

INSIDE OUT

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Terri Mullholland, *British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature: Alternative Domestic Spaces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), ISBN: 978-1-472-47120-8, pp.184.

Dorothy Richardson dedicated *Pointed Roofs*, the first chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage*, to Winifred Ray. We don't know much about Ray, but the 1911 census shows that she was living in a boarding house in St John's Wood, not far from the room Richardson herself would soon rent at 32 Queen's Terrace. Like Richardson, she was from a family of four girls and like Richardson she gained an independent living as a clerical worker. In 1911 she was working as a publisher's secretary. After the First World War, she became a translator. She never married and in 1935 she was living, perhaps temporarily, at the Pioneer, a radical women's club in London. If we don't know much about Ray, we know even less about Richardson's and Ray's relationship, but it seems to have been close and jokey. In 1944, Richardson recalled

an effort Winifred Ray & I once made towards producing a nonsense news-sheet to be called Oo-er, or the Householder's Handy Compendium. Amongst the "hints" I recall one for removing inkstains from the roof; among the "Situations Vacant" one for a scarecrow, pref. C. of E., early riser & knowledge of typing.¹

After reading Terri Mullholland's new study, it comes as no surprise that the objects of their satire should be the middle-class household and London's precarious job market. The friends were part of a large community of women living in rooms in boarding houses and eking out an existence on as little as a pound a week. Between 1921 and 1931 the number of people living in hotels,

¹ Letter to Peggy Kirkaldy, 25 January 1944 in Gloria G. Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.486.

boarding houses, and lodging houses in Greater London rose by fifteen per cent to 356,853 (7). Richardson and Ray were part of the first generation of young women who took up residence either as lodgers, who just paid for the room or as boarders, who paid for their meals and so bought the right to associate with their fellow residents in the boarding house's communal areas. Although, as Mullholland observes and the evidence of *Pilgrimage* bears out, the division between lodgers and boarders was permeable (6). Many tenants were, like Miriam Henderson, 'amphibious', nominally lodgers, but having access to some of the residence's social spaces. Adaptability was a necessary part of the boarding life. The difficulty of maintaining the boundaries between, intimate, private and public spaces required flexibility and sometimes subterfuge. We don't know where Richardson and Ray met, but boarding-house dwellers were enthusiastic participants in London's changing public sphere: feeding the growth of cheap cafés and restaurants; attending public lectures and concerts; and participating in political meetings and demonstrations.

Strict policing of the line between respectability and non-respectability meant that access to an intimate life was more difficult, but women living in close proximity were more able to conceal a hidden relationship. Were the two women lovers? Asked about Winifred after Richardson's death, Veronica Grad, on whom the character Amabel is based in *Pilgrimage*, claimed that she couldn't remember, writing to Rose Odle with perhaps more than a hint of jealousy; 'Dorothy so often told me of this or that young person – She was apt to get wildly enthusiastic about – & I just didn't pay much attention.'² In 1913 at least, Ray was important enough to Richardson to receive a dedication, but the world the two women lived in was one of mobile and temporary attachments. The boarding house was a queer, liminal space, productive and dynamic: connected to other generative spaces in the city and, as Mullholland shows, beyond the city and beyond Europe, linking the imperial metropolis with its colonies. The humble single room was part of a network that enabled new forms

² Veronica Grad to Rose Odle, c. June 1958, The Richardson Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale.

of social and sexual relations. It is no wonder that it features in so many novels and short stories of the early twentieth century.

Mullholland's study starts solidly with the material conditions the boarding house served. Housing was as urgent a political issue in London at the beginning of the twentieth century as it is now. Single women suffered from being seen as a 'surplus' or 'excess' that had somehow not been absorbed by the institution of marriage. Outside the family and outside the home, they were viewed as a source of social and political instability. But for some pioneers, the interior of a boarding house room was the unlikely starting point for liberation. In devoting her first chapter to Miriam Henderson's boarding house life, Mullholland recognises *Pilgrimage's* significance as a historical record of the changing position of middle-class women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Bryher put it, 'Miriam was the Baedeker of all our early experiences' (24). A room in Bloomsbury represents freedom because the alternatives Miriam rejects do not: suburban marriage; a position as a live-in teacher; a governess for a prosperous family in the country. But *Pilgrimage* is not of course just a historical document. As Mullholland describes, its experimental form draws on the strangeness and productivity of the spaces Miriam inhabits (25). Mullholland reads these spaces as texts, deciphering their simultaneous but contradictory meanings of warmth and alienation, homeliness and the uncanny.

Class relations are inescapable here and Chapter 2 turns to fictions by Storm Jameson, Ellen Burgess, and Stella Gibbons to examine the petty injuries that were an unavoidable part of women's bid for independence. This was nowhere more the case than in the unequal relations between men and women, where economic power decided when and where a relationship might take place. Not surprisingly, Jean Rhys emerges as a key writer here, the period's most sensitive observer of the complex relationships between power, gender, and space. In the invitingly titled Chapter 3, 'Can we go back to your room', Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Voyage in the Dark* become the key narratives about the fragile line between independence and dependence. Miriam's relationship with Amabel, also discussed in this chapter in a

section on intimate relationships between women, stands out as one of the rare examples in fiction of the other hidden lives women led.

Rhys's work also features in Chapter 4 on the boarding house's role as a cross-cultural meeting point for those travelling within the British Empire or coming from the United States. Mulholland identifies the anxieties provoked in particular by relationships between young Indian students and working-class women. The scenario of the landlady who entraps male boarders into marrying her daughter, found in James Joyce's short story, 'The Boarding House', became entangled with 'racial' fantasies of exotic sexuality and Asian brutality towards women. The boarding house produced many imaginative spaces and Mulholland is adept at tracking their trajectories through interwar fiction. As a consequence, the final chapter on Virginia Woolf's *The Years* yields a new and thought-provoking reading.

Mullholland's study will join other historical and literary studies of early twentieth-century London such as work by Matt Cook and Anna Snaith, and Matthew Ingleby's recent book on Bloomsbury, to enrich our understanding of the narratives generated by the city's changing cultural geography.³

³ Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London 1890-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Matthew Ingleby, *Bloomsbury: Beyond the Establishment* (London: British Library, 2017).