

'Perfectly fairy-godmotherish': the friendship of Toss Woollaston and Ursula Bethell

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Toss Woollaston was a 21-year-old art student when he met Ursula Bethell in Christchurch in 1931. His landlady, Mrs Coward, had spoken about 'Miss Bethell', the poet who attended her church in Spreydon. She 'would be particularly interested in me, Mrs Coward told me, because of my mind, and my love of art and poetry' (Woollaston 1980, 215). Woollaston describes the meeting in *Sage Tea*: '...when Mrs Coward intercepted a lady in blue silks on her way from the church door to the street, her head a little bent, eyes inward, evidently meditating divine matters, and told her stoutly "I want you to take an interest in this young man", I was prepared for anything that might follow' (215-16).

What followed was a close and sustaining friendship that ended only with Bethell's death in 1945. The two had much in common, despite the 36-year age gap — a love of art and literature, especially poetry, a strong religious faith, and a great reverence for nature. At first it was very much a mentor-protégé relationship. Woollaston felt himself to be 'a lame follower' in conversation: 'her wit and range were athletic and tremendous, her erudition so broad and deep that I felt sunk in it most of the time. But she was patient with me, probably on account of my enthusiasm' (1961, 33).

After the death of Bethell's companion, Effie Pollen, in 1934, the friendship gradually became more intimate, especially after Woollaston's marriage to Edith Alexander. By 1938, Woollaston had become something of a cause for Bethell. She purchased his work, introduced him to patrons and critics, and organised a scholarship which enabled him to paint full-time. It was she who encouraged him to write the autobiographical pieces that were the beginnings of *Sage Tea*.

Woollaston was by no means Bethell's only protégé, however. She was a great ally to the young and gifted, as Charles Brasch discovered when he met her in 1938. He found her to be 'the centre of an astonishingly diverse circle of interesting people, many of the younger of whom were so close to her that she almost directed their lives.' Brasch gives an intriguing account of how Bethell perceived Woollaston. She thought him 'a Franciscan poverello, made to be a saint, yet without any great driving force, so that she wondered if he was a true-

born artist: he was not very strong willed, (she said), his simplicity and spiritual urge were his charm and beauty' (302, 309).

Evidently there was much about the young Woollaston that Bethell found sympathetic. He shared, moreover, her vision of art. In his recollections of the poet in *Landfall*, John Summers wrote of the artistic synthesis 'for which Miss Bethell longed. It was that religion, art, and nature should become interfused: that nature should be so moulded and interpreted by art that together they might serve as a minor extension of Christianity' (291). Bethell's ideal could just as well describe the artistic aspirations of the young Woollaston, and it was this shared vision of art that anchored their remarkable friendship.

Woollaston in 1931 was a romantic and unworldly young man, intellectually and spiritually curious, and with poetic ambitions himself. He had grown up in Taranaki, the son of share-milking dairy farmers, and was largely self-educated. Bethell, a devout Anglican, was a member of Canterbury's landed gentry, well-educated and widely-travelled. She had studied painting in Geneva, and music in Dresden, but had spent much of her adult life engaged in social work in London. In 1919 she had returned to New Zealand, and in 1924, with her companion Effie Pollen, established the cottage and garden on the Cashmere Hills that would provide the inspiration for her poetry. When Woollaston met her she was 56, and at the height of her powers as a poet. Her first book, *From a Garden in the Antipodes*, had been published in 1929, and she had already completed many of the more complex and ambitious poems that appeared in *Time and Place* (1936) and *Day and Night* (1939).

After the introduction at church, Bethell arranged for Woollaston to garden for her on Saturday mornings, and in this way the two began to be acquainted. She encouraged him with his watercolours, introduced him to new poets, notably Gerard Manley Hopkins, and showed him typescripts of her poems. For Woollaston, 'working in this garden and talking with this employer was much more like being at a university than the dull (but presumably necessary) things I was learning at the School of Art' (1980, 218). Bethell maintained a keen interest in new developments in the visual arts, and she was able to share in Woollaston's enthusiasm for the paintings of [R. N. Field](#), on display in the 1931 Group exhibition. His contemporaries at the School of Art warned him that Field's work was 'modern' and 'irresponsible', but Bethell, who knew the artist, encouraged him to go to Dunedin to enrol in Field's classes (1980, 222).

The earliest surviving letters from Woollaston to Bethell date from Spring 1932, during his brief stint in Dunedin as Field's student.¹ The letters are carefully deferential towards Bethell, and full of his admiration and respect for his new teacher. But in January 1933 Field returned to England, and

Woollaston, somewhat at a loss, moved back to Taranaki in an unsuccessful attempt to establish himself as an art teacher. Restless and dissatisfied with his art, he wrote regularly to Bethell, and she, concerned at what she perceived to be his lack of focus, challenged him to clarify his beliefs and ambitions. At one point she even suggested a period of six months in a religious house as a way of instilling him with a sense of purpose and discipline.

By February 1934, Woollaston was back in Nelson to work in the orchards, and still 'at a loss what to do with my life'.² However, in May he met Flora Scales, a New Zealand artist on a brief trip home from studying at the Hans Hofmann School of Modern Art in Munich. For Woollaston, Scales' paintings — and her lecture notes from the Hofmann School — were a revelation. The shower of letters which descended on Bethell during this period reveal his exhilaration with Hofmann's teachings, which provided the intellectual impetus he had been searching for, and also reinforced his own romantic ideas about the role of the modern artist. By October, Woollaston had a plan: he would build a hut at Mapua where he could subsist cheaply year-round, working in the orchards to support his life as a painter. He had just begun the building project when Bethell wrote to tell him that Effie Pollen had died suddenly on 8 November.

For Bethell, the loss of her companion was a 'complete shattering' of her life, a profound shock from which she never fully recovered (Holcroft 13). The loss marked the end of her career as a poet. In the following years she wrote occasional poems, including a series of six elegies for Effie, but the joy that had inspired her art was gone. To Eileen Duggan she described herself as 'a tree struck by lightning — dead. I can think things, but not feel them — one must feel to write' (24 June 1937). Every year, as the anniversary of Effie's death approached, she entered a period of renewed grief, 'the darkness that rises up & quenches everything is terrible sometimes' (Letter to Rodney Kennedy 26 September 1936).

Bethell's immediate response to her loss was to sell her home on the Cashmere Hills, and move to a flat in the house she had gifted to the Church of England, known as St Faith's House of Sacred Learning. Initially, she planned to return to England, and Woollaston wrote from Mapua, inviting her to come and stay before she left. By the end of 1935, however, she had decided to remain in New Zealand.

For Woollaston, this was a period of intense work and achievement, and by early 1936, he and his friend Rodney Kennedy were making plans to hold an exhibition of his work in Dunedin. Bethell was kept informed about their intentions. She had become firm friends with Kennedy, whom she had met

through Woollaston, and by 1936 a pattern of correspondence was well-established: Bethell, Woollaston and Kennedy writing to each other, often enclosing books and pictures; and Bethell and Kennedy, both great supporters of Woollaston's work, frequently conferring over his plans and prospects. Bethell enjoyed the lively letters of her two young friends. 'I do appreciate' she wrote to Kennedy, 'the bits of almost literature that you and Toss fire off at me' (23 March 1938).

Woollaston invited Bethell to open his Dunedin exhibition but she declined with a self-deprecatory comment: "Thank you so much for wishing to have me — I am touched and flattered...You ought to get someone to open your show who can make a few intelligent remarks about art!" (10 July 1936) In any case, she was busy herself, working with Denis Glover to select the poems for her second book, *Time and Place*. Looking back on her work gave her pause to consider whether her life as a poet was truly at an end. She wrote to Kennedy: 'It gave me just a little "frisson" of life when D[enis] G [lover] said that he would be genuinely sorry if I didn't write any more! I wonder — it doesn't seem very likely. Yet the landscapes of Toss made me feel that art *is* something to go on with if there's the faintest urge' (26 September 1936).

Time and Place was published in August 1936 and Woollaston, prompted by Kennedy, wrote a review for the *Otago Daily Times*. 'Time and Place stands uniquely apart in New Zealand writing', he wrote: 'In so much of the verse written in this country, the conscience of the author is allayed too soon either by an easy ecstasy about bush and bellbirds, or by the excitement of banner-waving in procession with "The Modern School". In *Time and Place* one is not asked to follow — one is invited to contemplate' (12 September 1936, 4). The two young men anxiously awaited Bethell's verdict. She wrote to reassure Kennedy on 14 September: 'Toss has sent me his review & I think it is very good...People might consider it too indulgent, but no one could call it anything but intelligent. I feel very grateful for it (thanks to you too — this is like the birth notices! for the trouble you took as intermediary)' (14 September 1936).

By now, Woollaston had been married for three weeks to Edith Alexander, whom he had first met in Dunedin in 1932. The wedding took place in the garden of Edith's parents' home on 20 August, after the initial plan to marry at St Faith's, in Christchurch, was abandoned as impracticable. Bethell wrote to Kennedy, 'it was evidently simpler, & probably more sensible (as well as cheaper?!) to get it over — but I'm sorry St Faith's lost its romantic episode' (22 August 1936). In late September the newlyweds arrived in Christchurch to stay with Bethell on their way north. This was Bethell's opportunity to see the unsold work from the exhibition. She liked the landscapes, she told Kennedy, 'But the

people are utterly beyond me...Tiresome to be blocked in this way.. .there's no disrespect in my attitude to modern work, but I can't pretend I'm not at sea' (26 September 1936).

Bethell was delighted by Woollaston's choice of partner, and arranged for Edith to be confirmed into the Anglican faith at St Faith's. 'She will need all the help & cheer that the Faith can bring, in her courageous life — & I am glad that there is this further bond between her & Toss & 47 Webb Street' (8 October 1936). After the Woollastons had departed for Mapua on 16 October, she wrote again to Kennedy: "There is so much I could say but it seems almost an impertinence to write about Edith whom you know so well....She is a *healing* person — & has helped me greatly. It was so delightful having those two happy ones. I thought I should feel lonelier than ever now — but it has left a kind of peace I had not before' (16 October 1936).

The Woollaston-Bethell friendship flourished in the months following the marriage. Bethell offered the newlyweds 'carte blanche'³ with her belongings — an offer gratefully declined — and dispensed advice about domestic arrangements (T say decent la-trines//rsf consideration in arranging camp' (Letter to Kennedy 11 November 1936)). Toss and Edith wrote regularly, keeping her informed about new developments. When their first child was born on 19 September 1937, Bethell complained that his given name, Graham Woollaston, was unpronounceable. The baby soon became known by her preference — his middle name, Joseph.

Bethell continued to take a keen interest in Woollaston's spiritual development, and disapproved of his brief foray into the Oxford Group movement. But the influence now ran both ways. By 1937 the Pacifism of young friends like Woollaston and Kennedy, both conscientious objectors, had affected her own beliefs. 'If my family hear of my joining [the] Pacifist movement', she wrote to Kennedy, 'they will disown me in disgust. Well, I mustn't be a coward...I have always been a bit under suspicion' (18 February 1937).

Bethell was now taking a more active role in promoting Woollaston, introducing him to prospective patrons, such as the Christchurch journalist Leicester Webb, and the Englishwoman and former art dealer, Mrs Cochrane. In May 1938, she arranged a trip to Wellington so that he could meet the brothers George and Paul Gabites, and the young scholar Eric McCormick. She wrote to Kennedy of the success of the trip: '...everything has gone off splendidly....Toss and G[George] G[abites] dined with me here yesterday evening and T went off to his boat. He told me how much this contact with GG has meant to him — real understanding & help. In the evening afterwards I listened (at his room) to GG and his friend Mr McCormick go through all [Toss's] things that are here &

analyse them one by one from 8 o'clock to 10.30. It was delightful to listen to the mingled sympathy, understanding, & critical intelligence' (11 May 1938). The trip had been stimulating for Bethell, and there is a new sense of purpose and excitement in this letter, and its successor of 22 May: 'Now he *is* being taken seriously. They [the paintings] are going to be shown to more circles of people up there — so that at any rate his name will become known' (22 May 1938).

Back in Christchurch, Bethell continued her campaign, meeting with Charles Brasch, who had first seen Woollaston's art at Rodney Kennedy's house in Dunedin. Now, urged on by Bethell, he made the journey to Mapua. The three-day visit was a great success, and Brasch was sufficiently impressed to buy several works. On the evening of his departure a grateful Woollaston wrote to Bethell: 'Charles Brasch bought for £20 the landscape with mountains.. ..Also three drawings at £2.2 each. It was a great shock to get so much money from a person who loves pictures, & I felt guilty when it became evident it would happen....This is by way of a "thanks note" for this good fortune you have directed to me. I am too tired, and inarticulate from the shock, to write a letter' (21 June 1938).

Brasch's approval seems to have acted as a spur for Bethell. On 6 July she wrote to Kennedy of 'my plan for Toss which has been hovering in my mind for some time, & now brewing up....an untrammelled painting holiday for Toss this summer — a sort of orgy...After all this stimulus & sympathy & recognition he ought to have a chance to work freely & I am sure I can gather up enough from interested people to give him some months of moving round' (6 July 1938). Kennedy promptly wrote back describing her idea as 'perfectly fairy-godmotherish' (8 June 1938). Woollaston, too, was elated at the news.

Bethell now set to work soliciting funds. The £75 scholarship, funded largely (but anonymously) by Brasch, financed a term of life drawing at the Canterbury College School of Art in late 1938, and a period of painting in Taranaki in early 1939. The scholarship was conceived in a remarkable spirit of trust and generosity. Brasch wrote to Bethell: 'Yes, 6 months of painting should give Toss a chance; and yet, if at the end of it there is any doubt, one must take it that 6 months is insufficient, and not, I think, that Toss is likely to be found wanting....To judge the result will be difficult... but after all, what need? The judgement must come from Toss himself; we trust him as a person, and it is his life, so whatever he makes of it we must accept' (4 July 1938).

Woollaston arrived in Christchurch for the art school term in mid-September, just after the end of the 1938 Group exhibition. Bethell had secured an invitation for him to exhibit, and organised the small display of his work herself, drawing on her own and other Christchurch collections. She and Woollaston saw a good

deal of each other during the next few months. As the anniversary of Effie's death approached, they spent several days together at a bach at Sumner, she resting and typing poetry, he painting her portrait. She wrote to Kennedy of 'a wonderful three days "Retreat" with Toss in charge — I was very tired before I went down. I seem to have discovered Toss! & now understand more about his genius. Whether or no it will find expression on this earth remains to be seen, but I do think the S[chool] of Art has been helpful.. .Toss has helped me very much — it is wonderful how succour is provided at this season of the year' (5 November 1938).

From early November, Woollaston boarded at Bethell's former home on the Cashmere Hills, Rise Cottage, with its new owners, Mr and Mrs Allan. Here he set about painting Mount Grey, the mountain that could be seen from the cottage, and which meant so much to Bethell. 'You can imagine how delighted I am', she wrote to Rodney Kennedy, 'that he should be sheltering now at Rise Cottage & intent on painting our view. I do hope & trust that the picture will come into being' (5 November 1938). On the anniversary of Effie's death, Woollaston sent Bethell flowers from the Rise Cottage garden.

In December 1938, Woollaston was reunited with Edith and Joe in Dunedin, and the family travelled north to spend Christmas with his parents at Taranaki. They did not return to Mapua until early February 1939, and then there was the garden to get in order, a new room to be added to the house, and the fruit season before Woollaston could return to painting. Bethell made her first visit to Mapua in February, and was impressed with the self-sufficiency of the Woollastons' way of life. But she was concerned about Toss, who once again seemed to be immersed in manual labour.

On 17 April he wrote to reassure her: 'I am writing to "butt in" a little on this matter of assisting me for painting's sake...What seems to be worrying you is that, in coming back here to reestablish this life, some time is going by before I can again paint. Have faith, wait until I can paint again, and the fruit of work done will surely be in it. Yes, indeed, I must make my own life now, and my painting must be made for those who have faith in it...Apart from assistance (charity — or the fair exchange of money for pictures) what will happen this winter is that I shall have to seek work in the orchards. But my *desire* to paint will endure even that' (17 April 1939).

Bethell was not quite satisfied with such protestations. By May she had secured another £20, again from Brasch, which provided Woollaston with assistance to paint over the winter months. Bethell spent the winter in Wellington, preparing the poems for her third book, *Day and Night*, which was

published in October that year. But now, she had a new role in Woollaston's life — that of editor.

During the months of being cut off from painting in the autumn of 1939, the 28-year-old Woollaston had begun work on the memoir that was eventually published as *Sage Tea*. It was Bethell who encouraged him, as he explained: In 1938 when I had been telling her about my childhood in Taranaki, Ursula Bethell of Christchurch asked me to write down everything I could remember.⁴ The original manuscript, written as a series of letters to Bethell, is now in the Toss Woollaston Archive at the Museum of New Zealand — still in the envelope inscribed on the cover by Bethell, '[M. T. Woollaston](#). Not to be read'.

Bethell may have initiated Woollaston's autobiographical writing, but she soon became concerned at the way it seemed to be diverting his energies. He wrote back: 'I think we must not worry in case it may ever prevent me in any degree from painting. I do not know which may turn out best, my painting or my writing, so I shall cultivate both as opportunity offers' (18 June 1939). Woollaston had not yet entirely renounced his ambitions as a writer. Throughout the years of his friendship with Bethell, he sent her poems, without ever convincing her that they had much merit. Nevertheless, he accepted her criticism with good grace: 'About my verse — I do not feel what you say as criticism against me, but as findings that are interesting. I mean I can accept as final your statement that I cannot do it, and my only reaction is a small curiosity — why do I like what is good of other people's and not know at all in my own case? It is odd, and baffling. For all I know, my drawing may be as bad — except that I am more interested in it, & more determined' (7 November 1938).

Bethell and the Woollastons continued to write regularly in the 1940s, although ill-health increasingly affected the volume of Bethell's correspondence. In February 1942 Woollaston wrote to tell her of the birth of his third child, Anna: 'During the first part of my confinement at home and Edith's in hospital I read "Day & Night" again, and was acutely conscious of beauty....And the thought came to me of my own desiring to write poetry, and not succeeding, as a ramification of the meaning of the saying, "Many are called but few are chosen." How much I have wanted to be chosen for that! It doesn't hurt now as it used to hurt. Where do these old desires go? It is not dead, surely. I would now, if I could, immediately set about writing the most beautiful poems in the world. Perhaps the intense joy I had in reading "Day & Night" again was a moment in the new life of that old dead desire....' 'Now I keep hearing the phrase at the end of one of the Autumn poems — "That other morning breaks on other shore." All the night there has been and is, is for that morning. It is a very mystical morning, and very real. Not after a material life is rounded off -but rather

whenever a spiritual night is ended, it breaks. In some way I felt it break in that I could read your book with so much new insight and feeling — and in the resurrection, more complete than I materially experienced it, of an intimacy with and love for the life & the Canterbury those poems represent' (11 February 1942).

Bethell responded in a letter of 16 February. 'My desire, do you know, is to write more & better poetry — but I am so old it seems very unlikely!' Three weeks later she returned to the subject: 'For about a year, I think, I have wished I could begin writing again.. .Partly, bad health has inhibited such impulses — and it has seemed that I must have to do with human beings instead of thought and language. So the years have passed. You have revived the wish by writing so feelingly about "Day & Night"...Perhaps the time has now come when I should attend to this impulse — but it would mean some quiet & solitude & release from the fatigue of domestic toil — and since the Japanese are expected so soon & we are all in a fuss about blackouts & trenches & evacuation, it doesn't seem the likeliest moment for devotion to art!' (7 March 1942)

Bethell's days of 'devotion to art' were indeed over. In May 1944 she was diagnosed with inoperable cancer and wrote to tell the Woollastons in a typically frank and affectionate letter. She died on 15 January the following year. For Woollaston, her example and encouragement had been vital in the early years of his long life as a painter. For Bethell, the friendship of Toss, Edith, and other young friends had provided some consolation and sense of purpose in the ten years after the loss of her beloved Effie Pollen.

In the Woollaston household, Bethell remained a strong presence long after her death. Woollaston's letters to Edith over the years are studded with quotations from Bethell's poems, and references to her and her ways. For Woollaston, Bethell was indeed a 'fairy-godmotherish' figure; his first mentor and patron, but more importantly, a loyal, generous, and committed friend.

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Endnotes

- 1 Woollaston's letters are preserved among Ursula Bethell's papers in the Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury, Christchurch. Bethell's letters to Woollaston are in the Hocken Library, University of Otago, Dunedin. For full details, see under 'Works Cited' at the end of the article.

- 2 The quotation is from 'Horses' Ears and Throstles' Nests' (137), Woollaston's unpublished autobiographical manuscript.
- 3 From an undated letter from Edith Woollaston to Ursula Bethell, c. November-December 1936.
- 4 In spite of the reference here to 'Ursula', Bethell was generally known to the Woollastons and their friends as 'Mary Ursula'. Woollaston explains this: 'She had decided that 'Miss Bethell' was too formal now for the warmth of our friendship. The use of both names instead of only one would, she felt (and we agreed) register that warmth without lack of dignity. It would combine familiarity with respect for her seniority.' ('Horses' Ears 153)