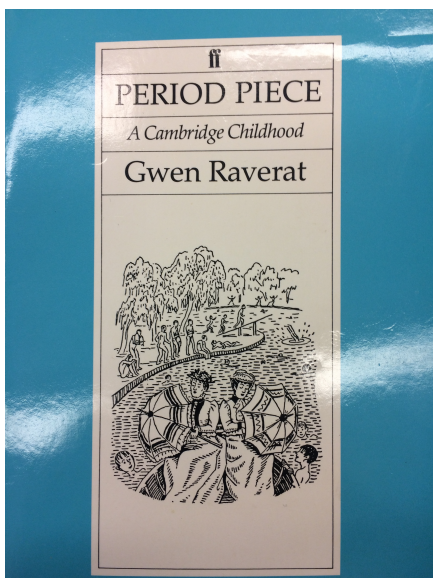


Gwen Raverat - Artist and Wood Engraver

Gwen Raverat is one of the most important British wood engravers, and the artist who brought this form of printmaking technique into the 20th century. She was born in Cambridge in 1885, as Gwendolen Mary Darwin and lived at Newnham Grange and in Wychfield. Her grandfather was Charles Darwin, the famous naturalist, but she never met him, as he died before she was born. She was very curious as a child and she soon developed a strong interest in drawing and in literature. Her mother taught her how to read at the age of five, and at nine she started to take drawing lessons with Mary Greene, a professional painter based in Cambridge but educated in Paris. As a child, Gwen considered these drawing lessons the most important thing in her life. Even after enrolling at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Arts in London, in 1908, Gwendolen kept strong links with Cambridge and was an active member of the “neo-pagans”, the intellectual circle of Cambridge students which included Virginia Woolf and Rupert Brooke. Thanks to Brooke, she met a French student who had come to England to become a painter, Jacques Raverat. They soon fell in love and got married; their love story inspired Virginia Woolf for her novel “The Voyage Out.”

After the death of her husband, Gwendolen moved back to Cambridge, making the town the centre of her professional and spiritual life. Apart from her activities as an illustrator and engraver, she collaborated in several productions for the New Theatre. Perhaps because of the attachment to her family and to her home town, Gwen had also a keen interest in children's fiction and in childhood memoirs. Her first commission for book illustration was “The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children” by Kenneth Grahame, now a classic anthology. In 1947, when she was 62, she wrote and illustrated her childhood memoirs. “Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood” tells the story of her life as a child in Cambridge and the story of her family. The book was published in 1952 and has never been out of print since. Gwen Raverat died in 1957 at the Old Granary, very close to Newnham Grange. Both houses are now part of the Darwin College complex. One of its student accommodations is dedicated to her memory and on the street, a blue plaque reminds us of her birthplace and the importance of the Darwin family in the Cambridge community.



Gwen Raverat plaque at Darwin College, University of Cambridge.
Picture by Kevin Taylor