

THE CAST OF *BACKWATER*: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Rebecca Bowler and Carol Overrill

Grace Broom

In the latter half of 1936 Dorothy Richardson wrote to Bryher announcing a rekindling of an old friendship. The character Grace Broom appears in *Backwater* as:

a dark short-necked girl with thick shoulders; a receding mouth and boldly drawn nose and chin gave her a look of shrewd elderliness. The heavy mass of hair above the broad sweep of her forehead, her heavy frame and leisurely walk added to this appearance. (I 252)

She resurfaces in Richardson's correspondence when Bryher is told that she has been ill, and her sister Florence has recently died. Until 1936, there is not mention of her in Richardson's letters, so this is the first intimation that the fictional schoolgirl who was to become such a close friend to Miriam had a real life counterpart. Richardson writes:

I wd have written last week, when your letter came but was held up by a charming little missive from the most charming of the day girls at Miss Perne's, whom I last saw, something like 40 yrs. ago, bent with unconscious gracefulness over a bad copy of a bad drawing, telling me of the illness of Grace Broom, who for the last twenty years has been on the Art staff of the Portsmouth School of Arts & Crafts, & the death, last week, of her sister. I had at once to write, to Christabel, & to Grace, who is recovering. The sister who has departed was at one time, the time when I was so often staying down here with the Beresfords, a sort of companion housekeeper to the dipsomaniac wife of a parson uncle of J. D. Beresford. The parson, who used to read my book, aloud,

in the evenings, told Florence I was living in sin with an atheist nephew of his in Cornwall.¹

George H. Thomson, following the evidence in this letter, emailed David Francis, the Humanities Librarian at the University of Portsmouth in 2002, asking for information about a female teacher at the Portsmouth School of Arts & Crafts who by 1936 had been working there for roughly twenty years. This school was, according to Francis, ‘the Borough of Portsmouth and Gosport School of Science and Art originally, and then it became the Portsmouth Municipal School of Art, and eventually Portsmouth College of Art, Design and Further Education – which merged with the University in 1994’. Francis searched the school’s prospectuses, and found two teachers that matched the description: a Miss E. V. Chivers, and a Miss Ethel Higgins. Miss E. V. Chivers, Thomson concluded, could not be Grace Broom. She was only three years old in 1891, the year *Backwater* is set. Ethel Higgins, however, seemed likely to be Dorothy Richardson’s schoolgirl. Ethel Higgins worked at the Portsmouth College of Art for twenty-eight years (rather more than Richardson’s guess of twenty years) and retired in 1936, presumably because of the illness that Richardson’s 1936 letter refers to. She taught embroidery and lace, and had an (Hons. Cert.) from City & Guilds.

Thomson next attempted to find an Ethel Higgins living in North London in 1891, the year that Fromm places Richardson at the Ayre sisters’ Edgeworth House school. Using *Backwater* as a starting point, he searched for an Ethel Higgins of schoolgirl age, who lived with her slightly younger sister (Grace’s sister Florence Broom) and her aunt (Mrs Lucy Philps), and whose father had recently died. The newly reduced Broom family had recently moved to a house ‘about a quarter as big as where we used to live’ (I 252), and the aunt, Grace tells us in *Interim*, was originally from the north of England where it snows more often at Christmas

¹Letter to Bryher, Beinecke Library, Yale University. This paragraph is part of a postscript, currently attributed to a letter of 23 November 1936. However, the fact that Richardson claims she hasn’t seen ‘Grace Broom’ for forty years, when she had written to Bryher only three months before recounting a visit made with her implies that the postscript has been misfiled in the Beinecke.

(‘You lived in the north all your young Christmases. It’s always colder there’ II 304). He found an Ethel Mary Higgins, who had been born in Devon in July 1877, and who by the time of the 1881 census was living in Derbyshire with her grandparents, parents, and her sister who was one year younger. The father, Charles Villiers Higgins died in January 1891. So at the time of the 1891 Census for Duffield, Derbyshire, Emma Jane Higgins (the mother) was a widow aged thirty-eight living with her mother-in-law Mary Higgins, aged eighty-two, and her daughter Annie Melinda aged eleven. Ethel Mary does not appear in the 1891 Census, which Thomson concluded was probably because she was at school in North London. However, if Ethel was at school in 1891 then according to *Backwater* her younger sister would have been there too. This Ethel would also have been only fifteen, and her younger sister only fourteen when Miriam was teaching at Edgeworth House, which is rather young for someone described as ‘one of the elder first-class girls who attended only for a few subjects’ (II 252). With these reservations in mind, we attempted to find Ethel Mary Higgins in the 1891 and 1901 censuses, but we found instead a record of her death. This Ethel had died aged four in Derbyshire.

‘Would the real Ethel Higgins please stand up?’

The Ethel Higgins who taught at the Portsmouth School of Art & Crafts teaching embroidery and lace was born in St. Martin’s in the Field, Middlesex (North London) on 29 July 1872. Her sister Kathleen was also born in North London on 20 September 1873. They were both baptised at Poole’s Park, St. Anne. Their father, Charles Higgins, already had four children from a previous marriage (Sarah Elizabeth Perry) when he married Ethel and Kathleen’s mother Harriett Woolley in 1871. Harriett and Charles had a further child, also named Charles, who was five years younger than Ethel.

Both Sarah Elizabeth Perry and Harriett Woolley were originally from Manchester and Salford. Charles and Harriett married in Manchester Cathedral and immediately afterwards moved to North London, appearing in the 1871 census at 4 Coleridge Road,

Islington. Ethel had two aunts on the mother's side, Elizabeth and Emma, and the elder of these, Elizabeth, did indeed live with the Higgins family in London. However, she is listed on both the 1861 census (when she was living in Broughton) and the 1871 census as being blind from birth, and she died on 27 September 1890, while she was still living with the Higgins family, by now repaired to '12 Portland Road, Brownswood Finsbury Park in the County of Middlesex'. Ethel's father, by this time sixty-two years old, died less than a year later, on 4 June 1891, just before Dorothy Richardson began teaching at Edgeworth House. Charles, still alive on the census date, appears in the 1891 census at 12 Portland Road as the head of a household of nine, including two servants, and Ethel and Kathleen, both attending Edgeworth House, are listed as scholars. In both the 1901 and the 1911 censuses, in which the much reduced family lived at 93 Cranwich Road, Ethel and Kathleen's mother Harriett is recorded as the head of the house. The 1911 census, in which Ethel is thirty-nine years old, very helpfully records Ethel's occupation as 'Art Teacher Portsmouth Education Committee'.

Although Ethel's aunt Elizabeth had lived with the family in London, it is unlikely that she is the model for Mrs Philps. The fictional Aunt Lucy is not blind, and was still very much alive when Miriam met Grace and Florrie, and for a long while afterwards. It is Harriett Higgins, Ethel and Kathleen's mother, who is the matriarch in the Higgins family. Richardson has turned the mother, widowed and suddenly head of a household, into a widowed aunt. The death of the Broom sisters' father *and* aunt, and the younger brother and host of step-brothers and sisters have been edited out of the story in order to present the Brooms as a small and close family unit of independent women.

The family's financial situation has also been subtly misrepresented. Charles Higgins, who was an engineer and surveyor, left £4,214 14s. and 9d. at his death, which was a substantial amount of money. If the Higgins family had to move to a smaller house, it was because there was no need to continue to run a large household with the step-brothers and sisters grown-up

and left, and both the father and dependent aunt dead. Richardson's editing here presents a family more like Miriam's own. Both father (dead or insolvent) and mother (absent or inadequate) are out of the picture, and the Brooms have no brothers or male elders of any kind to rely on. The Higgins family step-brothers and sisters may well have left the family home after the death of their father, but the younger son Charles certainly didn't. He has been deliberately left out.

The Pernes and Julia Doyle

The only other mentions of Ethel Higgins, still referred to as the fictional 'Grace', in Richardson's letters are also from 1936. Richardson writes two versions of the same event to both John Cowper Powys and Bryher, in which she and 'Grace Broom' go for tea with 'Miss Deborah Perne', the eldest of the sisters who ran the school in North London which in *Backwater* is called Wordsworth House:

Miss Ayre, 'Deborah Perne', was quite wonderful. Very thin and small and withered, her raven black hair still only partly grey, she nips about like a girl, has all her faculties and remembers everything and everyone. She refused to allow me to deal with the huge and heavy silver tea-pot. 'Grace Broom' and I stayed hours and, when at last we had to go, the old lady seemed not at all tired.²

Deborah Perne, with her 'beautiful quivering nodding black head' (II 336) was, by the end of *Backwater*, Miriam's favourite Perne sister. When Miriam confesses to all three sisters that although she is handing in her notice, she does not yet have another post lined up, Deborah is the only one who understands. Miriam catches her eye: "“Oh,” she shouted to her in the depths of her heart, “you are heavenly young. You *know*”" (II 330). In her biography of Richardson, Gloria Fromm identifies the Pernes and their school Wordsworth House as the Ayres and Edgeworth House in Finsbury Park.³ However, the 1891 census, the year before

²Letter to Bryher, 26 August 1936, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³Gloria Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (London: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp.19-20.

Richardson arrived at the school, shows four Ayre sisters rather than *Backwater's* three. As George Thomson notes, the fourth sister, Fanny Ellen Ayre, died in March 1892, shortly before Richardson's tenure.⁴ In 1891 at Edgeworth House, 28 Alexandra Villas, Anna Mary Ayre, the head, is 49; Emma A. Ayre is 48; Fanny E. Ayre is 44; and Isabella R. Ayre is 43. There are two boarders, Elizabeth G. Blackie and Grace Mary Jones, and two housemaids. Also recorded as present at Edgeworth House on the census night is 'Julia Doyle', whose real-life counterpart was Elizabeth Jane Pratt, 23 years old in 1891 and recorded as coming from Queen's County, Ireland.⁵

In *Backwater*, Julia Doyle is something of a mystery. Miriam feels, before she meets her, that this unknown girl, 'one of a large family living on the outskirts of Dublin' would be somehow a better teacher than she herself (II 272). However, when the two first meet, as arranged by letter, on the platform at Euston Station, Miriam feels instead a kind of kinship and a kind of shame in that kinship. She sees Julia's 'ill-cut' and 'old-fashioned' clothes and sees herself and Julia as passers-by must, she thinks, see them; as 'two dowdy struggling women' (II 273). Miriam's unease is intensified when she realises that Julia, far from being superior, views *her* as the successful teacher. Miriam's room, as the term wears on and she becomes more and more tired, is 'secretly and fiercely guarded by Julia' (I 278), but this protection is not merely motherly, it is divisive:

Julia seemed to come between her and the girls. She mastered them all with her speech and laughter. Miriam felt that when they were all together Julia was always in some hidden way on the alert. She never jested with Miriam but when they were alone, and rarely then. Usually she addressed her in a low tone

⁴George H. Thomson, 'The Perne Sisters and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*' in *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 4 (2011), 87.

⁵Thomson has her name recorded as 'Piatt', but this is an error on the part of the latest census copier. As Thomson notes, in the census, 'Accuracy depended first upon the resident and then upon the clerk who transcribed what the resident had written'. *Ibid.*, p. 88. One might add that in the digital age, when censuses are transcribed once again on a computer, there is yet another opportunity for error.

and as if half beside herself with some over-powering emotion (I 278).

Julia is also tormented by something that Miriam cannot understand. She dreams 'fearful dreams' and cries out at night (II 338). Her cheerfulness and her motherly airs with the younger children at the school conceal something which is never revealed to the reader of *Pilgrimage*, as it is never revealed to Miriam. Miriam wonders about it:

It was not that she had troubles at home. Those things she seemed to find odd and amusing, like a story of the life of some other person—poverty and one of her sisters 'very peculiar,' another engaged to a scamp and another going to be a shop-assistant, and two more, 'doties' very young, being brought up in the country with an aunt (II 339).

Elizabeth Jane Pratt was one of seven children born to George Henry Pratt and Matilda Courtney in Abbeyleix, Queen's, Ireland. The details of Julia's life are, as far as we can determine, fictional, and stand for the imagined adventures of a poor Irish family at the turn of the century. Miriam's description here implies that the whole family are female, but in fact, Elizabeth only had two sisters, and four brothers. Her eldest brother was already, in 1891, living in Canada and married to a Canadian woman. Another brother, six years younger, was to become a farmer, marry, keep a servant, and settle in Ireland. The family were not as resourceless as Richardson presents them.

In 1891 Elizabeth was twenty-three, substantially older than *Backwater's* sixteen-year-old Julia Doyle and older than Richardson. In *Backwater*, the eighteen-year-old Miriam's fear of Julia, before they meet, as a skilled manager of children and an exemplary teacher seems rather odd. Julia is made younger, and her poverty and amusing Irish family are made prominent in order to highlight one of Miriam's primary preoccupations in the novel: what is she, the gentlewoman displaced, going to do with her life? Can she possibly embrace the life of a teacher, and become like one of the Perne sisters? Can she manage children like Julia, come from a

large family where she must have had to do a share of mothering, can? Can she live in a small dark house in North London, independent from men but struggling always to maintain an appearance of respectability, like the Brooms? The alterations to the real life stories of these characters emphasise poverty and difficulties to create a framework in which Miriam can work out her own limitations. The men are edited out so as to present each character as one of a group of sisters, who if they are going to succeed in life, must do so without the support (or interference) of paternal or fraternal networks.