

Eileen Gray Her Life and Work

Peter Adam

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there that she wanted her passions and preoccupations to be read. She was not seeking posthumous renown. If she received it nevertheless, it was due to the strength of her work and the originality of the ideas expressed there. The absence of almost any information about her life has made her a kind of cult figure, a role she never intended to play and one she would have wholeheartedly rejected.

In the introduction to her first biography, I wrote: 'Eileen Gray would not have approved of this book. She was never tempted to write her own biography; she shied away from any personal revelations. She might have accepted a few words about her work, although she would have thought them "unnecessary".' That I, despite all this, have decided to write this new biography is not to betray a trust and a warm friendship, but to dispel much of the rumour, the numerous errors and speculations that continuously have grown up around her name: many people now claim to have met her, or even to have been her friend. It is also to recall once more the conversations, and the many happy hours we spent together in Paris, London and the south of France. She would have scolded me for making this public, but she would not have prevented me from doing so.

To tell once more the story of Eileen Gray is not only to retell the story of her work – plenty of books do that – but to reanimate my personal memories of a close friend, to retrace her struggle with life, a life that still fascinates all generations today. It is the story of a woman trying to survive in a world of men. Eileen fought many battles, most of all with herself, she said. She never looked for fame or medals; her outlook on the world was infused with a different kind of dream: 'I am always at the edge of life with no hold on material, practical things.' Looking back at her long life and the many different phases of her work, one discovers a special concern for the wellbeing of mankind that coloured everything she created. She felt deeply the spirit of things and objects, reflecting and perfecting them until a chair or a table became the friend of man. Her contribution to twentieth-century architecture is in her refreshing thoughts and her undogmatic approach to quality of life.

It is not an easy task to try to recount Eileen's life. Most of the protagonists have disappeared and can no longer be questioned. When she was born, Queen Victoria was on the throne, and when she died, almost a hundred years old, men had flown to the moon. All I could do was to piece together a few memories, to reanimate the recollection of a life, which by all accounts, and in the truest sense of the word, was extraordinary.



Childhood and Student Years

Eileen Gray was born in Ireland on 9 August 1878 into an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family (fig. 8). The youngest of five children, she grew up in the family home of Brownswood. The elegant manor house stood on a picturesque site, originally occupied by a castle, on the banks of the River Slaney in County Wexford, in the southeast of Ireland – a rather obscure Norman town known for its cattle market.

Eileen Gray's family peerage went back to the fifteenth century, when the first Lord Gray was master of the household of King James II of Scotland. One of her great uncles was postmaster general of Scotland. Her grandmother Jane Stewart had married Captain Jeremiah Lonsdale Pouden, and on 3 May 1841 their only daughter, Eveleen (the 19th Lady Gray), was born. They had one child, Eileen's mother Evelyn.



8 The family (Eileen is on her mother's lap).

Eveleen was strong-minded and independent; at the age of twenty-one she ran off to Italy with a good-looking 30-year-old painter, James Maclaren Smith. In 1864, their first son, James Maclaren Stuart, was born; followed by Ethel Eveleen, Lonsdale and Thora Zelma Grace. On 9 August 1878, their last child, Kathleen Eileen Moray, was born. In many publications Eileen's birth date is erroneously given as 1879. In later years Eileen herself was always very casual about such matters. Once asked on television if she was ninety-six or ninety-seven, she simply replied: 'Is there a difference?'

Eileen spent much of her childhood between London, where her parents had a townhouse in Kensington, and Brownswood. For a while Eileen's parents maintained the outward signs of respectability. She remembered them sitting silently at either end of the long dining-room table. But when she was eleven her father went back to Italy, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Eileen's experience of parental authority therefore centred almost exclusively on her mother, a woman of dominating nature and mild eccentricity. She had a rather solemn face, as if she rarely smiled – a woman whose pride had been hurt through the loss of the love of her husband.

Eileen loved her father, with whom she often travelled and whose life must have seemed to her one of adventure and independence. If her mother instilled in Eileen good manners and a sense of social propriety, her father taught her the love of freedom. He was a minor figure in the arts, painting mostly landscapes and portraits in the Italian manner (figs 9, 10). Eileen inherited from him not only her beautiful eyes and fine nose, but also her love of art. 'My dear Papa,' wrote Eileen, age seven, 'I loved Florence, I like less its Cathedral, not as much the one in Milan, smaller and all in marble.' And from Vienna she reported that 'Wagner's opera was less enchanting than the Castle of Schönbrunn.'

Growing up in a large, ancient house as the youngest of five children, most of them considerably older, Eileen felt lonely and unloved. Despite substantial wealth and many servants, life was far from comfortable at Brownswood. In the cold, wet weather the children had to put on coats to cross the icy halls and staircases, and 'even the nursery seemed never to warm up'. While Eileen's brothers and sisters drove around in a little horse-drawn cart, she would escape the nursery and go down to the beautiful River Slaney at the bottom of the grounds, or roam the surrounding hills. On those solitary outings, she discovered magical places. Simultaneously lost and charmed, withdrawing from the world of the grown-ups, she had the first inkling that



9 Eileen's father, James Maclaren Smith, c. 1875.

10 One of his watercolours.

life for a person of her temperament and disposition might never be easy. She was an extremely frightened child; even towards the end of her life, she wrote, 'I have instinctive fears, fears of ghosts, of people. This fright never left me and I have often tried in vain to conquer it.' Sometimes, as the big dark house creaked around her, she got up from her bed and quietly put two chairs in front of her mother's door. There she slept until dawn, when she was found half-frozen by the servants.

Eileen longed for friendships, but lacked the skill of cultivating, fostering and sustaining them. She remembered being left behind when the others went to a ball, or being scolded for not using a thimble. With a hint of jealousy, she recalled watching her sister Thora being ball girl to a tennis team of four men and receiving a beautiful silk scarf. The shadow of her lonely childhood never entirely left Eileen, and for a long time she suffered the repercussions of those stifling and unhappy years. This perhaps explains her enduring capacity to pursue goals and remain free of conventions.

Eileen's education, like that of most girls of her background, was mostly private and at best sporadic. Brought up by a flow of governesses, her childhood was restricted. The governesses were hired for their manners or their compatibility with the household rather than their intellectual ability. Eileen often regretted her lack of formal education, but she had the wit and curiosity to educate herself.

When Eileen was ten, her older sister Ethel married Henry Tufnell Campbell, the son of Lord Lindsay. Henry was a snob, and Eileen, who never got on with Ethel, disliked him intensely. Any manifestation of wealth or importance was anathema to her; she considered it vulgar. Henry persuaded his mother-in-law to claim her title of Baroness Gray in the peerage of Scotland. Eileen's father, James Maclaren Smith, received Royal Licence to change his name to Smith-Gray, and thereafter the children were known by the name of Gray.

From an early age, Eileen hated the complacency and arrogance of her class. Their pride and self-confidence clashed with her innate feeling of compassion and social justice. She associated England with her upbringing and society, and she never stopped trying to erase her roots. She rarely made use of her title – 'The Honourable' – thinking it better suited to operettas and highly inappropriate for an architect talking to workmen.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Eileen had grown into a tall, striking young lady (fig. 11), with her long auburn hair piled high on her head or



11 Eileen, aged eighteen, with some suitors.

12 Eileen and her sister Thora in the family car.

hidden under a spectacular hat, giving her an air of sophistication that far exceeded her age (fig 12). Most photographs reveal her delicate features and display a serenity only rarely interrupted by the blur of a smile.

The last year of the nineteenth century was clouded by political events. The daily news of the Boer War preoccupied most families. Eileen's brother Lonsdale was sent to South Africa, and early in 1900 the family received the news that he had died there after drinking poisoned water. Just two years later Eileen's father also died, leaving her grief-stricken.

For most young women at that time, marriage seemed to offer the best means of getting away from their mothers and achieving a degree of independence. Of course, with her looks and background Eileen was never short of suitors. But her desire for freedom was too strong to be satisfied by the mere exchange of one kind of dependence for another. And indeed her passionately independent spirit prevented her from ever marrying or forming any other lasting relationship; although she had several affairs with men and women, she never felt a deep enough attachment to want to share a house with any of them. With a certain sense of daring that was nurtured more by stubbornness than courage, the young Eileen chose to escape the regularity and banality of her existence and the atmosphere of static respectability that characterized her upbringing. As the first step in that direction, she asked her mother if she could go to art school in London. At the turn of the century, the art school of choice for any well-bred young woman (or gentleman) was the Slade School of Fine Art (fig. 13). The study of art was considered a suitable pastime for young women of the upper and upper-middle classes before marriage, and in fact the Slade had become a kind of finishing school for girls of good families.

Eileen was not, as has often been stated, one of the first female students: she was one of 168 women, and there were only 60 men. As one can imagine, during the lunch breaks, the students' attention would often turn to the opposite sex, which became quite a worry for the Slade authorities. On the whole Eileen was not impressed by the academic training of any of her teachers, who had been brought up mostly on Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. Like all students, Eileen had to attend classes in drawing from the antique. These classes were held in a huge room, where students copied plaster casts of classical sculptures, surrounded by prize works by artists such as William Orpen. Eileen must have shown promise because she was also allowed to paint from life, a privilege given only to proficient students, although it goes



13 An art class at the Slade, c. 1904.

without saying that the ladies' life class was kept at a safe distance from that of the men, and it was only marginally tidier.

Students were also encouraged to sketch in the National Gallery or the British Museum or even the Tate Gallery, which the Prince of Wales had officially opened as the National Gallery of British Art in 1897. Visits to the museums were a must, not only for art students but for anybody in good society, although museums also opened on Sundays, known as 'People's Days'. Eileen's favourite was the South Kensington Museum, not far from her home, which by official order of Queen Victoria became known as the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1899. It was there that she first became interested in furniture and saw lacquer screens.

For a woman of Eileen's upbringing, London consisted mostly of Chelsea, Belgravia, St James's Park, Regent's Park and Bloomsbury. Beyond these exclusive pockets lay the unknown. People of different backgrounds did not mix, not even in parks. Hyde Park at the south end was aristocratic, its penny chairs thronged with high society, while the north side was frequented by the 'populace'. Although Eileen still lived at home in South Kensington, she felt free. London was both alarming and exciting, offering the remote possibility of adventure or escape. Walking to school, she could observe people from all walks of life and different backgrounds, and her curiosity was sharpened. Eileen's lunchtime explorations of London were usually spent in the streets of Soho, which was then the centre of the artists' world. She became more determined than ever to break away from the limits of convention.

With her newly won freedom, she also made new friends. They included the young painters Gerald Kelly, Wyndham Lewis and Spencer Gore, and the potter Bernard Leach, all of whom would become famous in the years that followed. There was also a young explorer, Henry Savage Landor, as well as two women, Kathleen Bruce and Jessie Gavin. During the course of the year, all of them would meet in Paris.

