

Book Review Supplement

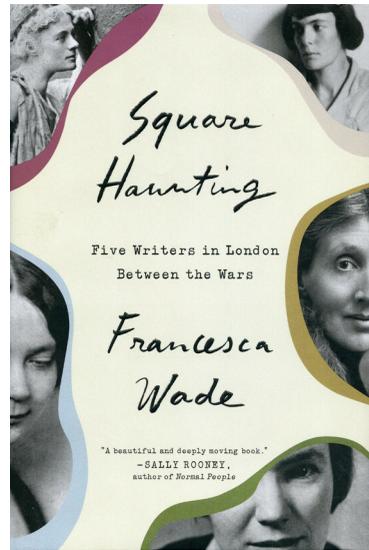
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Francesca Wade. *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London between the Wars.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2020), \$28.99 (hardcover).

As the title of this fascinating book explains, it is the story of five women: the modernist poet H.D., the classicist and translator Jane Harrison, the historian and broadcaster Eileen Power, the novelist and publisher Virginia Woolf and, of most concern to the readers of *VII*, Dorothy L. Sayers. All five lived in Mecklenburgh Square in central London, on the edge of Bloomsbury, not far from the British Museum, at some point during the interwar period. The Square provides the setting and a thread linking the many otherwise unconnected episodes recounted in the book.

After a prologue describing the destruction of the Square during World War II and an introductory chapter presenting its history and location, Francesca Wade, a British journalist and editor of *The White Review*, devotes a chapter to each of the five famous female residents, describing their lives while they lived there, why they came and left, and how they interacted, if at all, with the four others. The book starts in 1916, when H.D. moved in, and ends with the destruction of much of the Square from an air raid in September 1940. Of the five women, only Virginia Woolf was still living there at the time.

For Sayers scholars, part of the enjoyment of reading this book comes from the connections between these five women, who are not usually studied together but who are all pioneers, achieving far more than was expected of women in their time. For example, one link between the women is John Coursons, another resident who is frequently mentioned, especially in the context of his friendship with H.D. In December 1920, Sayers came to occupy the former room of H.D., who had considerably left her some coal for the fire. Coursons's intimate, conflictual, and ultimately disastrous relationship with Sayers becomes more easily explicable in the light of his previous interactions with residents in the Square. A description of Coursons in later life, poor and alone, resorting to 'selling off letters from his famous friends in order to survive' (336), even elicits a certain sympathy. Wade has also discovered that Eileen Power and Sayers were introduced at a party in Oxford in 1938



while Sayers was doing background research for her radio nativity play *He That Should Come* (338). Power, a competent historian with some knowledge of first century Palestine, sent her reading suggestions and lent Sayers her own copy of Vladimir G. Simkhovitch's 1923 work *Toward the Understanding of Jesus* (339), which appears to have been a previously undetected source of information for both the nativity play and *The Man Born to be King*. It is also amusing to learn that when Power married fellow historian Munia Postan in 1937, their friend and colleague J.H. Clapham's daughters 'immediately proposed a most suitable toast: to "Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey"' (259).

What links the five women, apart from each one's temporary residence in the Square, is their desire for independence and to write. The book is a celebration of female autonomy, with the women profiled disdaining convention and accepting marriage only if it could be a partnership of equals. Wade perceives in the writers' choice of Mecklenburgh Square a connection with the sentiments expressed in Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own* (9): the need for a female writer to have domestic arrangements which enable her to live, work, love, and write in the best possible conditions. Woolf's essay even mentions Jane Harrison, who had died just months before Woolf wrote it, as an inspiration for young women of her generation.

As readers of Sayers's novels know, when Harriet Vane returns to the capital after the traumas of her trial and a period travelling in Europe, she rents a one-bedroom flat in Mecklenburgh Square. For Francesca Wade, 'her address represents the self-sufficiency Harriet prizes so dearly' (140). Sayers gave her independent heroine the same London address she had when she first moved to the city, because 'it remained a byword in her mind for a life devoted to intellectual endeavour' (140). In this setting, Harriet can feel at home, write detective fiction, earn her own living, and owe nothing to anyone.

This book, strangely moving in its portraits of women's lives and struggles, helps us see Sayers in a particular context and compare her with other women who had similar struggles and aspirations during the same period. While each of the women was unique and their writings are very different, they had surprisingly similar concerns and a similar desire to make their own way in the world without allowing society or even those they loved to determine or limit their potential. The title comes from Virginia Woolf's diary. On 20 April 1925 she wrote: 'I like this London life in early summer—the street sauntering and square haunting' (v). As we saunter through the Square in our imaginations, Wade makes it and the past come alive, which is no mean achievement.

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