RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Gwen John

Sue Roe

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Roe was born in Leicester in 1956 and educated at the universities of Kent and Sussex. Following a career as a freelance writer and editor, she lectured at the University of East Anglia until 1996, when she resumed her freelance career. Her previous books include *Estella*, *her Expectations*, a novel, a collection of poems, *The Spitfire Factory* and *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice*. She is editor of the Penguin Modern Classics edition of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf.* A regular tutor at the Charleston Summer School, she currently lives in Brighton.

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GWEN JOHN

A Life

Sue Roe

VINTAGE

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FOR MY FAMILY

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Preface

‘In about 1929 I saw coming into the church a woman in a felt hat with a wide brim, dressed in a long, dark cape, who slid discreetly to the end of the church, and there, without kneeling like the other worshippers, pulled out a sketchbook and began to draw.’ The observer was Madame Louise Roche, who lived at 6 rue Babie, a suburban street in a residential area of Meudon, a village six miles outside Paris. The artist was Gwen John. Soon after Madame Roche had noticed her in the church, Gwen moved in next door, to a plot of land containing two wooden sheds on stilts: one was her home, the other her studio. She loved the garden, and though she immediately announced to Madame Roche that she was an artist, not a gardener, she soon had words with her about the way she disposed of the slugs in her vegetables, quoting Shakespeare’s view that killing an insect was like killing a Caesar. What did she do with hers? asked Madame Roche. ‘I collect them up carefully in a box and put it outside in the street,’ replied Gwen.[1]

Gwen John, born in Haverfordwest in 1876, sister of Augustus, and Rodin’s model and muse, has always seemed a mysterious and shadowy figure within the history of British painting. For a long time it was assumed that she lived the life of a recluse. Since little was known about her except that she lived alone with her cats and favoured attic rooms (she liked the sloping ceilings) perhaps she, like the figures in her paintings, was also a solitary figure in an empty room, a mystical creature who hid from the world and saw nobody. Perhaps she had moved to Paris to escape the influence of her charismatic brother, perhaps she had ended her life broken and beaten down by Rodin, like his earlier mistress,

Camille Claudel; perhaps she had starved herself, perhaps . . . But in fact, Gwen regularly exhibited and sold her work during her lifetime, and lived a busy, daring and eventful life.

In 1895, she went to the Slade, encouraged by Augustus who had started there the previous year and quickly realised that she should be there too. She was taught by Henry Tonks and Frederick Brown, and her early drawings reveal her fine draughtsmanship. Shortly after leaving the Slade she went with Ida Nettleship (soon to become Augustus's wife) and Gwen Salmond to Paris, where she spent six months under the tutelage of Whistler. She returned to London afterwards, but was soon anxious to be off again. She decided to walk to Rome with Augustus's new lover, Dorelia McNeill and the two made their way along the River Garonne, weighed down with a large quantity of painting materials and their portfolios, singing for the locals to buy food and sleeping under the stars. They got as far as Toulouse, then decided to change direction and headed for Paris. Gwen was to live in Paris and Meudon for the rest of her life.

Her early years in Paris are compellingly documented by Gwen herself, mainly in her letters to Rodin. She lived in Paris during one of the most exciting periods in the history of modern European painting. She arrived in the winter of 1903 and lived there and in nearby Meudon until her death in 1939, modelling and painting, producing work whose unique qualities were recognised in her lifetime and which continue to haunt and fascinate. The sixth *arrondissement* at the turn of the century was busy and grimy, and the Hôtel Mont Blanc, the lodging house where she lived for two years in the rue Edgar Quinet, was full of strange people: the local *coquotte* (Gwen's spelling) and her lovers, the caretaker's mad husband, excited by the idea that lady artists saw men naked; the fat cleaning lady who swore she too had modelled for Rodin – 'like this' – head on one side,

mimicking a pose. Domestic life was eventful since, as an artist, Gwen was the object of much curiosity. Her working life, as a model in turn-of-the-century Montparnasse, was just as adventurous. The lady painters she modelled for, most of whom were besotted with Rodin, became the subjects of similarly colourful anecdotes, with their temperaments, their obsessions, their stories: Miss Hart, shocked by the neighbouring Finnish men and their conquests, Miss O'Donel, resplendent in her fur-trimmed tea gown, complaining about her poverty and boasting about her ancestry; the 'man-woman' Mlle Roederstein. Gwen found them intermittently exasperating, but they enabled her to earn her living, and most of the time they were diverting and kind. One of the most serious lady painters, Isobel Bowser, was the sister-in-law of the Symbolist poet, Arthur Symons, and through her Gwen met him, becoming familiar with his work. He was enchanted by hers.

Rodin was a major influence, particularly on her drawings. He recommended freedom, instinct, drawing from 'nature', but knew that none of this could be achieved without study: 'on the contrary, it is necessary to have consummate technique in order to hide what one knows'.[2] He soon realised that Gwen was a gifted artist, and encouraged her to bring her drawings regularly to show him. He also encouraged her to study. She read literature, philosophy and religious tracts, selecting and copying out extracts for him to read and drafting critiques and letters to him many times so that the version he read would be perfect. She set herself the highest standards, telling herself, 'Unless you have the will to be great you will fall into mediocrity.'[3]

In 1911 she moved from Paris to Meudon, and began to sell her work to the well-known New York art dealer, John Quinn, who was recommended to her by Augustus. She knew that great art was never made by being seen at the right parties, but her private life was more sociable in Meudon than it had been in Paris. In Meudon she entered

into the life of the neighbourhood, making friends among the local people. She also had illustrious friends – John Quinn and his companion the poet Jeanne Robert Foster; the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (secretary to Rodin); Arthur Symons; Maud Gonne. She kept her close friends from the Slade years, Ursula Tyrwhitt, Grilda Boughton-Leigh and her sister Chloe; and Constance Lloyd. But her early exuberance gradually gave way to a need for the privacy and solitude necessary to paint. She gave herself *retraits* – periods of time when she would go nowhere and see no one until she had solved a particular problem in her work.[4] At these times, no one succeeded in interrupting her, not even (on one occasion) Ezra Pound, who sat patiently in a nearby garden drinking tea while he waited (in vain) for her to emerge.

She painted women in rooms, lots of them, canvas after canvas, increasingly trying out the same subject in many variants, challenged by the differences, trying to produce one, from the series of versions, for exhibition and in the process making technical discoveries as she ceaselessly experimented with each new variation on her subject. Her early paintings have a depth-charge; her later work in oils is haunting, mysterious, oblique, as she pursued her technical search to express ‘the strange form’. While her early figures are nerved-up, fragile, alert, her later ones are monumental, with elongated limbs, massed haunches, expressionist, big-boned hands holding enormous folds of cloth or paper, odd, misshapen flowers or open books. She used the same subject many times in order to explore the function of the room as abstract space, and to experiment with the relationship between figure and ground. Her female figures became gradually more expressionist as she ultimately moved towards abstraction. She was influenced by the work of her contemporaries – Cézanne, Rouault, Chagall, Lhote, Gleizes – and worked hard to incorporate new technical discoveries. She kept many notebooks in which she made

jottings as she studied other painters' work and developed her own methods. Rodin called her a 'bel artiste'. Augustus, reading her notebooks after her death, found it 'Astonishing how she cultivated the scientific method. I feel ready to shut up shop.'[5] Both Rodin and Augustus were regularly supportive, and both encouraged her to exhibit and sell her work. The very men from whom she was alleged to have fled were those who took her most seriously as an artist. Just because little was known about her life, should we really have assumed that she was unaware of what she was striving for in her work? That it just crept up on her, haunting and arresting her in the way it haunts and arrests us, her viewers?

Nevertheless, Gwen continued to be an enigmatic figure. Her papers, gathered up by her nephew Edwin from the rue Babie after her death together with 'a mass of beautiful drawings',[6] were for a long time not in the public domain. Her letters to Rodin and all her literary, religious and philosophical extracts were in the archives of the Musée Rodin but though there are over a thousand documents they are largely undated and unattributed, and they create a necessarily partial impression. The papers in the Tate Archives tell another story, but that too is partial. In 1984 the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth acquired the papers of Gwen John from Edwin John's son and daughter, Ben John and Sara John. Papers and documents have since been added, and the archive reveals the extent of Gwen's social connections and friendships and her regular contact with members of her family. Her letters to her Slade friend Ursula Tyrwhitt, acquired in 1975, were now supplemented by evidence of a broad range of connections – with women painters in early twentieth-century Paris, with Maud Gonne, Rilke, Arthur Symons – and of the nature of her relationships with members of her family: her father, Edwin William John, her brothers and sister – Augustus, Thornton, Winifred – and her nieces and nephews. These papers, together with those

in the Musée Rodin in Paris, the John Quinn Memorial Collection and the Foster-Murphy Papers in the New York Library, and the Tate Archives in London, have enabled me to tell her story.

'I don't fancy strangers writing about her somehow,'[7] Augustus once remarked to his son, Edwin John, then Gwen's legatee. Anna John, Ben John, Rebecca John, Sara John and Julius White have been remarkably helpful and kind to me, the stranger who began to research a book about painting and ended up writing a new biography of their great-aunt. I am deeply grateful for their trust and encouragement. Understanding her as thoroughly as possible has been an honour and a responsibility. It has meant not only looking at all her available work but also studying all her letters, diaries and notebooks and perusing her correspondence with a range of her contemporaries. I travelled regularly to Aberystwyth, Cardiff, Haverfordwest, Tenby, London, Brittany, Paris and New York to study her papers and explore the places she lived and worked in. Given the allegedly solitary occupation of biography, I have accumulated an astonishing number of people to whom my thanks are amply due. People helped me wherever I went, and I am truly grateful. I have endeavoured to present Gwen as accurately as possible, without speculation or invention. I hope I convey in what follows something of her sense of humour and her daring, as well as her need for independence, her diligence and her perfectionism. The more she emerged in all her complexity, the more concerned I became to try to honour her memory.

The real mystery of Gwen John's life may turn out to have less to do with her own elusiveness than with the problem of why we find it so difficult to imagine the life-style and frame of mind of a woman artist living alone. Gwen lived in a focused, determined, ardent and exuberant way, with strenuous concentration and dedication. She once remarked that she could not understand why people wanted to have

children: beautiful monuments were erected to artists who produced great works; nobody ever erected a monument to anyone for having children.[8] The work she produced and the way she lived mark her out as a woman with strength of character, sensitivity, daring and originality. Her papers reveal her as a great storyteller. She loved anecdotes and had an eye for detail, and an acute ear. Single woman, life model, female artist – these are all roles which challenge our imagination and our prejudices. Gwen John's story reveals her as a unique individual whose life challenges all our assumptions about women artists and about the distinctions between reclusiveness, eccentricity and hard-won independence. Her life was her own and she lived it in her own way. From time to time, Augustus urged her to return to Britain and abandon her reckless life in Paris. But she loved France, and had made it her home. 'If to "return to life" is to live as I did in London – Merci, Monsieur!' she told him. 'There are people like plants who cannot flourish in the cold, and I want to flourish!' [9]

1

Childhood

. . . she would be rushed to the train and put aboard without a moment to spare, clutching her painting, still wet . . .[1]

The lanes surrounding Haverfordwest are leafy and high-banked, lit in spring and summer with the starry points of wild flowers. The path feels protected, with hedges on both sides, stretching up past South Parade (where you paraded your finery, and your family, on high days and holidays). You climb up to the Parade from the banks of the river just behind Victoria Place, where Gwen John lived as a child, and walk parallel to the River Cleddau until, very soon, you find yourself in the country. The hedgerows must have seemed very tall to a small child. She would have had to look up to see dapples of light through the trees as she made her way along the path, beaten into a track by walkers, drovers and horses, out on to the open road.

'When I was a child,' Gwen would say to a friend, years later, in middle age, 'I used to cry all the time, and they told me, "don't cry now, when you're grown up you'll have something to cry about." So I was afraid of growing up and I never expected any happiness in life.'[2] She had a melancholy streak, which afflicted her when she felt trapped or emotionally restrained, but when she was outside, running along the beach or walking in the open air she could be exuberant, dynamic; wild. The John children were experienced walkers – it was their father's favourite hobby, he liked to stride ahead and pick the primroses.[3] We can

imagine Gwen as a small child, with pale skin, dark hair and serious, enquiring, penetratingly bright blue eyes, being led up the steep stone steps to the Parade with her two brothers – the dark-haired, pale-skinned, quiet elder brother Thornton and her younger brother Augustus (named after Augusta, their mother, and nicknamed ‘Gussie’ after her, too) – and their pretty little vibrant sister Winifred. Or sometimes they would continue along the river path (called the Frolic), down Scotch Wells past the mill where the miller used to come out all covered with flour; and on towards the old workhouse where the children had identical pinafores and blouses.[4] For walking in the Parade Gwen would probably have worn her black dress with its lace collar and tidy buttons, petticoats and her button boots – an outfit that marked her out as respectably middle class, in this prosperous market town.

A ‘bustling, hilly town, centre of a rural and maritime community’,[5] Haverfordwest was built on the Western Cleddau at a point where it was both fordable and accessible to the seagoing trade: until the railway came in 1853, this trade was what its survival had depended on. It was still the centre of the farming community and its market was one of the biggest and most abundant in Wales, known particularly for its wide varieties of fish and its large corn market. There was a large fair for horses and cattle every summer on 7 July. Traders came in from outlying areas: old photographs show women in traditional high, Welsh hats attending to donkeys laden with wares. The commercial traders were called bagmen, because they rode on horseback with saddlebags.[6]

Strict trading rules had been established. Back in 1835, Royal Assent had been given to an Act for paving, lighting and otherwise improving the town, one of its clauses stipulating, ‘No animal is to be sold in the streets except at a market or fair.’[7] Victoria Place, built in 1837–9 and named after Queen Victoria, was part of a smart new project to

repave the town: so many houses were out of alignment that all the awkward projections had to be removed before the pavements could be laid. The position of the town, at the foot and side of steep hills, gave it an irregular appearance, and it was felt that the narrowness of the streets, with their lack of proper pitching and paving, deprived it of an air of appropriate respectability[8] – all this had been ironed out, and the town boasted a prosperous appearance by the time Gwen was born into it.

The original layout of the streets had been determined by the river crossings. 'Old Bridge' had replaced the old medieval bridge in 1726, and in 1837 'New Bridge' provided a suitably imposing approach through the fine terraces of Victoria Place.[9] In 1885, when Gwen was nine, a drainage scheme was passed (at huge expense: £4,598 was granted) so that many houses would now have drains and plumbing.[10] Since 1840, the town had been 'principally occupied by shopkeepers, mechanics and merchants of moderately independent fortune'. By 1858 it had a Literary and Scientific Institution in Victoria Place, Potter's Library and Billiard Rooms in High Street, a police station on Tower Hill and a lunatic asylum on St Thomas's Green. Thirty-two houses were taverns or public houses; there were six auctioneers and appraisers, fifteen blacksmiths; thirty-five boot and shoe makers; twenty-three butchers (seven of the name of White); eight corn merchants; five lime merchants; nine straw bonnet makers and eight surgeons. From the 1860s onwards, Commerce House in Market Street was one of Wales's largest department stores; the street also boasted a branch of Ocky White's (now at number 7 Bridge Street).[11]

Education at that time was primarily a matter for boys. It was still technically the responsibility of the state but the Grammar School, founded in 1813, had been set up for children of 'the poorest sort of people and not of any who were of great wealth and ability'.[12] The National School on

Barn Street put the boys through examinations and there was also an imposing school on Hermon's Hill where the better class of farmers and tradesmen sent their sons.[13] Schooling reflected the class and social standing of the parents, and the only prominent school for girls, Trasker's High School, had a reputation as a charity school. (In 1884, when Gwen was eight, it became Taskers' High School for Girls.)[14] The daughters of educated men such as Edwin John were taught at home, by their governesses or mothers, and as a child in Haverfordwest, Gwen would have been 'educated' at home, probably by Augusta.

Haverfordwest had considerable social and political standing. It was both town and county, as were Carmarthen, Chester and Bristol; but not even these had, as Haverfordwest had, its own Lord Lieutenant, who appointed the magistrates, and the magistrates of Haverfordwest appointed their own chairman of the quarter sessions, which was also unusual.[15] Respectability was the keyword. The *Pembrokeshire Herald* for 23 June 1876 reported the Pembrokeshire election, and reflected the prevailing views of the town: 'It is with the heartiest satisfaction that we announce that the canvass on the constituency on the part of the Conservative candidate has been a great success in all the divisions of the country, and there is no reason to doubt that he will be returned as the representative of Pembrokeshire by an overwhelming majority.' Just one birth was reported that week, on 17 June; only the professional classes announced private events in the newspaper. But in the *Herald* for 30 June there were four, including this one: 'On the 22nd instant, at Victoria Place, Haverfordwest, the wife of Mr. E.W. John, solicitor, of a daughter.'[16]

Six weeks later Augusta registered the birth, at Haverfordwest Register Office, of Gwendolen Mary John. It was usual for births to be registered more immediately, and by the father of the child, but the slight delay, and the registration by the mother, suggest nothing particularly

untoward. Some items in the *Herald* for 23 June – the day after Gwen's birth – give a sense of the world she was born into. 'John Miller & Co's Reliable Cattle Food' was advertised: 'The Cost is Trifling, the Results Gigantic.' There was a notice to stock feeders: 'As LINSEED CAKE is extensively adulterated, we are doing all we can to put before our customers a Pure Article.' The Duke of Connaught's marriage was reported. The maxims for the day included, 'How to destroy flies – Encourage spiders' and 'A lock that burglars cannot pick – Wedlock.' The newspaper also supplied 'ADVICE TO MOTHERS: Are you broken in your rest by a sick child suffering with the pain of cutting teeth? Go at once to a chemist and get a bottle of MRS WILSON'S SOOTHING SYRUP. It will relieve the poor sufferer immediately.' The poem for the day after Gwen was born was 'Unsung', by T.H. Aldrich ('As sweet as the breath that goes / From the lips of the white rose / As weird as the elfin lights / That glimmer on frosty nights, / As wild as the winds that tear / The curled leaf in the air / Is the song I have never sung . . .')[17]

As a child herself, Gwen's mother Augusta had learned to paint, attending 'Mrs. Leleux's Establishment' at Eltham House in north Brixton, and she went on drawing and painting up to the time of her marriage.[18] Her painting, *Oranges and Lemons*,[19] showing children playing the childhood game, hung on the wall in Gwen's childhood home. Augusta painted in the conventional Victorian pastoral style; her *Figures in a Landscape*[20] show a peasant woman and her two children, their belongings in soft swag bags, pausing in their journey along the open road. The mother is putting the boy's bag on his head so that he can carry it and the painting is gentle but lively, done in good, strong colours. Augusta signed it 'Gussie'. Her *Landscape with Cows*,[21] which she signed 'A. John', hangs in the Dalton Collection in Charlotte, North Carolina, among Constables, Rembrandts, Sickerts and Turners, and is attributed to

Augustus.[22] She came from a long line of successful Sussex plumbers. Her father was the younger son of Thomas Smith, a village plumber, who was born in Chiddingly, in Sussex. When he inherited his father's business he moved to Brighton and in 1831, aged twenty-two, he married Augusta Phillips. They lived in Union Street. A year after Augusta died, he married again, the twenty-six-year-old Mary Thornton. They had at least ten more children, of whom four died in childhood. Mary's third child was called Augusta, after Thomas Smith's first wife.[23] (Augusta called her first-born son, Gwen's elder brother, Thornton.)

The man Augusta fell in love with, the solicitor Edwin William John, was the grandson of Welsh labourers living in Haverfordwest, though when his children later pressed him on the matter of their ancestry, he insisted that 'we come of a line of professional people'.[24] Edwin's father, William John, also a solicitor, had married Mary Davies, a local seamstress; Edwin was the fourth of their six children and the second son. Edwin brought his young wife to Haverfordwest where they set up home in Victoria Place (he practised from his office in nearby Quay Street). He was evidently an immensely shy man, with few friends. If he saw a friend approaching in the street, he would hurry by as if late for an appointment. He stood very straight, with a commanding nose and a heavy moustache. When somebody once mistook him for a high-ranking officer, he was delighted.[25] He and Augusta were apparently very happy together. One of their common interests was music. She liked to play Chopin on the piano, while he played the organ, and preferred religious music.

Augusta was well liked. When she went about her business in Haverfordwest and nearby Tenby, which she liked to visit, she took her children with her as she made her way through the town, holding them by the hand. She painted all round the walls of the nursery to amuse them.[26] She taught them to paint by colouring outline pictures in

drawing books.[27] In the summer holidays, she may have sat on the beach with her parasol while her children played on the sand. Perhaps she sometimes even went to the beach to paint, since Pembrokeshire was an area popular with artists and there were often painters on the beach. Augustus later remembered that 'Gwen and I, full of curiosity, would approach as near as we dared, to watch the mystery of painting. Even at that early age we were vaguely aware of Art and Beauty.'[28]

It was a long journey in pony and trap to Broad Haven, the seaside coastal inlet on St Bride's Bay just over six miles from Haverfordwest, where the family rented a large house with green gables, overlooking the sea, every summer. The pony and trap would have taken them down steep, narrow, winding roads towards the sea, and suddenly round the last bend, there it was: spread out and glittering ahead of them, the lion rock just visible, far out. Their house, Rocks Drift, was dour and imposing, right on the sea front, so they could lie in bed and listen to the sound of the sea all night. On the beach there was a large, dark cave, a safe but voluminous place for children to play. Out at sea are large, mysterious-looking rocks. The colour of the stone everywhere holds the light softly, so that it brushes against stone in patches and drifts, like watercolour washes. A primitive sect in the district practised baptism by total immersion: girls in skimpy dresses could be seen emerging from the water, making a lasting impression on Augustus, 'like Naiads from the ordeal'. At home, the day started with prayers, in which everybody joined. Those big enough to read were given improving tracts to follow: *Jessica's First Prayer*; *Christy's Old Organ*; *The Lamplighter*. Edwin John was a good churchman; his faith, Augustus later judged, was 'securely based on a shrewd estimate of its contingent rewards and penalties'.[29]

But Augusta was never well. She suffered from chronic rheumatism and travelled widely in search of a cure.[30]