

# FROM DARWIN TO CORNFORD: THE EVOLUTION OF THE POET FRANCES CORNFORD

## INTRODUCTION

JANE FIRMAN AND PETER MABER

In 1959, at the age of 73, Frances Cornford was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. She was only the second woman to receive the honour; Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and W. H. Auden were among the men who had preceded her. In the 1950s, the final decade of her life, Frances<sup>1</sup> had become more widely known than ever, broadcasting on the BBC, giving talks and poetry readings in London and Cambridge, taking part in a 'literary conversation' with John Betjeman, and seeing her poems regularly printed, reprinted and anthologised.<sup>2</sup>

In 1954 her *Collected Poems* appeared, to great acclaim, and was that quarter's Choice of T. S. Eliot's Poetry Book Society. A folder of reviews preserved in the British Library's Darwin and Cornford Papers reveals how widely her poetry was being praised.<sup>3</sup> 'Mrs Cornford is deliciously and formidably clever [...]. The verification matches the fineness of age, mind, heart and imagination', wrote Raymond Mortimer in *The Sunday Times* of the *Collected Poems*, which reminded him 'of a Greek anthology: there is a similar mixture of irony and pathos'. Her poetry was being appreciated for its variety and complexity; the *Times Literary Supplement* identified her 'ear that never fails her', and at the same time appreciated that 'her poems are often memorable not just for the words but for the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this volume we refer to Frances Cornford using her first name, in respect of her own wishes; see her letter to Jessie Stewart, discussed by Jane Firman in the Preface and Chapter 4, and by Samantha Evans in Chapter 12.

<sup>2</sup> A transcript of Frances's talk with Betjeman is in Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58384, dated 12 May 1953.

<sup>3</sup> Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58389. Subsequent quotations from reviews are from this folder.

silences that lie round the words'. Often the reviewers praised the sense she can communicate, through her poems, of herself, *The Manchester Guardian*, for example, opining that 'to read them is to be heartened with a rich and delightful personality'.

Yet these were honours that were hard-won. Despite being noticed as a poet from the moment her first book of poetry, *Poems*, was published in 1910, there was a simultaneous tendency to dismiss her as — in a term she could view only as pejorative — a 'poetess', and to reduce her, attributing her success to her status as Charles Darwin's granddaughter. *The Nation* was quick to categorise her work as 'feminine poetry', while for the *Daily Chronicle* she was a model 'poetess' whose work exemplified the virtues of 'purity'; range was rarely picked up upon, and on the publication of *Autumn Midnight* in 1923, *The Nation* and *Athenaeum* referred to Frances again as a 'poetess' who 'writes of children, houses and furniture, gardens and hills and sand-dunes, and knows more than a thing or two about such things'.

Frances appeared in so many ways to be an insider to the world of learning, born into the Darwin family, the daughter of two University of Cambridge academics, Francis Darwin and Ellen Wordsworth Crofts, and marrying another Cambridge don, the pioneering classicist Francis Cornford. The accounts of those who knew her reveal a woman who could appear completely comfortable within the University milieu: more confident than her husband in entertaining academic guests, she would be an exemplary host with her 'great gifts as a conversationalist' that could 'make any subject seem interesting' and 'put people at ease', so much so that, as her son Hugh reveals, 'when visiting scholars came to see my father he would say to her "Come and start us off"'.<sup>4</sup> Hugh's account shows her responding generously to students, scholars, and the general public with enquiries about her or their own work, and

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh Cornford, 'Frances Cornford, 1886–1960', in *Frances Cornford: Selected Poems*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Enitharmon Press, 1996), p. xxxi.

to requests for advice and support. These are impressions supported by Frances's correspondence, which testifies moreover to her sustained, vigorously intellectual relationships, many, like those with Sir Edward Marsh and Siegfried Sassoon, spanning decades. Helen Fowler, who interviewed Hugh as well as Frances's other surviving son Christopher when writing a portrait of Frances (published in 1996), maintains that 'a quality of assured and enlightened common sense [...] informed all her relationships and friendships with a variety of people from Rupert Brooke onwards', and that she possessed 'the inborn stability which enabled her to juggle with ideas and convictions, to pursue self-awareness and self-knowledge and to behave with unselfconscious unconventionality'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Frances also suffered from estrangement, most painfully during her multiple bouts of depression, which lasted for years, and which could leave her barely able to function or to feel, let alone to think. Even in the midst of the Darwin and Cornford security she could be at once within and without the networks that might appear to define her, and states of being somewhere in between are a powerful feature of her poetry, as in the tonally ambiguous poem 'A Glimpse', selected for this volume's opening, and discussed in Chapter 10. The realities of her creative patterns, writing in snatched moments late at night when the house had gone quiet, make for a charming anecdote,<sup>6</sup> but equally might form part of her wider struggles to be taken seriously, or indeed to have full confidence in her own abilities; she was unable to accept that she was ever a professional poet.<sup>7</sup> Describing herself instead as 'highly cultivated but quite uneducated', she maintained characteristic self-deprecation, but there were deeper insecurities at play, going back at least to her limited home-schooling, which was provided by governesses and selected tutors.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Fowler, 'Frances Cornford, 1886-1960', *Cambridge Women: Twelve Portraits*, ed. by Edward Shils and Carmen Blacker (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 137–38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

In her diary of 1902, aged 16, Frances reveals in a sudden outburst the pain she experienced in being an outsider to the University, even as she was living within the heart of Cambridge, within a family of academics:

O my God my God I wish I was an undergraduate, I wish I was a man, I *wish* I was a man. Today especially this morning it seems so hopeless so pathetic so ridiculous that never in the lay world shall I be an undergraduate. That door is closed to me, I can peep in & see a glimpse, see the youngness and the joy and the go of it all. I can see them acting at the ADC [the University's Amateur Dramatic Club] and can see them canoeing in the river, lying like whiteflannel slugs under the willows. I can speak to them as they sit swallowing at Sunday lunch, but the inside of it. Never never never. I am so tired my words go.<sup>9</sup>

When she refers to this violent sense of exclusion as a 'queer feeling [...] that swallows one up each moment one is alone', as if being consumed along with the male undergraduates' lunches, she not only points to the pervasiveness of such feelings in relation to her own struggles to find an identity, but seems to have the sense also that she is not alone, that she is speaking for many women.

Frances would grow over the next few years to be at home in male undergraduate company, most notably through her friendship with Rupert Brooke, on which this volume sheds new light. In her memoir, published in extracts in this volume for the first time, Frances recalls the now-graduate Brooke carrying her suitcase through a London park, revealing that 'the tradition of our youthful set in Cambridge' had been broken: their circle, which had included her now-husband Francis, held 'the tenet [...] that men and women were exactly alike and equally capable of looking after themselves'.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps such an egalitarian spirit was what lay behind Brooke speaking so openly to Frances in his many letters to her. This extended to criticism of her work, playful and supportive on the face of it, but Frances was

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<sup>9</sup> Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58390 B.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Cornford, Memoir, Frances Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

unprepared when she learnt after Brooke's death that he had mocked what he saw as her poetic limitations.

Although towards the end of her life Frances had finally established her identity as an accomplished poet in her own right, in the decades that followed her death in 1960, she fell out of public and academic consciousness almost completely. Her eleven volumes, including the *Collected Poems*, fell out of print, and while interest grew in those with whom she was associated — the Bloomsbury Group, the Georgians and the Great War Poets — there was little critical or popular interest in her poetry, except through her inclusion in the odd anthology. The understated qualities of her poetry were not in vogue, and the exponential rise in interest in modernism and its restless spirit of experimentation occluded her poetry's more restrained spirit of play, even as she admired and had learnt from T. S. Eliot. It's likely that the absence of overtly feminist themes in her poetry, or of direct involvement in feminist movements, also contributed to this neglect, although it's notable that she sustained a warm relationship with Virginia Woolf across her life, and wrote to her to say how much *A Room of One's Own* meant to her on its publication, with Woolf replying to express happiness 'that a wise and distinguished woman, with glowing daughters, should find some sense in it', adding 'Yours is so much more important a contribution to life than mine.'<sup>11</sup>

Yet recent decades have seen the beginnings of a renewal of interest in Frances's work. Her life and poetry have begun to be understood as intersecting and corresponding meaningfully with contemporary debates surrounding gender, education, war, love, loss, religion and mental (ill) health. Jane Dowson, who contributes to this volume, is the critic who did most to lead the scholarly revival, including Frances in her multiple studies of twentieth-century women's poetry, and bringing out a new *Selected Poems* in 1996. In 1999, Christopher Ricks included Frances in his new edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*,

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, Letter to Frances Cornford, 29 December 1929, Darwin and Cornford Papers, Add. 58422.

and he has since broadcast on her, extolling the virtues of her short verse that can all too easily go unnoticed.<sup>12</sup> In 2019 one of her poems featured as part of *Poems on the Underground*,<sup>13</sup> and online interest has grown rapidly over the last decade, with more and more of her poems freely available and in many cases the subject of lively critical forum debates.

The aim of this volume is to build on this momentum in presenting the first critical volume to make Frances the central subject, and to offer a sustained reassessment and realignment of her life and work. The volume brings together scholars from multiple fields to cover different and intersecting aspects of Frances Cornford's life, work and contexts from many perspectives. The authors have had access to, and have drawn on, the Frances Cornford Papers, the Cornford family's previously private archive of extensive unpublished manuscript materials, which has vastly expanded the sense that it is possible to give of multiple dimensions of Frances's life and work.

The chapters presented here are designed to be self-sufficient, allowing for coherence and depth within their different subjects and disciplinary approaches, at the same time as taking part in dialogues across the volume as a whole. As such, this volume takes on something of the structural logic of Gwen Raverat's *Period Piece*, as 'a circular book': 'It does not begin at the beginning and go on to the end; it is all going on at the same time, sticking out like the spokes of a wheel from the hub, which is me. So it does not matter which chapter is read first or last'.<sup>14</sup> Frances here takes the position of Raverat's 'me'. As a key source for understanding Frances's childhood, Raverat's memoir is a touchstone across

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Ricks (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1999); and Christopher Ricks, 'Young and Old', *The Essay: Five Easy Pieces*, BBC Radio 3, 30 May 2011 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sbcsz>> [accessed 11 January 2025]

<sup>13</sup> Frances Cornford, 'All Soul's Night', *Poems on the Underground*, 17 March 2021 <<https://poemsontheunderground.org/all-souls-night>> [accessed 4 December 2024].

<sup>14</sup> Gwen Raverat, *Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood* (Faber and Faber, 1952), Preface, p. 11.

multiple chapters, the episodes it chronicles themselves forming recurrent spokes on this wheel. At the same time as there is circularity, chapters are grouped in clusters with the aim of providing a sense of chronological and thematic development.

The first five chapters form a cluster that situates Frances's life in the contexts of those around her and of her forebears, as well as foregrounding her own voice. In Chapter 1, Jane Firman introduces the contexts of Darwin family history and of the University of Cambridge, the seemingly immovable intellectual traditions that surrounded Frances, and which she had to navigate in carving out an identity for herself. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Frances's parents, and consider the implications of their lives and works for Frances's development. Janet Browne focuses on Sir Francis Darwin, Frances's father and Charles Darwin's third and closest son, attending to his important work as a botanist whilst also revealing the heartbreak he endured after the deaths of both his first wife, Amy Richenda Ruck, and second wife, Ellen Wordsworth Crofts, Frances's mother. Ann Kennedy Smith then takes up Ellen's life, revealing her importance as the first woman lecturer in English literature at the University of Cambridge; as a respected literary critic; and as a proto-feminist, with progressive views in relation to both education and domestic life. Kennedy Smith considers Ellen's influence on Frances's development, including in relation to her cultural sensibilities, before the devastating impact of her death in 1903, when Frances was just 17.

In Chapter 4 we hear Frances's own account of her life in the form of extracts from her unfinished memoir, published here for the first time. Jane Firman introduces these, reflecting on the challenges that Frances appears to have encountered in narrating her life, and on the significance of the two key relationships it foregrounds: that between the classicist Jane Harrison and Francis Cornford, and that between herself and Rupert Brooke. In Chapter 5 Christopher Stray then focuses on the life, scholarly output and relationships of Frances's husband, Francis Macdonald Cornford. The chapter emphasises the importance of Francis Cornford's activities in

Cambridge as both undergraduate and don, including in his breaks with tradition, and it brings together his relationship with both Frances and Jane Harrison.

The volume then turns to two chapters focused on art and architecture. In Chapter 6 Sylvia Lachmann writes on the Cornford's Cambridge home, Conduit Head, including from her perspective as the house's current owner, giving insight into the way the Cornfords lived and to their love of the visual and performing arts. She reveals how Frances was true to her aim of creating a home where people could 'find a little shelter and friendliness and a few beautiful things to look at'.<sup>15</sup> In Chapter 7 Frances Spalding illuminates the close relationship between Frances and her cousin, the artist Gwen Raverat, examining Raverat's illustrations in relation to Frances's poetry; Peter Maber then traces Frances's early ambitions to be a painter, and discusses the relationship between the verbal and the visual in her work.

Two thematic chapters on aspects of Frances's life follow. In Chapter 8, Jane Garnett reveals the importance of religion to Frances's life and how her lifelong reflection on the essential qualities and demands of Christian belief provided psychological assurance and emotional disorientation in equal measure. In her positive moments, Frances read Christ's life as challenging but enabling, and understood life as a process of becoming oneself. But religious idioms also inflected the deep tensions in this process within her own life — the fragmentation and alienation of the self. In the worst periods of her mental illness, she used the language of evil, and described herself as possessed. She felt at odds with many aspects of the Anglican Church, and came to develop an eclectic religiosity interwoven with ideas drawn from popular contemporary psychology. Her correspondence with her close friend, Evelyn Saywell, a doctor at the Tavistock Clinic and her husband George, a prominent Anglican clergyman, illuminates her

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<sup>15</sup> Frances Cornford, Letter to Rupert Brooke, quoted in Christopher Hassall, *Rupert Brooke: A Biography* (Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 214.

self-reflection in these respects. Garnett draws on that and other correspondence, as well as on Frances's poetry, to situate her religious life in a contemporary cultural world.

In Chapter 9 Eugene Paykel then approaches from a psychiatric perspective the prolonged episodes of depression which affected Frances at three particular points in her life. Paykel takes as a starting point the assessment of Frances's son Hugh, who was a General Practitioner, and amplifies this account by giving a detailed overview of the nature of depression, and the way it has been understood both historically and today. The assessment and effects of Frances's depression are considered, with recourse to the Saywell correspondence, principally the letters written by Frances, but also a few by her husband. Understanding the nature of her depression, which is expressed across many of her letters, in the contexts of her time, emphasises the tenacity of a brave woman. The chapter is published posthumously, in memory of Eugene, who died in 2023.

In Chapter 10 Peter Maber gives sustained focus to Frances's poetry. The chapter organises itself around her claim that 'poetry must be *personal*, because it springs from a first hand experience (whether inward or outward) and *impersonal* (whether grave or gay) because it must reach something in us which is universal',<sup>16</sup> arguing that Cornford's poems are at once familiar and strange: that they are written from experience and yet are content to leave much unspoken; and that they employ distancing techniques that complicate the seemingly straightforward presentation of emotions. Although Frances's poetry as a whole resists categorisation, there are times throughout her career when it intersects with dominant modes and even movements: she can align herself with T. S. Eliot, whilst keeping alive the traditions of Victorian nature poetry; she became associated with the Georgian poets through her friendships with Rupert Brooke and Eddie Marsh, yet turned against what she called the 'Georgian idiom' of

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<sup>16</sup> Transcript from 'Guest of the Week' on *Woman's Hour* (1959), Frances Cornford Papers, Cambridge University Library, GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

‘faded poeticisms and jog trot rhythms’.<sup>17</sup> An introductory survey traces these connections and ruptures, together with a discussion of the widespread reception of Frances in her own lifetime: while her poems would provoke parodies, they also elicited heartfelt letters of praise. Subsequent sections discuss her light verse and its serious intentions; her distinctive ways of viewing the world and its connections with the artistic eye of Gwen Raverat; the connections between her nature verse and evolutionary theory; her war poetry; and her writing of the self and its relation to her given circumstances, as well as to wider issues of gender.

Ian Patterson then responds to Frances’s work from the perspective of a poet in Chapter 11, close reading and evaluating Frances’s poetry from across her entire life, considering the role that sentiment plays, as well as the limitations it can bring, and providing an understanding both of the surfaces of her poetry and of its forms. Two contemporary poets, Kaddy Benyon and Bhanu Kapil, have written poems responding to Frances’s work especially for this volume, testifying to the power of Frances’s poetry to inspire creative as well as critical responses. Kaddy Benyon’s ‘Scribbling on the Backs of Envelopes’ opens this volume, alongside Frances’s ‘A Glimpse’, extending the (ambivalent) sense of Cambridge continuities in Frances’s work, and reflecting on the need to bridge the world of learning with the realities of human lives, pressing concerns this volume unpacks in reading Frances’s own poetry. Bhanu Kapil’s ‘Frances’ is positioned after Frances’s memoir, to which it responds, extending our sense of Frances’s life in dramatizing both her losses and her creative impulses.

The Frances Cornford Papers contain many thousands of letters to and from Frances stretching across her life, and in Chapter 12 Samantha Evans curates a selection showing how Frances wrote within different contexts and at different periods of her life. The selection finds her frustrated by the interruptions of domestic life and needing to find ‘the cure in a woman's

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Notes for a Talk’, Darwin and Cornford Papers, British Library, Add. 58385.

life’;<sup>18</sup> trying out new poems; engaging with the latest thinking on Charles Darwin; and struggling with the overbearing influence of Jane Harrison. A many-levelled portrait of the author emerges through these varied letters with their seemingly spontaneous thoughts, revelations, abrupt changes of direction and digressions.

Three short contextual pieces follow: in ‘The End’, Jane Firman interviews Master Letter Cutter Eric Marland, who carved a plaque in memory of Frances, about his work and the Cornford graves. In ‘Afterwords’, Andrew Cornford, Frances’s grandson, reflects on his memories of Frances and on her significance; and John Wells, Senior Archivist in the Department of Archives and Modern Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library, reflects on the significance of the Frances Cornford Papers, and their place now in the Cambridge University Library poetry archives.

Emma Darwin, great-great-granddaughter of Charles, opened the volume with her prologue, introducing and giving insights into Frances’s life and work from creative, critical and familial perspectives; Jane Dowson concludes the volume with an epilogue. Dowson returns to her work on Frances, situating her within feminist contexts, and reflecting on the volume as a whole. She brings the volume to a close with reflections on the directions that future scholarship might take in the light of these new perspectives.

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<sup>18</sup> GBR/0012/MS Add. 10410.

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