

James Fergusson

## THE ANGELA THIRKELL SOCIETY

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It is odd that in her early memoir, *Three Houses*, so evocative of childhood and particularly of Kensington in the last decade of Queen Victoria, Angela Thirkell makes no mention of the books in The Grange, her grandfather Edward Burne-Jones's country house in London, in North End Lane, Fulham (once Samuel Richardson's; now demolished and the site of a very urban street market); or 27 Young Street, the home off Kensington High Street of her father, the classical scholar and sometime Oxford Professor of Poetry J. W. Mackail; or North End House, Rottingdean, the commodious Burne-Jones seaside retreat in Sussex. The future novelist nestles in drawing-room window-seat cushions, pushes pencils and necklaces through the gratings of the studio, even ventures tentatively into the kitchen or pantry, but the only glimpse of any sort of 'library' room is when her Cousin Ruddy invites her and his daughter Josephine into his study where, 'pipe always at hand', he tries out on them his *Just So Stories*.

*Three Houses* was published in 1931. Angela Thirkell (née Mackail, 1890–1961) had returned to England from Australia after the collapse of her second marriage. By the first, to a gay singer, she had two sons, Graham McInnes, a writer and Canadian diplomat (himself the author of an evocative childhood memoir, *The Road to Gundagai*, 1965), and the novelist and essayist Colin MacInnes. By the second, to an Australian soldier turned engineer, she had a son, Lance, who pursued a career in the BBC Overseas Service – and was a leading figure in the founding of the Angela Thirkell Society. Thirkell's numerous novels, her *Pomfret Towers* and the Bassetshire series, with their idealised vision of an England long gone, have always proved popular in America (the separately run Angela Thirkell Society of North America has today more than twice as many members as its British-based cousin), but her reputation, as happens with writers, suffered a decline after her death in 1961. *The Times*'s obituary, adopting an emphatic past tense, then recorded, 'Her novels, more particularly the early ones, had the virtues of gaiety, a fetching inconsequence, and a pretty and at times delicately malicious wit. Comedies of polite manners, illustrating a somewhat narrow world and restricted range of experience, they evoked the graces of living in the country houses of Bassetshire, in which nothing

very much happened except that “the County” pursued its leisurely and well-bred occasions, retainers were comic or faithful, and young couples dutifully paired off in the last chapter.’

Thirkell wrote for money. She needed it. Prolific, conservative, representative of a lost ‘class’, she already seemed *passée*. When her reputation was reviewed, not altogether to her credit, on the publication of Margot Strickland’s 1977 biography *Angela Thirkell: portrait of a lady novelist*, Diana McFarlan, an Irish enthusiast, mustered with Strickland and Lance Thirkell to launch a society to preserve the memory of Angela Thirkell and her work. The first annual general meeting was held at the pub next door to Thirkell’s birthplace, the Greyhound in Kensington Square (rebuilt in 1899, she complained, ‘as a commonplace gin palace’), on 27 September 1980. Lance Thirkell was elected President, and remained so until his death in 1989, when his widow, Kate, took over the role. Kate Thirkell, daughter of the painter Thomas Lowinsky (a Burne-Jones collector), was born in Kensington Square in Burne-Jones’s former house (indeed in his bedroom) and first met Angela Thirkell during the Second World War at Garsington Manor, the house the Lowinskys had taken outside Oxford, where Lance was an undergraduate at Magdalen. Lance married her in 1946; she died in January this year, aged 93, and their son Thomas will be confirmed as President at the AGM in September.

Zealous and energetic, the society holds informal regional meetings and organizes annual and other outings to places associated with Thirkell and her family – her grandfather Burne-Jones, her cousins Rudyard Kipling and Stanley Baldwin, her godfather J. M. Barrie: to Rottingdean, for example, Kelmscott Manor, Stanway House, Wightwick Manor, the Watts Gallery at Compton. It runs its own lending library and secondhand book department, and may claim significant success in promoting the reprinting of her oeuvre – she has recently been adopted by Virago Modern Classics. Alexander McCall Smith makes particular claims for *High Rising* (1933; to which he wrote an introduction for Virago, 2012) and *Wild Strawberries* (1934; ditto, 2012), which are ‘Very funny, indeed’, and acclaims Thirkell as ‘perhaps the most Pym-like of any twentieth-century author, after Barbara Pym herself’. *Pomfret Towers* (1938) was reissued in 2013, alongside a new selection of short stories, *Christmas at High Rising*, and the novels *August Folly* (1936), *Summer Half* (1937) and *The Brandons* (1939) followed in May this year.

The society's own publications list includes an edition of letters from Thirkell to her typist, *Dear Mrs Bird from Old Mrs T* (2002), *Melbourne and London: a childhood memoir* (2000) by Lance Thirkell, *Parallel Lines* (1993), a collection of stories by members in the manner of Angela Thirkell, and *Coronation Memories* (2013), members recalling where they were and what they were doing on Coronation Day 1953. Rita Rundle updates Thirkell's world for the modern reader in a spirited guide, *Barsetshire in the Twenty-first Century* (2012). Recent numbers of the society's journal include disquisitions by Hilary Temple on Angela Thirkell's French and Kate Macdonald 'On Belts, Corsets & Uplift Brassieres'. Critics have failed to notice, reports Macdonald, 'the crucial symbolic importance of ladies' underwear' in Thirkell's work. Redressing the balance, Macdonald culminates in a close examination of Margot Phelps, the Cinderella heroine of *Jutland Cottage* (1953) whose life is changed 'by the gift of the right kind of underwear'. Lady Cora Palliser tells Rose Fairweather (typical Barsetshire names – Thirkell was a shameless borrower from other novelists: from Dickens as much as Trollope) that they must 'talk to Margot about the importance of a good foundation belt'. Forthwith, Rose drives Margot to Bostock & Plummer in Barchester for a new belt and brassière, fortified by which Margot goes to lunch at the County Club – and 'before she knows it' Lady Pomfret has asked her to join a committee! From then on, whenever Margot has a crisis of confidence, she slips into the belt – 'it does cheer me up so dreadfully'.

Angela Thirkell was devoted to one author's society: the Dickens Fellowship. 'A *delightful* society,' she wrote, '– we all adore Dickens and most of us come from his class... we are all united in love of him.' So united in love of Thirkell continue two branches of the Angela Thirkell Society, each side of the Atlantic.