or ‘chapters’), entitled *Pilgrimage*. The central character in *Pilgrimage* is based on the author’s own life between 1891 and 1915 and illustrates Richardson’s assumption of the validity and importance of female experience as a subject of literature. She is the first writer of fiction about whom the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ was used. Other more famous examples, such as James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), followed a number of years later. In a 1918 review of Richardson’s novels, May Sinclair first applied the term ‘stream of consciousness’ in a literary context, in her discussion of Richardson’s stylistic innovations, though Richardson, herself, did not like the term and preferred the term ‘interior monologue’. Virginia Woolf (1923) noted, that Richardson ‘has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender.’ In particular, Richardson’s ‘wariness of the conventions of language, her bending of the normal rules of punctuation, sentence length, and so on, are used to create a feminine prose, which Richardson saw as necessary for the expression of female experience.’

Richardson’s work has attracted a wealth of critical and biographical study – now continuous for almost 100 years. In the 1920s, it was commonplace to group Richardson alongside Joyce and Proust as a pioneer of a new form of writing and although *Pilgrimage* was often the object of fierce attack in early criticism, that attack was frequently by the most eminent of antagonists – D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf amongst them. Throughout the 1950s, *Pilgrimage* featured in a series of books, essays and articles. Richardson’s work had become a part of the history of the twentieth-century English novel and, for many writers and critics, including Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bowen, knowledge of it was an essential part of a literary education. By the late 1970s, substantial articles were appearing regularly and Dorothy Richardson studies had been given a new political impetus by second-wave feminism. Gillian Hanscombe brought out a paperback edition of *Pilgrimage* with Virago in 1979 and her monograph, *The Art of Life: Dorothy Richardson and the Development of Feminist Consciousness*, was one of the first to explore fully the implications of Richardson’s political aesthetic. More recently, the importance of Richardson as a life-long ‘modernist’ in literature has been underscored by a number of significant developments. There has been a spate of scholarly works, such as Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007. Also, in 2007, the Dorothy Richardson Society was established at a meeting at the Senate House of London University. The meeting reviewed and approved a Dorothy Richardson website which hosts an up-to-date detailed Richardson bibliography and an annual electronic journal: *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*. Most recently, in 2013, the project to edit three volumes of Richardson’s Collected Letters and seven volumes of her fiction has won funding from the British Arts and Humanities Research Council. Four universities are now engaged in the collaborative project. A blue plaque would set the seal on these Bloomsbury-led developments. Professor Scott McCracken, the Secretary of the Dorothy Richardson Society in the UK, strongly supports the plaque and adds: ‘It would be marvellous if we could get the plaque up next year, 100 years after the publication of *Pointed Roofs*. It would help to get her better known.’ It should be noted that her period of residence at 2 Woburn Buildings was dealt with extensively in *The Trap* (1925 - the eighth volume of *Pilgrimage*) and in this book and elsewhere Richardson’s observations of the comings and goings of W.B. Yeats at 18 Woburn Buildings opposite was featured, thus giving 2 Woburn Buildings a particular prominence in her oeuvre. Moreover, Richardson has a particular relevance to contemporary urban and gender studies insofar as the protagonist of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam Henderson, ‘seeks a third space between masculinity and femininity, developing a

new and evolving form of gendered identity that is enabled by the possibilities the city offers' (<http://www.keele.ac.uk/drsep/aboutdorothyrichardson/>).

Conclusion: The Marchmont Association is keen to address the male/female imbalance in UK plaque subjects. It is also keen to celebrate lesser-known important and significant figures in the history of Bloomsbury/Marchmont as part of its educative role. Other things being equal, it also privileges the length of residence in Bloomsbury/Marchmont, and the fact that the home of the blue plaque recipient is still standing. Richardson fits the bill on all these counts. In addition, the plaque would provide a fitting complement to the bronze W.B. Yeats plaque at 5 Woburn Walk (previously known as 18 Woburn Buildings).

We are grateful to the University of Ulster for its support for this plaque.

Additional References

- Scott McCracken, 'Editorial',
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May Sinclair, 'The novels of Dorothy Richardson', *The Egoist*, April 1918, 57-59.
Virginia Woolf's review of *Revolving Lights*, 'Romance and the Heart', *The Nation and the Athenaeum*, 19 May 1923, 229; reprinted. in *Virginal Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed., M. Barrett, 1979, San Diego: Harvest.