

## REMEMBERING EVA TUCKER

*Howard Finn*

The previous issue of *Pilgrimages* (issue 7, 2015) featured an interview with the novelist Eva Tucker in which she discussed her longstanding engagement with Dorothy Richardson's writing, going back to when she first read *Pilgrimage* in 1952.<sup>1</sup> That interview (which took place in 2014) was one of several undertaken over the last couple of years, covering not only Richardson but Eva's own novels and various aspects of Eva's life, including her encounters with many leading cultural figures, literary and otherwise, of the post-war period.

Each interview followed a kind of ritual. Arriving at the Belsize Park Gardens flat which had been Eva's centre of operations since the mid-1960s, I would be shown straight into the spacious, book-lined living room and seated at a large table by the French windows – this table being where everything important in Eva's daily life seemingly took place. Lunch would then be served at the table, nothing too elaborate or ostentatious, but served in a precise order and in precise combinations involving unusual, to me, side dishes – if I picked up the wrong dish at the wrong time Eva would politely tell me so. After ice cream, the meal would end with coffee and an assortment of again, to me, unusual little cakes and very sweet sweets. Lunch would always be accompanied by a bottle of white wine. Interesting conversation occurred over lunch but I would never have dared turn on my recorder. At the end of lunch Eva would say 'well I think we've finished, let's get down to work' meaning the interview could begin and I could turn my recorder on.

Our last interview took place on 22 July 2015. Eva was now house-bound and had difficulty walking, but she had asked a carer to come in and act as waitress for an hour, serving the lunch in

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<sup>1</sup> 'Howard Finn interviews Eva Tucker on reading *Pilgrimage*', *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies* Issue Number 7, (2015), 82-100.

accordance with Eva's detailed instructions. Eva only referred to her illness in passing, she was as intellectually alert and focused as ever. Our interview topic this time was London cultural life in the 1960s and Eva told a number of colourful stories about her Belsize Park next door neighbour in the 1960s who, typically for Eva, just happened to be R. D. Laing, his family and entourage.

The conversation eventually turned to Eva's own writing. Her most recent novels had been autobiographical historical novels and she said she was desperate to write something imaginative and contemporary. Despite only being strong enough to concentrate on writing for two hours each morning, she had begun a new novel entitled *Life Goes On* about two octogenarian women. One of the women, Delia, is seriously ill and trying to deal with the madness of hospital life; the other, Eliza, is still well and active and trying to deal with the madness of modern urban life. The two narratives meet in episodes where Eliza goes to visit her ailing friend Delia in hospital. Eva had already worked out a climactic plot twist – the critically-ill woman in hospital would recover and live on, while the apparently healthy friend would die suddenly. However, Eva cautioned, 'that's just my plan, of course characters don't always do what their authors want them to do. In the end it will be the characters who will have to decide which one of them is going to live and which is going to die.' Eva proceeded to read the opening section of the novel aloud in a manner animated and full of subtle nuances. And with that another interview was over.

Sadly, Eva's condition deteriorated in October 2015 and she was taken into hospital for a month. She was allowed to return to her beloved Belsize Park Gardens flat in November and passed away a few days later. Her daughters felt that, having made it back home, Eva had decided it was best to die now, in her own home: the time and the place were right.

Eva's daughters, Sarah, Catherine and Judith, organised a number of events to commemorate their mother's life at which much of north London's literary circle turned out. It was evident that almost everyone in Eva's orbit shared similar memories of the flat, the living room and the lunch. The consensus was that the high-

ceilinged living room with its brown and orange fabrics and rugs was, in part, a recreation of the 1930s Berlin drawing rooms of Eva's childhood, while the lunch, both the actual food and the somewhat strict hospitality, owed something to a German-Jewish tradition.

As explained briefly in the *Pilgrimages* interview, it was the Quakers who helped Eva escape as a child with her mother from Berlin in 1938 and who got them safely to England as refugees.<sup>2</sup> It was at a Quaker School in Somerset during the war that she discovered her love of the English language and English literature. It wasn't until the late 1970s that Eva herself became a Quaker 'by convincement' (intellectually) and she joined the Hampstead meeting. It was therefore appropriate that, on a Saturday afternoon 23rd January 2016, the main memorial event was held at the Hampstead Quaker Meeting House – a fairly large hall a few minutes north of Hampstead High Street heading up to the heath.

A hundred or so chairs in the hall were laid out in large circular rows, but by the time the meeting started the seats had all been filled and it was standing room only. The three daughters read prepared pieces. Catherine read a verbatim collection of emails sent to her by Eva in a week a couple of years earlier and which beautifully captured Eva's busy social life – and omnivorous reading habits – along with her humour and sensibility. Judith ended her piece by saying that her mother had given the greatest thing a mother could give to a daughter: freedom of intellectual curiosity. Other contributions were diverse: an old school friend, a colleague from the north London inter-faith forum Eva used to lead, a German friend from Berlin. A representative from PEN paid tribute to Eva's work for them, particularly on the Ken Saro-Wiwa campaign in the 1990s, and a representative from the Royal Society of Literature paid tribute to Eva 'on behalf of the literary establishment', which amused everyone. There were also a number of less official contributions from literary acquaintances, for whom passing references to lines from Eliot and Woolf seemed to be the order of the day. An American author said it was apt that the view

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<sup>2</sup> *Pilgrimages* 7, (2015), 89-91.

through the Quaker hall window showed Hampstead's slanted roofs, evoking Dorothy Richardson's first novel.

It has been a commonplace in Richardson criticism to suggest that *Pilgrimage* employs a 'Quaker aesthetic' and, as a practising Quaker and life-long reader of Richardson, Eva Tucker had written about this and discussed it many times in our conversations.<sup>3</sup> The memorial meeting may not have been quite like a regular Quaker meeting, nevertheless the intensified atmosphere of this particular meeting threw into relief the special characteristics of Quaker practice familiar to readers of Dorothy Richardson. What was striking for me on this occasion was not only the seating arrangement and the lack of priests, prayers and overt religious trappings, but the rhythm and ambience. At the beginning of the meeting a silence gradually emerged and a Quaker clerk stood up and said that we would now have an hour of silent contemplation, but if anyone felt moved to say something they thought might be of interest *to others*, they could stand up and speak. After a speaker has sat down, the Quaker clerk added, at least a couple of minutes of silence for reflection should pass before the next speaker stands up. She then said that 'when we have arrived at a satisfactory silence two Friends at the front will turn to each other, shake hands, and that will signal that the meeting is over'.

Silence provides a kind of continuity, a structuring rhythm and an underlying mode of continuous reflection. Yet silence also provides discontinuity, dividing the spoken contributions and creating a juxtaposition/montage effect. And, of course, each silence is different depending on whether the preceding contribution was moving, amusing or enigmatic.<sup>4</sup> For the majority of contributions, the speaker who stood up did not introduce themselves or give any context to their speech, they simply recounted a kind of scene or observation and then sat down. If the

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<sup>3</sup> Eva Tucker, 'Richardson and the Quakers', *Pilgrimages* 1 (2008), 124-131; 'Dorothy/Miriam in Sussex: Between Memory and Promise', *Pilgrimages* 6 (2013), 107-115; 'The Enchanted Guest of Spring and Summer', *London Magazine* (June/July) 2013.

<sup>4</sup> '[T]he test of absolutely everything in life is the quality of the in-between silences', Dorothy Richardson, *Revolving Lights* (III, 389).

speech has sufficient ‘presence’ (‘perfectly realised’ to use Richardson’s term) then it evokes a kind of particular ‘essence’, in this case of Eva’s character or life, which may suggest some further ‘universal’ essence (of being, or death). The point is *not* to say something obviously dramatic or epiphanic for rhetorical effect (that would be too contrived, indulgent), but to produce a kind of dedramatized ‘open’ epiphany which the contemplative listener can then reflect on and interpret in their own way. A Quaker meeting might therefore be said to resemble a series of narrative fragments which are not introduced, not contextualised and not explicated, and which are juxtaposed via ellipses (silences) in a way which is never over-determined, yet which are united by an underlying silence denoting a reflective consciousness. And what is this description if not a description of the paradoxical, yet cohesive aesthetic of *Pilgrimage*? *Pilgrimage* may be read as a ‘discontinuous’ combination of fragmented juxtaposed scenes. But it may also be read as a ‘continuous performance’ in which different scenes and levels of realism (fictive, biographical, social, spiritual, existential) are overlaid, always present, united by silence.<sup>5</sup>

Such reflections on possible connections between the intensely moving experience of this Quaker meeting and the aesthetic form and purpose of *Pilgrimage* occurred to me after the memorial meeting in Hampstead had ended. During the meeting itself, listening to the contributions and the silences, the primary reflections were on what an interesting person Eva was.

At our last interview in July 2015, after Eva had finished reading from her new novel, we continued chatting as I got ready to leave the Belsize Park Gardens flat for what would turn out to be the final time. The very last thing I have on my recorder, before it was turned off, is a closing exchange about Eva’s new novel-in-progress:

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<sup>5</sup>The most interesting current work on Richardson and silence (and the Quakers) is being done by Annika Lindskog. See, Annika J. Lindskog, ‘Dorothy Richardson and the Poetics of Silence’, *Pilgrimages* 5, 2012. As Lindskog concludes: ‘If ‘real speech’ can only come from silence, as Miriam says in *Revolving Lights*, perhaps the reason Richardson needed to write such a very long novel was because she had so much silence to put between the lines’, p.34.

*It sounds like you have about a third of the novel up and running with the other two thirds reasonably clearly mapped out in your mind. Do you have a timetable for completing a first draft?*

Well, mortality – that’s my timetable! I hope my life will be relatively uninterrupted by health issues and that I’ll be able to get on with it. I have the carers coming and going so I have to work around that each day – I mean for writing I need at least a couple of hours uninterrupted. Mornings are the best time. I also have a clear space in the evenings between 7 and 10 but I’m too tired by then. I’ve been gaining a bit of stamina lately so hopefully I can keep the writing going at a reasonable pace. I wanted you to know that the writer is still here.

*Laura Marcus made a point at the Richardson blue plaque unveiling that the plaque reads simply ‘Dorothy Richardson – writer’ not ‘pioneering modernist novelist’ or anything fancy, just ‘writer’ – it seems appropriate for Richardson somehow.<sup>6</sup>*

Absolutely. That’s what I’d like to be called: writer.

### **Eva Tucker: Writer**

**18 April 1929 - 12 November 2015**

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<sup>6</sup> A blue plaque for Richardson was unveiled on Woburn Walk, London, 15 May 2015.