

Architecture as Method of Self-Realisation: The Belfast Architect Florence Fulton Hobson

Florence Fulton Hobson (1881–1978) was the third woman architect to be licensed by the RIBA. Attended the School of Art in Belfast, was an apprentice in the Belfast practices of James John Phillips and James St John Phillips and worked for Edward Guy Dawber and James Glen Sivewright Gibson in London. After returning to Belfast, she worked for the Belfast Corporation from 1905 as an assistant to the Royal Commission on Health and Housing.

Little is known of her activities for the Belfast Corporation and only a few houses that were designed by her have been identified to date. She wrote, however, about the ways in which she negotiated her role as the only women in an all-male profession in her article “Architecture as a Profession”. Here, she analysed and reflected on doubts that were at the time expressed in relation to women practicing as architects. At the same time the text was an aid to women who wished to become architects because it explained how architects are educated and accredited.

Keywords: Florence Fulton Hobson, Ireland, Suffragette, Easter Rising, Belfast, RIBA

Little is known about Florence Fulton Hobson (1881–1978). In 1911 she was the third woman to be licensed by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and was the first one from Ireland. The online *Dictionary of Irish Architects*, the *Dictionary of Ulster Biography* and the brochure *Celebrating Belfast Women: A City Guide Through Women's Eyes* dedicate short texts to her¹ and on the basis of the information available here Ryan McBride wrote his unpublished BA Hons dissertation *Houses Designed by Women, for Women* that reiterates her biography and discusses one of her houses.²

Her life and significance as the first RIBA licensed Irish woman architect furthermore inspired the novelist Marina J. Neary to write two novels within which she and her family take a central place.³ The extent of Fulton Hobson's architectural oeuvre has yet to be researched and this paper focuses on providing an account of her career and, more importantly, on discussing her 1911 article “Architecture as a Profession”.

Life

Fulton Hobson was born in 1881 in Monasterevin, County Kildare but grew up in Belfast where her family had moved to by 1883. Her family (Fig. 1) were Quakers and her English mother Mary Ann

- 1 “Hobson, Florence Fulton,” *Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720–1940*, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/5010/HOBSON-FLORENCEFULTO> (accessed August 27, 2016); Kate Newmann, “Florence Hobson,” *Dictionary of Ulster Biography*, <http://www.newulsterbiography.co.uk/index.php/home/viewPerson/692> (accessed February 2, 2017); and *Celebrating Belfast women: A city guide through women's eyes* (Belfast: Women's Resource & Development Agency, [s.a.]), 22, <https://wrda.net/pdf/celebrating%20belfast%20women%20-%20tour%20guiding%20booklet.pdf> (accessed August 27, 2016).
- 2 Ryan McBride, “Houses Designed by Women, for Women,” (BA Hons thesis, Ulster University, 2015).
- 3 Marina Julia Neary, *Martyrs & Traitors: A Tale of 1916* (Maine: All Things that Matter Press, 2011); Marina Julia Neary, *Never Be at Peace* (Tucson, AZ: Fireship Press, 2013).

Bulmer Hobson (1856–1947) was a hobby archaeologist,⁴ active Suffragette and founder –together with the poet and writer Alice Milligan (1865–1953)– of the Irish Women's Association in Belfast.⁵ Fulton Hobson's younger brother, John Bulmer Hobson (1883–1969), is the best-known member of the family. He was a leading member of the Irish Volunteers, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood before the Easter Rising in 1916 and he had a pivotal role in the political developments in Ireland at that time.⁶

Fulton Hobson attended the School of Arts in Belfast and was an architectural assistant in the practice of James John Phillips (1841/42–1935) and his son James St John Phillips (1870–1935) between 1899 and 1903.⁷ After moving to London she was first a temporary assistant to Guy



Fig. 1. Family Photograph, ca. 1922. Florence Fulton Hobson is standing to the left hand side. Her mother Mary Ann Hobson (née Bulmer) is seated in front of her. John Bulmer Hobson sits to the right hand side of the image. Courtesy of the family (private collection).

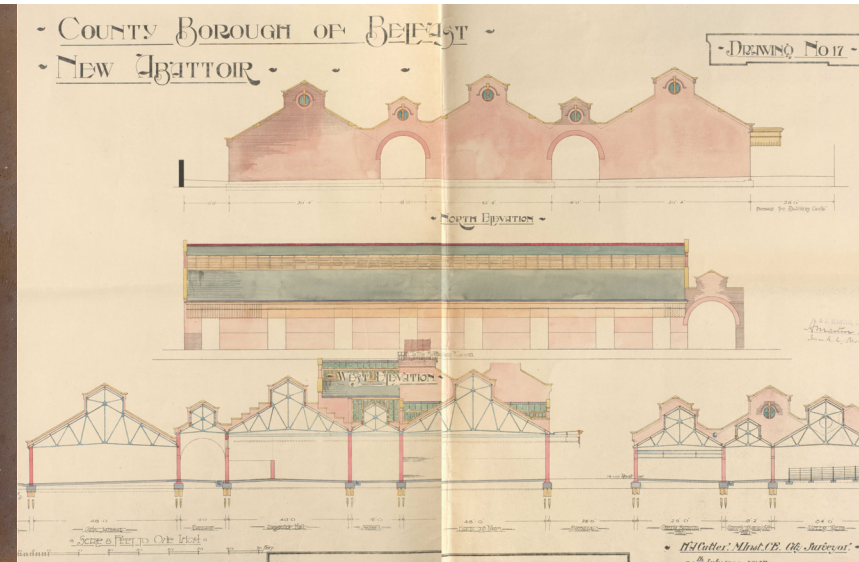


Fig. 2. Henry Albert Cutler, New Abbatoir, Drawing no. 17, North Elevation, West Elevation, Belfast, 1909.

Courtesy of 'The Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland', LA/7/8/JA/3/17.

Dawber⁸ (1861–1938), who ran a large practice that specialised in stone-built country houses in Tudor or late Stuart styles, and later took employment with James Glen Sivewright Gibson⁹ (1861–1951). Here, she was involved with the

work on the Neo-Baroque Town Hall in Walsall near Birmingham.¹⁰ Fulton Hobson returned to Belfast and in 1906 and became a temporary assistant in the Surveyor's Department at the Belfast Corporation where she made working drawings for an Electric Generation Station.¹¹ After travelling privately on the Continent to study architecture for three months she commenced working for the Royal Commission of Health and Housing, also at the Belfast Corporation. Here, she appears to have worked between 1907 and 1921. Up until 1911 she was involved with the erection of ten workmen's dwellings in Portadown, a Presbyterian Church on Grosvenor Road in Belfast, a disinfecting station, and a public abattoir that was designed by the architect Henry Albert Cutler¹² (1861–1952) (Fig. 2).

Shortly after she had become a licentiate to the RIBA in 1911 she anonymously published the article "Architecture as a Profession."¹³ Little is known about her later career at the Belfast Corporation or her private practice. In 1913 she gave the public talk "Town Planning and its Relation to Public Health" at the Belfast Public Library. It encompassed topics such as the ethics of town planning, modern legislation, and social housing. She also built several houses at Carnalea (Figs. 3 and 4), south of Belfast, a bungalow in Killiney (Fig. 5), near Dublin and made alterations to the 1810

4 Mary Ann Bulmer Hobson was active in the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club and is frequently mentioned in the Annual reports between 1904 and 1913, especially in relation to her interest in 'Souterrains' or cave dwellings. In 1904 her daughter Florence is mentioned as having made sketches and plans. "Some Souterrains in Antrim and Down," *Annual Report & Proceedings: Belfast Naturalists' Field Club Series 2*, vol. 5, part 3 (1903–4), 213–214. See also "Lecture on 'Deneholes and Souterrains,'" *Annual Report & Proceedings: Belfast Naturalists' Field Club Series 2*, vol. 5, part 5 (1905–6), 425–426, <https://archive.org/stream/s2annualreportsp05belfuoft/page/n5/mode/2up> (accessed June 16, 2017). In 1947 her *Memoirs of Six Generations*, which is a Chronicle of her family, was published. Mary A. Bulmer Hobson, *Memoirs of Six Generations* (Belfast: Graham and Heslip Ltd., 1947).

5 Catherine Morris, *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013).

6 Marnie Hay, *Bulmer Hobson and the Nationalist Movement in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Kate Newmann, "Bulmer Hobson (1883–1963), Writer and Revolutionary," *Dictionary of Ulster Biography*, <http://www.newulsterbiography.co.uk/index.php/home/viewPerson/691> (accessed January 1, 2017).

7 Biographical details on her professional work: "RIBA Nomination File 'Florence Patterson'. Candidate's Separate Statement, December 3rd, 1910," in The Royal Institute of British Architects, *Licentiate Florence Fulton Hobson Student RIBA*, London, November 29th, 1910. In addition to her architectural work, this CV also lists two publications "Some Ulster Stone Monuments in Antrim co. Down" (1910) and "Some Ulster Souterrains" (1910). Her mother wrote the texts but both articles were illustrated with Fulton Hobson's drawings of ancient stone monuments and underground structures. Information on her work after 1911 is contained in: Florence Fulton Hobson, "Hand-written Curriculum Vitae," not dated (c. 1921). This manuscript is in the collection of Fulton Hobson's family. Her successful completion of the preliminary and intermediate RIBA exams in 1903 didn't go unnoticed and the Belfast architect W. J. Fennell welcomed her in a public lecture on "Early English Architecture" among the ranks of architects and '... was glad to see that there was at least one lady in Belfast who had the pluck to serve her time to architecture, and had passed the Royal Inst. Of British Architects...' "Lecture by Mr. W. J. Fennell FRIBA on 'Early English Architecture' at Municipal Technical Institute (extract)," *The Northern Whig*, Monday February 9, 1903 in The Royal Institute of British Architects, *Licentiate Florence Fulton Hobson Student RIBA*, London November 29, 1910.

8 "(Sir) Edward Guy Dawber," *Dictionary of Scottish Architects: Architect Biography Report*, http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=203314 (accessed, August 15, 2016).

9 "Glen Sivewright Gibson," *Dictionary of Scottish Architects: Architect Biography Report*, http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=100337 (accessed, August 15, 2016).

10 RIBA Nomination File 'Florence Patterson'.

11 Fulton Hobson, "Hand-written Curriculum Vitae."

12 "Cutler, Henry Albert," *Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720–1940*, <http://www.dia.ie/architects/view/896/CUTLER-HENRYALBERT> (accessed August 10, 2016).

13 Anonymous [Florence Fulton Hobson], "Architecture as a Profession," *The Queen: The Lady's Newspaper*, December 23, 1911. Her being licensed by the RIBA was reported also in *The Queen* shortly after her article had been published. "Public Work and Women's Employment," *The Queen: The Lady's Newspaper*, February 17, 1912, 284.



Fig. 3. Florence Fulton Hobson, House at Carnalea Co. Down, 1914–15.
Courtesy of Gary Quigg Photography.



Fig. 4. Florence Fulton Hobson, House at Carnalea Co. Down, 1920–21.
Published in Maire Garvey, “Ireland’s First Women Architect,” *The Crystal* (September 1927), 263.



Fig. 5. Florence Fulton Hobson, Bungalow in Killiney near Dublin, c. 1921.
Courtesy of Gary Quigg Photography.

Glendun Lodge in Cushendun.¹⁴ Fulton Hobson also worked for the Reconstruction Commission of the Irish White Cross Society before the initiation of the Free State in 1922.¹⁵ The Irish White Cross had been organised in 1920 to obtain funds to alleviate the effects of civil war in Ireland.¹⁶

The only publication that illustrated and discussed Fulton Hobson’s houses was the 1927 article “Ireland’s First Women Architect” by Maire Garvey in the magazine *The Crystal*¹⁷. It featured images of two of the houses that Fulton Hobson had built in Carnalea as well as one floor plan (Figs. 3 and 4).

Around 1930 she ran the craft shop, Dunluce Handcrafts, in Bushmills, Co. Antrim and retired in 1936. In 1947 she married William Forbes Patterson and appears to have lived in London until the 1960s but returned to Carnalea where she died in 1978 at the age of 97.

Architecture as a Profession

The most compelling insights to the ways in which Fulton Hobson experienced her education and early practice as an architect are given in her article “Architecture as a Profession”. The article begins by explaining that architecture is suitable for those –men and women– who combine artistic ability and ‘practical common sense’ and continues to summarise several preconceptions concerning women architects:

Many people declare that women should be domestic architects, and that they would no doubt excel in house designing on account of their special knowledge of domestic arrangements, but this is about as far as they are willing to go; any larger sphere of work has probably never presented itself to the minds of the majority of people. There certainly is an idea abroad that a woman could not superintend the erection of a high building or supervise workmen. It is thought that she could not possibly go up a ladder in a skirt, and that, although she might be everything that could be desired as a designer of houses to live in (for who knows the dwellers’ requirement better than she?), yet to look after all the details of house erection would be something entirely outside her sphere, and unsuitable, if not impossible.¹⁸

This statement as well as the remainder of the article displays comprehensive knowledge and involvement in the discussion about women in architecture that had commenced in Britain around 1900 when Ethel Mary Charles (1871–1962) and her sister Bessie Ada Charles (1869–1932) had

¹⁴ Fulton Hobson, “Hand-written Curriculum Vitae.”

¹⁵ Maire Garvey, “Ireland’s First Woman Architect,” *The Crystal: Modern Ireland Mirrored* (September 1927), 264.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Anonymous, “Architecture as a Profession.”

become associate members of the RIBA in 1898 and in 1900. Some of the wording of Fulton Hobson's article allows for the assumption that she was familiar with the article, "May Women Practise Architecture?",¹⁹ that was published in 1902 in *The British Architect* and that reported on a talk by Ethel Mary Charles.

The argument, that women are best suited to be domestic architects, can be found in both articles and was related to the notion that the realm of women is the domestic one. Domestic architecture hence provided a 'natural' niche for women architects. Female spheres and experiences were linked with newly acquired expertise in architecture. This could be seen, as Despina Stratigakos has shown, as an attempt to reconcile the perceived opposite spheres of women in the workplace with women in the domestic realm. Using the first German women architect Emilie Winkelmann (1875–1951), as an example the reporter Fritz Daussig explained in 1909 that designing single-family homes would help women to remain feminine and would 'preserve the best female qualities in their professional work'²⁰ since house design should come 'naturally' to women architects.

Fulton Hobson's remark that a women architect would find it difficult to supervise contractors or builders referred to social expectations about gendered behaviour.²¹ The social homogeneity of the all-male work place was disrupted by a female presence and created unease. Fulton Hobson regarded such diffidence as unnecessary because architects are gentlemen and behave politely to everyone in the office.²²

Her comment that skirts make the climbing of ladders a problematic exposure²³ appears to have related to the observation that male architects were able to transgress class boundaries between construction workers and fellow middle-class architects through wearing clothes appropriate for the building site. This way they would be seen as knowledgeable master architects as well as craftsmen. It would have been scandalous for the lady architect to attempt the same.²⁴

The notion that women could not climb a ladder was also linked to a broader discourse concerning the perceived inferior physicality of the female body. Such concerns went, as outlined by architectural historians Lynne Walker and Despina Stratigakos, hand-in-hand with fears that a third gender

would be created, that athletic bodies would lead to female impotence, or that women would become 'masculine'.²⁵

The beginning of Fulton Hobson's article outlined objections towards women architects but it also provided the female reader with counter-arguments should she too have to tackle similar views and obstacles. Fulton Hobson's text also addressed practical issues such as how to find an architect willing to give a woman the opportunity to work in his office. In giving insights into the daily operations of an architectural practice, she provided her readers with clues as to why an architect might be reluctant to accept female apprentices which also equipped the reader with knowledge that might help to persuade a prospective employer.²⁶ The article explains the costs and length of tutelage, gives details about the three qualifying examinations by the RIBA and provides a list of schools where architecture is taught.

She closes her article with a word of warning to the architectural aspirant: she should not seek architecture as a profession unless she is strongly drawn to it. In citing the text *De Profundis* written by Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) to Lord Alfred Douglas (1870–1945) from prison between 1896 and 1897²⁷ this last paragraph takes a serious tone and is as such separated from the more ironic or matter-of-fact spirit of earlier passages:

Those who undertake something that is not part of themselves will achieve that, but will be nothing more; that if they start with the ideal of being the parish beadle, in whatever sphere they are placed they succeed in being the parish beadle and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself ... invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it.²⁸

For Wilde, *De Profundis* was a reflective piece in which he deliberated the meaning of the identity of the artist and the 'self'.²⁹ This had been an integral part of Wilde's work and he had been particularly

25 Stratigakos, "Architects in Skirts," 90–2; Lynne Walker, "The Entry of Women into the Architectural Profession in Britain," *Woman's Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986), 13–18. See also Lynne Walker, *British Women in Architecture 1671–1951* (London: Sorello Press, 1984).

26 Anonymous, "Architecture as a Profession."

27 The title *De Profundis* was added by Robert Ross but Wilde named the letter *Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*. "Manuscript of 'De Profundis' by Oscar Wilde," *British Library: Manuscript/Letter*, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-of-de-profundis-by-oscar-wilde> (accessed January 2, 2017). It is not known which edition Fulton Hobson used. If she read the first edition of 1905, it would not have contained any reference to Douglas and their relationship because the publishers feared being sued for libel and removed some passages. The text therefore would not have read as a love letter but presented itself as a reflective piece on the life of the artist. Fulton Hobson nevertheless will have been aware of the reasons why Wilde had been incarcerated.

28 Anonymous, "Architecture as a Profession."

29 Elaine Hernen, "Names are Everything: For Oscar Wilde, Posing as a Letter and Visiting Card," 219, <http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/resources/documents/names-are-everything-oscar-wilde-posing-letter-and-visiting-card-elaine-hernen-224-5> (accessed, 22 August, 2016).

19 "May Women Practise Architecture?" *The British Architect*, February 21, 1902, 125.

20 Fritz Daussig, "Ein weiblicher Architekt," *Daheim* 45–48 (1909), 11, as cited in Despina Stratigakos, "Architects in Skirts: The Public Image of Women Architects in Wilhelmine Germany," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (November 2001), 97.

21 Stratigakos, "Architects in Skirts," 92–4.

22 Anonymous, "Architecture as a Profession."

23 "May Women Practise Architecture?," 125.

24 Stratigakos, "Architects in Skirts," 92–4.

interested in exploring the meaning of identity within the constraints of social conventions.³⁰ Fulton Hobson's reading of Wilde was therefore inspired by the notion in which a person and their art amalgamate.

The reader at the time would have related the term 'parish beadle' to a lay official of a church or local administration who carried out various duties within charitable organisations. The most prominent parish beadle, Mr. Bumble, had been portrayed by Charles Dickens in his 1837–39 novel, *Oliver Twist*, as a pompous character engrossed with his idea of duty and power over others which overrides emotions of empathy or compassion. In *De Profundis* the term 'parish beadle' served Wilde as an example for an occupation that might bring with it importance, power, or respect but that might not necessarily amalgamate with a person's identity. The passage cited by Fulton Hobson in her article therefore was a warning that a profession should not be chosen because of a perception of it. If it is chosen for what it stands for rather than for what it means for oneself, it will become a mask and as such it will never be part of the self. The punishment of wearing such a mask is to never be able to merge the idea of an occupation with the true self. Fulton Hobson closed her article with the advice that architecture is only suitable as a profession for those 'who feel that it is the medium through which they can express themselves best and in which architecture is their method of self-realisation'.³¹ An occupation should support one's identity and provide the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and nourish it.

Conclusions

When women began to enter the profession of architecture around 1900 many reasons were brought forward that sought to explain why their gender was a hindrance to their ability to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of an architect. Within this discourse, very little opinion was expressed that women lacked the necessary intelligence or may have been unable to learn all required skills. Most criticism related instead to practical factors regarding social conventions and class.

Fulton Hobson's article was written in reaction to such notions and intended to be an encouragement for women to enter the field of architecture. In providing her readers with a number of counter-arguments she displayed her awareness of what it meant to have transgressed social boundaries and stratifications that expected women to fulfil a role described and prescribed by conventions. For the woman architect, no guidance existed to aid her in navigating social interactions in the workplace, in talking to a builder, in choosing the appropriate dress for the office and for the building site, or in approaching a client. In this way, she was placed outside societal norms and had to find

ways that, on one hand, could counteract criticism and prejudice and that, on the other hand, helped her to be recognised as a professional.

Fulton Hobson's ultimate goal was, nevertheless, more than to provide a guidance to architectural education or to give instructions as to how to recognise and respond to prejudices. She cautioned her reader that the achievement of being a women architect should not be an end in itself. The struggle to become an architect is merely the means to the end of becoming what she considered to be her true identity and a fulfilment of herself. Fulton Hobson's main concern was that future women architects would reflect on what it means to find self-realisation as a woman and an architect in one person.

Acknowledgements

Without the help of Florence Fulton Hobson's great-nephew Roger Mitchell, who provided me with family photographs, documents, drawings and other material that is still in the family's collection, it would not have been possible to write this paper. I would like to express my sincere thanks to him and his family for their ongoing confidence, support and interest in this research. I would also like to thank Prof. Peter Walker as it was he who brought Florence Fulton Hobson to my attention. Finally, I must thank Ryan McBride, who wrote his BA Hons dissertation on her life and work. His research and literature review were of great help and accelerated the writing of the biographical part of this paper.

³⁰ Ibid., 220.

³¹ Anonymous, "Architecture as a Profession."

Tanja Poppelreuter

Belfast School of Architecture, University of Ulster



Tanja Poppelreuter is a Lecturer in Architectural History and Theory at the University of Ulster in Belfast. Her research interests lie in the field of 20th-century art and architectural theory with the focus on the impact of politics, sociology and medicine on these fields as well as on the question of how utopian ideas developed and took shape in modern society.

E-mail: t.poppelreuter@ulster.ac.uk

