

A Little Town and some of its people

Poems after Flora Twort

The Poets Commentary by Ellora Sutton.

Approaching the second month of my residency, I knew that I wanted to explore the life and work of Petersfield artist Flora Twort. There were two main reasons for choosing her as my subject: firstly, it would allow me to continue the work of the first month of highlighting Petersfield's rich artistic/cultural tradition (the writing of Edward and Helen Thomas, the visual art of Flora Twort); secondly, Flora's work celebrated Petersfield, and in writing about her and her work I would not only be celebrating her, but the town she loved so dearly as well. She was Petersfield's artist in residence.

I decided to do a sequence of poems (as opposed to, say, one long narrative poem) as, to me, it reflects the nature of an art exhibition. A sequence is like an exhibition of linked poems, just as you might say an exhibition is a sequence of linked artworks; it's just that instead of hanging on a gallery wall, the poem hangs on the white page. This also ties in with the title of the sequence, 'A Little Town and some of its people', which was the name of Flora's 1931 solo exhibition at London's Gieves Gallery.

Through this sequence I am telling/retelling Flora's story through a blend of ekphrasis and 'speculative history'. 'Speculative history' is a term I first came across in Shara McCallum's collection *No Ruined Stone*; she describes such poems as being a blend of research and imagination, in which imagination is allowed to fill in the gaps between research. I like to think that Flora would have approved of such an approach, as I feel that it somewhat mirrors her use of tracing paper to transfer sketches of people she'd seen elsewhere into her bustling scenes, creating a kind of 'speculative' scene or 'speculative' record. Her use of tracing paper was one of the key impulses behind 'Flora Sees a Man Steal an Egg', in which her own "pilfered eggs" are her observations; this poem was also inspired by a quote from Flora herself, from a newspaper clipping in the archive box: "You see that man there, whilst I was drawing I saw him steal an egg, ever so slowly, he didn't even quicken his pace. I could have given him quite a shock." It made me wonder why she didn't!

In terms of research, my primary sources were Flora's pictures themselves, held by the Museum. They were like reading her own first-hand testimonies, they allowed me to see what she saw, exactly how she saw it. They describe the world around her but also what she herself found interesting about it, what she thought was worth recording; in this way, I took every picture to be almost a self-portrait. One of the things I've learnt as a poet is that a description says as much about the describer as it does the described; I realised this is equally true for visual art.

For example, 'Flora at the Heath' is an ekphrastic response to Flora's oil painting 'Boating on Petersfield Heath Lake' (on display in the Museum). I love this painting because it almost seems like a series of ready-made stanzas, each cluster of people telling their own story. I focused on the feminine figures as that is what I think Flora is interested in, especially in a time when the roles of women were so restricted – as Flora herself would have known, in particular as an artist. But this was also a changing time; the three women in the poem create a sort of chain, reflecting the different roles a woman might have or aspire to in their society.

Two texts were vital to the creation of these poems. The first was the Museum's copy of *Flora Twort: A Petersfield Artist* by Alice Munro-Faure, which I turned to for biographical details and a

better understanding of Flora's art and technique. The second was *Doctor Himself: An Unorthodox of Biography of Harry Roberts, M.D.* by Winifred Stamp, which was pointed out to me in the Edward Thomas Study Centre – it let me see Flora and her world through the eyes of someone who actually knew her. A massive thank you to Deirdre for bringing it to my attention!

Another form of research I undertook was visiting a few of the Flora Twort sites in Petersfield – the Market Square, St Peter's Church, 1 & 2 The Square, Church Path Cottage. The places that she was a part of, the places that were a part of her and her story.

The timeframe of this sequence is c.1917-1939, although it concludes with her exhibition in 1931. Although I could have written about her entire life, I knew I had to narrow it down to a clear narrative, to make it manageable both for myself and the reader.

I chose to start in 1917 at Oakshott Hangar with 'Prologue: Flora Cuts Her Hair' because I felt like this is where her Petersfield story begins. When I was reading *Flora Twort: A Petersfield Artist* the mention of Flora cutting her hair around the same time that she moved to Hampshire really leapt out to me as a pivotal moment for Flora – to me, it symbolised her emancipation, her coming of age, the true start of her life as an artist. The details of Oakshott Hangar – being able to see for thirty miles, the types of animal and plants, the homemade cider, the stream – are all taken from *Doctor Himself*.

This timeframe also allowed me to reflect how the world was changing around her, just as Flora did in her work. This is most clearly seen in 'Flora Gazes Out From Her Studio Window at the Market Square', a sequence of short ekphrastic fragments/sketches, each responding to Flora's depictions of life on the Square over several years: 'The Saddler's Shop' (1930), 'Print of Cattle Market', 'Saturday Shopping at Petersfield Square' (1932), 'Women Talking in Petersfield Square', and 'Market Day at Petersfield Square' (1939). We see the "empty" harnesses of the saddler's give way to buses, and in the final stanza I tried to hint at the anxiety of the war that surely must have been present, even in such a bustling scene, in 1939. This anxiety is reflected in the children "hanging on so fiercely"; I wanted to show this through the children to reflect what Nevil Shute wrote in his letter to Flora of 28th September 1925: "I've never seen a girl with so great a maternal instinct" (from the archive box).

It was fun to consider how I might use form to reflect visual art. 'Flora Outside St Peter's Church at Twilight' is a haibun, a Japanese form in which the opening stanza is a haiku and the second is prose. Given the way it looks on the page, it can't help but be a visual form; I felt this was fitting as it is an ekphrastic poem, written in response to Flora's painting 'St Peter's Church at twilight' in Petersfield Museum. Given the title of the painting (and poem), this form also serves to reflect the transitional temporal space of 'twilight' – neither wholly day nor night, just as this piece is neither wholly prose nor poetry. It also reflects the act of looking/creating. The haiku is an image describing the shape of the gravestones (to me, they look like a jawbone curving down the church path), whilst the prose poem section offers a more intense form of looking.

'Flora is Woken by Horses' is a combination of ekphrasis and speculative history. It is both a response to Flora's sketches of horses on display in the Museum (her use of red chalk made me think of hot glass, hence "blown-glass / figurines of horses"), and an imagining of a scene that Flora herself describes from 1919: "No one had told us about it then and I was woken early on October 6th by the clatter of horses' hoofs under my window in the Square. There they were,

going to the fair. Shire horses and ponies, combed and polished from tossing mane to fringed feet, their manes and tails plaited with bright new straw.” (From the box of archive material).

I also used biographical details as sparks for a lot my imagery. For example, in ‘Flora Meets The Bookshop’, “I could hear the beating of your hearth” came from Winifred Stamp’s description of the restoration of The Bookshop in *Doctor Himself*: “Stripping walls, pulling down partitions and opening up the wide, unspoilt hearth revealed a beautiful little old house, of the late fifteenth century, its pegged beams shaped from old ships’ timbers brought from the Portsmouth yards.” Likewise, “a final art-school ration / of slithered almonds” is inspired by Flora’s diet of almonds, raisins and kippers whilst she struggled to survive as an artist in London (taken from *Flora Twort: A Petersfield Artist*).

All of these poems are dramatic monologues taking on the voice of Flora Twort, apart from the opening ‘Prologue’ poem. The ‘Prologue’ is addressing Flora, presenting her and the reader with various different possibilities as to how she may have cut her hair. I wanted to do this to introduce the reader to the idea that it is speculative history, that there is much we don’t know. These are poems, not a history textbook. They play in the light of possibility.

I chose to end with her 1931 exhibition in ‘Flora Travels to London For the Opening of Her One-Woman Show’ because it felt like a good narrative climax: she has made it, and she has taken Petersfield with her. She has become one of Petersfield’s people; she has become a part of Petersfield’s story.