**“Large eyes, clear brow ...”**

**Florence Hobson: Ireland's First Woman Architect (1881-1978)**

“Those who want a mask have to wear it,” Florence Fulton Hobson declares in her anonymous article in the December 23, 1911 edition of *The Queen, the Lady’s Newspaper*. She counsels young women to do thorough soul-searching before embarking on any professional pursuit. “Only those should adopt architecture as a profession who feel that through the medium they can express their artistic ideas.”

Self-knowledge and self-realization were Florence Hobson’s life-long guiding principles. In light of her impressive artistic achievements, she was a pioneer but not necessarily a rebel by nature. She did not engage in any sort of activism. Challenging conventions and breaking boundaries were not her primary goals. One could argue that as a child, Florence was not even fully aware that these boundaries existed. Born into a middle-class Quaker circle in Belfast, an oasis of prosperity, sobriety and progressive thought, she did not brush with destitution, addiction or gender discrimination.  Her mother, Mary Ann, a radical Yorkshire-born feminist and freelance archeologist, raised her with the idea that there was nothing a bright, disciplined young lady could not accomplish. Together, they would go on explorative expeditions, measure underground caves in Ulster and later present their findings at various lectures and publish them in archeology journals. Educated middle-class women were encouraged to engage in scientific work.

Artistic and imaginative, Florence had her heart set on pursuing architecture as a profession, inspired by her maternal grandfather. Even though there were no official laws banning women from this particular field, there was general prejudice against them. No female architects were articled in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century, though there were the two Charles sisters in England belonging to the Royal Institute of British Architects. Florence did not realize what she was up against until her trip to London, where her ambitions were met with: “If you were a little less good-looking, you’d have a better chance.” Finding someone who would be willing to take a woman as an apprentice proved to be the biggest challenge. Florence reflects on her experience in a 1911 edition of “The Queen”, listing various reasons, employers had cited for not hiring a woman or taking on as a pupil, “The fear that it might be rather disturbing to have a lady in the office, and there are those who imagine that the young men might become distraught, and that from the hour of her entrance concentrated work would cease.” Another popular excuse for not taking a female apprentice was that “offices are small and that there would not be room for a lady” given her full skirts and wide sleeves.

Eventually, she was accepted by James Phillips, a leading designer of Methodist Churches. After completing her apprenticeship, she moved to London and worked with Edward Guy Dawber and James Glen Sivewright Gibson. The experiences proved to be frustrating and unfulfilling to her, as her mentors focused on huge commercial buildings, and her personal interest lay in small residential homes. In addition to her main job at the Royal Commission on the City of Belfast's Health and Housing, she had a handful of private clients, mostly women of leisure. For being a feminist’s daughter, Florence was rather ambivalent on the topic of gender roles. She did not explode with indignation at the thought of women staying at home. Her goal was to give middle-class housewives comfortable, esthetically pleasing homes where they could raise their families. “Homes designed for women by women,” became her slogan.

As for her own domestic life, it revolved around her liberal and supportive parents who never pressured her into marriage. In her letters to Sawyer, Roger Casement's biographer, she recalls her idyllic childhood that had lingered well into her late forties, until her father’s death. A noted beauty, with golden-brown hair and big blue eyes, she had access to many successful bachelors in the British Isles and on the continent where her work frequently took her, yet she remained single until her late sixties. A year after her mother’s death, she married William Forbes Patterson, a divorced English writer, more than ten years her junior. The couple alternated between County Down and London. Living in the Irish Republic dominated by the Catholic ethos would prove problematic, given the unorthodox nuances of their relationship.

For a long time, Republican Ireland hesitated to admit Florence Hobson into its pantheon of great Irishwomen. This exclusion was due in part to her Ulster domicile, her predominantly English origin reflected in her surname and her seemingly insufficient sympathy for the Irish nationalistic cause. Florence became identified with the isolated province of Ulster as opposed to Ireland as a whole. Northern Protestants of English stock were not viewed as truly Irish. In her youth Florence was a frequent guest at the Ardigh, Francis Joseph Bigger’s house that served as a miniature university of Gaelic revival, but she never joined the Gaelic League or any other nationalistic organizations that admitted women. Her father was a Gladstonian Home-Ruler, and seeing Ireland totally free from England was not exactly her most sacred dream. If anything, the pacifist in her must have been deeply disturbed by the bloodshed of the Rising, the War of Independence and the subsequent Irish Civil War. As a Quaker she viewed freedom as something that could be achieved on a spiritual and intellectual level, independent of one’s political circumstances.

It is very easy to deify flamboyant figures like Maud Gonne and Constance de Markiewicz, who had kicked their aristocratic roots to the curb for the sake of the Irish cause and fed orphans from their own hands, or Helena Molony, an Abbey actress and trade unionist, who was arrested in 1911 for throwing rocks at royal portrait during a protest meeting and had tried to dig her way out of prison in 1916 with a spoon. Florence's younger brother Bulmer, a prominent Fenian whose political career fizzled after his attempt to stop the Rising, is rumored to have been involved with Helena Molony romantically. In conversation with her family members, Florence tended to downplay the seriousness of that love affair or avoid the subject in general.  She was not thrilled about her brother’s choice of companions or his willingness to put his life in danger, though she did not openly condemn his political activities. After all, following one’s own conscience was a key Quaker principle. It just happened that her brother’s conscience led him to advance nationalism.

 The playwright Sean O’Casey, a colleague, comrade and ardent admirer of Helena Molony, criticized Bulmer Hobson for his lack of concern for the poor. Social justice was a major agenda item in the Irish nationalistic cause, and Bulmer did not seem to care enough for the working class and remarked on more than one occasion that Ireland was not made up of beggars exclusively, and that the interests of the poor should not be put on the top of the list. O’Casey claims to have spotted Bulmer rolling his eyes, sneering and yawning whenever the subject of the labor wages and worker unions came up.  It is likely that Florence shared her brother’s sentiment. Her writings indicate that she did not step outside her immediate socioeconomic tier frequently. Working a few hours a day in pleasant conditions and being well-compensated for her expertise, she was far removed from the realities endured by working class. And yet, the Hobson siblings should not be accused of malicious callousness. In their defense, the privilege into which they were born was not decadent in nature but rather industrious and obliging. Education and prosperity came with responsibility. Even if they did not throw al their efforts into relief for the destitute, they were as compassionate as one could expect from members of their circle. Bulmer had spent the years leading up to the Rising living in voluntary poverty, engaged in uncompensated work with the Irish Volunteers, his immediate needs covered by random journalistic assignments and a small bequest from his English grandmother. As for Florence, she devoted her free time to caring for her parents. As a sign of gratitude, she built a house for them. Benjamin Hobson must have been delighted to see a feature article on his daughter in the 1937 edition of *The Crystal* magazine shortly before his death. The author of the article establishes Florence as a wholesome and formidable figure in the canon of professional Irish women, “Her large eyes and fine brow indicate the possession of the artist’s imagination which is the traditional gift of the real architect.”

Unsurprisingly, Florence Hobson did not find much favor from De Valera, who openly rejected equality of men and women in the workplace, probably did not want to draw too much attention to a professional Protestant woman of predominantly English stock. She certainly was not a poster girl for Irish womanhood. Instead of pursuing political martyrdom, religious vocation or traditional Catholic motherhood, Florence pursued a competitive and well-compensated career - a choice that the Irish majority would associate with being English. [Soft Break] As a cultural and political dialogue is being established between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, more Ulster figures are being included into general Irish encyclopedias.  Florence Hobson is listed in the latest edition of the Dictionary of Irish Biography. The contributor lists her under her maiden name, since she had used it throughout her professional life. However, her letters to Sawyer at the Public Records of Northern Ireland were signed Florence F.H. Patterson and are catalogued as “Patterson papers”. She was already a widow when she wrote them.

Sawyer contacted Florence in early 1970s in hopes that she would share her personal memories of Sir Roger Casement for his new biography, and she responded most enthusiastically, seeing it as a chance to restore Casement’s heterosexual image. Florence rejected the widely accepted theory of Casement’s homosexuality and insisted that the infamous Black Diaries were forged. She believed that Casement was in love with Ada MacNeill and simply could not marry her because of financial difficulties. Being anxious to see that book published, she gave the author extensive advice on how to find a publisher.

Her correspondence with Sawyer reveals a stoic attempt at maintaining a sense of humor. In her youth she was known for her gentle wit and spunk. In her twilight years her wit took on a bitter undertone. “There is nothing much about me except tat I am now an ancient monument … The doctor is not to be here for eight weeks – so he evidently thinks I will survive that long.”

Florence lived to be ninety-seven. Almost an entire century had passed before her eyes. She had witnessed the progression of women’s wardrobes, from corsets and bustle skirts to mini skirts. She had also witnessed, albeit from the periphery, a great deal of turmoil and suffering: two world wars, an insurrection that had nearly claimed the life of her brother, a string of Anglo-Irish conflicts in the 1920s, and the worst of the Troubles in 1970s. Her house was on the shore of Belfast Lough, about ten miles from Belfast. Hearing the reports of new casualties, she was probably relieved that her brother, who had once breathed romantic patriotism, who had once dreamed of a progressive, prosperous, united Ireland, was no longer alive to see this travesty. “Irish nationalism had been dragged through the mud by the IRA,” she laments in one of her final letters. Imbued with the philosophy of egalitarianism, tolerance and non-violence, she could not fully comprehend any of the military conflicts that took place in her lifetime. She was fashioned for peace, achievement and self-realization, and the notion of intense ethnic hatred was foreign to her.

A fruit of Edwardian era, just a few steps ahead of the mainstream, Florence Hobson did not open any doors.  She was simply the first one to walk through the door that was already open – Ireland’s first female architect, an inspiring emblem of optimism and achievement.