

‘At Home’ with Clara and Harris Rackham

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Clara Dorothea Tabor (1875-1966), known as Dorothea to her family, was born in Notting Hill, London, and came to Cambridge in 1895 to study Classics at Newnham College, one of two pioneering college for women, where she was to develop her lifelong commitment to education for women and girls, professions for women, and equality between the sexes. It was there that she met her husband, Harris Rackham, her college tutor in ancient Greek. The couple shared an interest in the causes of unemployment, and urban poverty. Harris was the Cambridge University Secretary of Toynbee Hall, a university settlement in Whitechapel where Clara was introduced to the Christian Socialist economist, R.H. Tawney. Harris conducted the poverty surveys for Toynbee Hall in the Castle End area of Cambridge ¹(TFP) for which Clara was elected as a Poor Law Guardian in 1904. Like many feminists of her day, Clara was ambivalent about the institution of marriage and she and Harris aspired to a supportive, equal marriage in which both were free to pursue their separate interests and pursuits.

Harris and Clara were married in the parish church in Bocking in Essex in 1901. Their first marital home was 4 Grange Terrace in Newnham, an area of large Victorian red brick villas popular with academics and their families the Rackhams knew well including Eleanor Sidgwick, Marion and Julia Kennedy, the Jebb family, Mary and James Ward. To the west of Grange Road the town’s edge gave way to flat countryside and huge East Anglian skylscapes. The Cambridge Women’s Suffrage Association would meet at 4 Grange Terrace which quickly became an ‘open house’ for a motley assortment of school teachers, charity workers, adult education tutors, Poor Law Guardians and trade unionists. In 1901 Clara founded the Cambridge branch of the Women’s Co-operative Guild, an organisation intended to enable

¹ The notebook with Harris’s handwritten notes still survives and is in the possession of the Tabor family (TFP)

working-class women to campaign for the causes they believed in and to make their voices heard. Activists Mrs Foister and Mrs Edwards became regular visitors and good friends.

In May, 1901, Clara began the practice of inscribing the names and dates of all her house guests in a black leather visitors' book in the hallway (TFP). She kept this up for over fifty years until 1956 making careful entries in the book which moved with her from 4 Grange Terrace to 18 Hobson Street and then to 9 Park Terrace. *Inter alia* the names of some well-known national figures, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, Jeannette and R. H. Tawney, Philippa Fawcett, William Beveridge, Hugh and Ruth Dalton, Margaret Bondfield, Leah Manning, Marion Philipps, Mary Agnes Hamilton, and Edith Picton-D'urbevill all appear. This remarkable book intimates the astonishing width of Clara and Harris's social, political, artistic, and educational networks, the centrality of the Rackhams themselves to the advanced circles in which they moved, and the importance of their three Cambridge addresses as congenial 'salons' in which a liberal left-leaning group of intellectuals, writers, theorists and policy makers would congregate and the formative ideas, theories and policies which were to influence the shape of early twentieth-century Cambridge, the Welfare State and the postwar settlement were aired and discussed.

In 1911 Harris Rackham was promoted to Senior Tutor at Christ's College and the couple moved into the Senior Tutor's house at 18 Hobson Street. Following the example of housing reformer, Octavia Hill, whom she admired, Clara invited groups of women from the East London seeking their first contact with higher education to stay in her home and 'gave to her Cambridge Co-operative friends similar glimpses of the opportunities for learning while homing.'² The Rackham's daily routines continued. Harris would depart for his college frequently working all day and dining at High Table. Clara took her early morning swim in the river Cam every day, followed by a strong cup of coffee, and, unrepentant chain smoker that she was, a cigarette, Egyptian or Turkish rather than Virginian. She would inhale through a cigarette holder with eyes shut seemingly asleep while listening intently to what was said.

² Quoted, Henry Brown, *Co-operation in a University Town* (London: Co-operative Printing Society, 1939), 67.

The early days of the marriage were replete with happy memories. The Rackhams enjoyed their walks along the paths and bridleways around the ploughed fields between Newnham and Coton, spotting kingfishers and herons on their early evening walks to Haslingfield, Barton or Madingley. Assorted friends would turn up without warning, those from London often bringing unannounced visitors with them. After trudging with Clara and Harris through mud, chalk streams and spinneys where siskins, black caps, and chiffchaffs were duly identified they would all stay up talking animatedly until the early hours of the morning.

In February 1924, the Rackhams received a letter of thanks for their hospitality signed by fifteen of their friends including the mathematician Philippa Fawcett, the MP, Susan Lawrence and the novelist, F. M. Mayor: ‘We who have so often stayed with you in the old house want to give a little token to remind ourselves and you of the many happy hours we spent there. Never have there been friends so hospitable. Hobson Street was a real centre of enjoyment.’³ The Rackham’s house-warming present from their grateful house guests consisted of a modern gramophone encased in a mahogany cabinet with a winding handle which took pride of place in the large high-ceilinged sitting room. It was the perfect gift for Harris who was intensely musical, for many years the President of Christ’s Music Society, and sang in the college choir.

Clara’s suffragist friend, Margery Fry, the Principal of Somerville College, who would visit the Rackhams in Cambridge after her brother the painter and critic, Roger Fry, was appointed Hon. Fellow of King’s College in 1927, remembers Harris as a ‘rather gauche, boyant classical don, with a passion for his gramophone, which he is always ready to turn on for you even when he ought to be translating Aristotle.’⁴ The translation in question was probably the Loeb edition of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* published in 1926 by Heinemann to academic acclaim.

³ Letter from E. S. Bennett and fourteen others to Clara and Harris Rackham, February 23, 1924 (TFP).

⁴ Notes from Fry’s unpublished personal papers in Oxford (n.d) kindly made available to me by Anne Logan, Margery Fry’s biographer.

In 1924 the Rackhams moved to 9 Park Terrace, one of a row of spacious town houses built in the 1830s belonging to Christ's College with a fine view overlooking Parkers' Piece, a grassy piece of open ground used for cricket, football, and open-air public meetings. A short cycle ride to the East lay Mill Road with its bridge linking Petersfield to Romsey, the working-class community consisting largely of railway and construction workers and their families, known as 'Red Romsey', which Hugh Dalton remembered with unqualified affection and respect: 'Happy is a Constituency Labour Party which has such workers, both men and women, as these!'⁵ Clara was later to represent Romsey as a Labour councillor fighting tirelessly to secure better schools, housing, medical care and working conditions.

Clara and Harris embarked on an ambitious programme of internal renovations, which Clara described in one of her few forays into popular journalism, 'Banishing the Basement Bogey' in *Good Housekeeping* (1925),⁶ transforming Park Terrace into a modern labour-saving home. The old kitchen was unceremoniously ripped out and replaced by a new kitchen large enough to double as the housekeeper's sitting room replete with a modern serving hatch and a view of the garden at the back. Old fireplaces were replaced with modern gas fires, musty carpets with stained wooden floors and woven rugs, guest rooms fitted with individual wash basins and gas rings for making tea to welcome any visitor passing through Cambridge needing a bed for the night. Two weeks after Clara had presided over the festivities when Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party, visited Cambridge to lay the foundation stone of the Romsey Labour Club, Leah Manning recalls that Clara and Harris gave over their home for use as the headquarters of the Cambridge Joint Strike Committee when the General Strike was declared on May 4th. and that it was 'full of lively, exhilarating talk and the delicious smell of hot coffee and frying sausages.'⁷

⁵ Hugh Dalton, *Call Back Yesterday: Memoirs 1887-1931* (London: Muller, 1953), p.131.

⁶ Clara Rackham, 'Banishing the Basement Bogey', *Good Housekeeping*, vi .6 (Feb, 1925), 54, 166, 168.

⁷ Leah Manning, *A Life For Education* (London: Gollancz, 1970), 61.

Scarcely a week passed without a visit from their large extended family and an invitation to friends and family for Sunday lunch. Harris would uncork a bottle of wine or write a note to the porters' lodge ordering a bottle of sherry to be sent to celebrate a birthday or a special occasion. The days of frugal Sunday lunches and the cold lentils of Clara's strict sabbatarian childhood were a distant memory. The meals at Park Terrace prepared by the housekeeper were good but not extravagant with a crisp green salad and a vinaigrette dressing. Fresh fruit and vegetables – a pineapple or a coconut for a special treat -- were purchased daily from the market.

Any local group needing a meeting room in the town centre at short notice could always ask the Rackhams. In Clara's absence they would be admitted by the housekeeper. Tea was poured out from a large silver tea pot inherited by Clara's mother from her aunt, Anne Allen. Sir Harold Shearman, leader of the Greater London Council and the Inner London Education Committee, remembered how WEA tutors would drop in and out of Park Terrace and before that the Teachers' Labour League.⁸ There was always a cat ensconced in the Rackham household often occupying the window seat. Pussy-foot, a blue Siamese was very wild and used to run up the curtains. Another favourite cat was Montagu, mischievously named after Montagu Butler, the great classicist and Master of Trinity College. A large gilt-framed mirror hang over the mantelpiece on which there was a silver French clock.

Alongside Dickens, Tennyson, Browning and Rossetti bound in red leather, the book-lined shelves boasted presentation copies of books illustrated by Harris's brother, Arthur Rackham, with customised bookplates and signed and numbered first editions. The walls of the sitting room were hung with original Rackham prints, sketches, etchings, paintings and drawings, each properly stretched, mounted and framed. There was a striking portrait in oil of Wilhelmina Welland by Arthur's wife, the celebrated Irish portrait painter, Edyth Starkie. Visitors recollected an assortment of ornaments and souvenirs brought back from holidays in Switzerland, walking tours of Italy, or further afield from the Himalayas and the Canadian branch of the family. A low occasional table was piled high with newspapers, buff

⁸ Sir Harold Shearman, letter to Clara Rackham, December 11, 1965 (TFP).

government reports, back copies of *Labour Research* and *Fabian Quarterly* as well publications from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds with exquisite illustrations of birds with wondrous, diaphanous plumage for which the children made a beeline.

Mary Tabor recalled that childlessness was a sadness to her aunt although something on which she never allowed herself to dwell.⁹ Clara took her responsibilities as an aunt very seriously and loved to hear the house humming with the voices of her many nephews and nieces. The children saw a playful and boisterous side of their aunt hidden from those who only knew the public Mrs Rackham. ‘She was a delightful and original aunt, and great fun’ and would entertain her nieces by ‘doing mad or incongruous things’ such as shrieking out on the upper deck of the bus and referring to the Natural History Museum as the ‘dead zoo.’¹⁰ On one occasion two of her nieces Bertha [The daughter of Clara’s brother-in-law, Bernard Rackham] and Mary [the daughter of Clara’s brother, Francis and Magdalen Ricardo, Clara’s best friend at Newnham College] were staying and Bertha ‘fell between a rowing boat and the bank.’ Clara fished her out and marched them home. ‘Bertha was wearing a nice blue Liberty dress which shrank.’¹¹ Family Christmases would often be spent at Fennes, the Tabor family farm in Essex. A large fir tree would be brought inside, a blazing coal-fire lit, and the room decorated with holly, mistletoe, and paper chains. There were puzzles, treasure hunts, and charades for the children and the ritual completion of the General Knowledge Quizzes in the Sunday papers for the adults. Clara and Harris insisted on playing ‘Consequences’ in ancient Greek making the younger members of the family feel inadequate. At Easter Clara

⁹ Mary Tabor, interviewed by Brian Harrison, November 25, 1975, 8SUF/BO62, Women’s Library at the LSE.

¹⁰ All these incidents (undated) were related to Anne Stevenson Wright by her mother, Mary Hobbs and are reproduced by Anne in her unpublished typescript, ‘Family Reminiscences and Anecdotes’ (ASH).

¹¹ Ibid.

would take her mother and her nieces to the beautiful Good Friday and Easter Sunday services in King's College Chapel¹².

on September 6th, 1939, Clara and Harris were devastated to hear that Arthur had died of cancer two days after Britain had declared war on Germany. Two thousand staff and students from London University were evacuated to Cambridge during the war including many of the Rackham's personal friends such as the Economist, Geraldine Jebb, Principal of Bedford College, London. Clara accepted LSE students as lodgers getting used to the hum of new voices on her staircase and the sound of strange latchkeys in her own front door. Having resisted rearmament for as long as was decently possible, an admixture of hope, naivety and a visceral detestation for war never really left her, Clara signed up for Air Raid Precaution (ARP) duties and agreed to serve as the Cambridge and District Trades Council representative on the committee deciding the fate of conscientious objectors.

Harris volunteered for work in the Cambridge University Botanic Gardens. Clara and Harris would tread their way home gingerly leaning on one another's arm for support past the ATS huts on Donkey Common and the deeply dug air raid shelter trenches on Parker's Piece, in good time to draw the black-out curtains. During the winter afternoons and evenings they sat together in quiet companionship making do with a light, cold supper off a tray; the new egalitarianism of the war was well suited to their own ethical code; that nobody should benefit unfairly from the war -- that privileged people like themselves should throw in their lot in with everyone else. On Tuesdays and Sunday afternoons there was the ever-popular 'Brains Trust' on the wireless and from 1942 a chance of hearing one or other of their friends and acquaintances, Margery Fry, Bertrand Russell, Barbara Wootton or Ellen Wilkinson answer 'brain teasers' sent in by the audience on a postcard. They followed foreign affairs closely and would tune in to the BBC Home Service at 6.00 pm to listen avidly for news of the war. They would peruse their books and papers, often in silence, until it was time for bed.

¹² Letter from W.E. Adams to Joyce Bellamy, October 21, 1980, Clara Dorothea Rackham U DLB/9/55, Hull History Centre, Worship St, Hull HU2 8BG.

One welcome wartime visitor to Park Terrace was R. H. Tawney, Professor of Economics at the LSE, bombed out of his Mecklenburg Square house in London, who lectured in Cambridge two or three days a week.¹³ Another was Margery Fry, persuaded by Susan Isaacs to become joint Hon. Secretary to the research committee of the Cambridge Evacuation Survey. Mary Tabor, bearing the heavy responsibility for rehousing bombed-out families in Camberwell and Holborn -- she was to become the first Housing Manager for Stevenage New Town in 1951 -- made regular visits bringing home-made 'comforts' and family news.

Clara was kept busy with her committees and the activities that Labour called 'winning the peace', intended to ensure that the war-time sacrifices of ordinary people would be rewarded by vast improvements in postwar health, education and living standards. What was always expected from her, and which she unfailingly produced, were clearly-written reports, lucid plans, proposals and documents of a sociological nature (often unsigned if they were for the local Party or for an organisation she supported) with structured arguments, objectives, findings and recommendations. For Clara, the act of writing was sedentary. She possessed an old typewriter, an Olivetti, but more often than not her documents were handwritten and required silence and intense concentration. Reports could be exceedingly long and time-consuming. The Minority Report of the Royal Commission on Unemployment opposing reductions in unemployment benefits which she and William Asbury wrote and signed ran to 500 pages. *Labour's Plan for Cambridge* which she co-authored in 1945 required many hours of consultations, discussion and research. Her little book *Factory Law* (1937) was in contrast short, economical and to the point.

Writing had to be done at a desk or a table, with ink-well and blotting paper to hand. She would leave instructions not to be disturbed other than in dire emergency, filling her good fountain pen with black ink; it was that or a sharpened pencil, covering sheet after sheet of paper in her neat, precise, confident handwriting. There was a small mahogany cabinet with shallow drawers alongside her desk. Anne Stevenson Wright, who eventually inherited the cabinet, described it as 'an interesting artefact from the history of the Labour Party: remnants of labels

¹³ Lawrence, Goldman, *The Life of R. H. Tawney* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 251.

still adhere to the drawers ('PENAL REFORM', 'UNEMPLOYMENT', 'LABOUR PARTY' etc.) and a 'much treasured – and very useful – piece of furniture.' (ASH).

Then personal tragedy struck again. Harris Rackham died unexpectedly in March, 1944 in the same week in which American-led bombing raids had reduced the sixth-century abbey at Monte Cassino to a sorry, charred reproachful ruin. It had been a long, happy, companionate, marriage and Clara was plunged into almost inconsolable grief. With Harris gone and Arthur's volumes gathering dust, Clara consigned her brother-in-law's books to packing cases and donated them to the Cambridge Central Library in 1944 to form the basis of what James Hamilton praised as 'probably the most important single collection [of Rackham's work] in public hands in Great Britain.'¹⁴ Several of Arthur's paintings were loaned to the Cambridgeshire County Council Pictures in Schools Scheme instigated by Nan Youngman, the county Art Advisor. Visibly struggling to manage a large house that had turned into an echo chamber on her own, and acutely conscious of her serious loss of hearing, Clara invited her sister, Margaret Tabor to move into Park Terrace for company in 1948, keeping herself busy with innumerable requests to attend school prize days, fetes and flower shows while throwing her formidable intellectual weight behind the national campaign against the Labour Party's growing support for Comprehensive Education and in favour of the retention of the grammar school.¹⁵

Margaret Tabor died in 1954 and Clara stayed on for three more years moving to Langdon House in Chesterton, a 'model' retirement home opened by Princess Margaret, built by the Cambridge Housing Association which she had helped to set up in the 1920s. She retired from all public duties on January 27th 1957 citing deafness as the cause, the news prompting

¹⁴ James Hamilton, *Arthur Rackham: a Life with Illustrations* (London: Pavilion, 1990), 191.

¹⁵ Clara Rackham, 'Comprehensive Schools', *The Political Quarterly*, xxiii, no 2, (April-June 1952), 134-46.

widespread sadness, dismay and disbelief,¹⁶ although it was hardly a surprise: she was eighty-one.

Clara transferred to Meadowcroft in Trumpington Road when her room was needed, and returned to Langdon House when a vacancy occurred. Her belief in the possibility of world peace was inextinguishable and she was an early supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament walking on four of the famous Aldermaston Marches, the last in 1961 sporting only a flask of coffee and sandwiches in a string bag, accompanied by her great-niece, Sarah Rackham aged eleven. In 1963 Clara attended the opening of the ‘state of the art’ indoor heated swimming pool on Parkside completed at a cost of £248,000 pounds for which she had agitated since the early 1950s. Had she still lived in Park Terrace she would have enjoyed a fine view of the imposing edifice to municipal modernism from her window. Having turned down both the OBE offered by Winston Churchill’s Private Secretary in May, 1941¹⁷ and the Freedom of the City of Cambridge, offered by the council to mark her 90th birthday, Clara died peacefully in Langdon House in March, 1966.

A Note on Sources

This account draws extensively on the unpublished, uncatalogued personal papers of Clara Rackham (TFP) by kind permission of Helen Bloxsome and Lucy Tabor and on my own biography of Clara Rackham, Maroula Joannou, *The Life and Turbulent Times of Clara Dorothea Rackham: Suffragist, Socialist and Social Reformer* (London: Routledge, 2022). I am indebted to Anne Stevenson Wright (née Hobbs), Clara’s great-niece by marriage, for access to her unpublished typescript, ‘Family Reminiscences and Anecdotes’ (ASH). The two Arthur Rackham illustrated Christmas greetings cards, the sketch of Harris Rackham, the photograph of Harris Rackham, the photograph of Harris Rackham at the Acropolis, and the Rayon D’or at Le Bourget are reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of

¹⁶ Clara pasted the many tributes and letter of thanks received from the public and press cuttings relating to her retirement into an exercise book marked ‘Letters, January, 1957’ (TFP).

¹⁷ Anthony Bevir, letter to Clara Rackham, May 21, 1941 (TFP)

Christ's College, Cambridge. All other illustrations are from the Tabor Family papers (TFP) unless a different source is specified. The Hull History Centre has a cache of documents on Clara Rackham sent in by the general public after an appeal by Joyce Bellamy and Eileen Price for information to be used in *The Dictionary of Labour Biography*. See <https://www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk/> (CDR, U DLB/955).
