

KATE'S HOUSE

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Katharine Tait. *Carn Voel: My Mother's House*. Newmill, Penzance: Patten Press, 1998. Pp. 35. Illustrated. £6.95. ISBN: 1 87229 28 X.

Katharine Tait has written a charming memoir of Carn Voel, near Porthcurno in Cornwall, where she now lives with one of her sons. It is illustrated with five black and white photographs of the house, Kate, her brother, and her parents, and one colour photograph of Kate sitting in her present-day kitchen. The volume is no. 9 in a series of twelve monographs called *Patten People*. All the monographs are brief in length, paperbound in red,

with a striking engraving by Gertrude Hermes stamped on their fronts. The series was conceived and is edited by Melissa Hardie, whose view of the series is of "friends and circles of friends, all people of the twentieth century", people who are in part inspired "by their surroundings".¹

Kate and her parents, Bertrand and Dora Russell, have all written previously about Carn Voel. Her father mentions the house only in passing in his autobiography but devotes a paragraph to the "beauty of the Cornish coast" and raising his children there. He prints the four-line "poem" about the wind that he heard Kate say to herself at age two years 3½ months in Cornwall (*Auto.*, 2: 151). Her mother, in her autobiography,² naturally gives more space to the house, then called Sunny Bank, that she found in March 1922 and fashioned into the family's summer home. She notes that Bertie's contribution (apart from a financial one) was to specify that he preferred Cornwall to Devon and starkness over lush vegetation. Renamed Carn Voel after a headland at Nanjizal, Dora writes that the rather plain, former boarding-house needed anchoring, and a Chinese-style porch was added partly for that reason. Although Bertie always needed a house with a view, he wrote little about his surroundings. Dora, on the other hand, drew inspiration from the landscape and wrote a poem about Carn Voel and its setting which she prints on page 161 of *The Tamarisk Tree*.

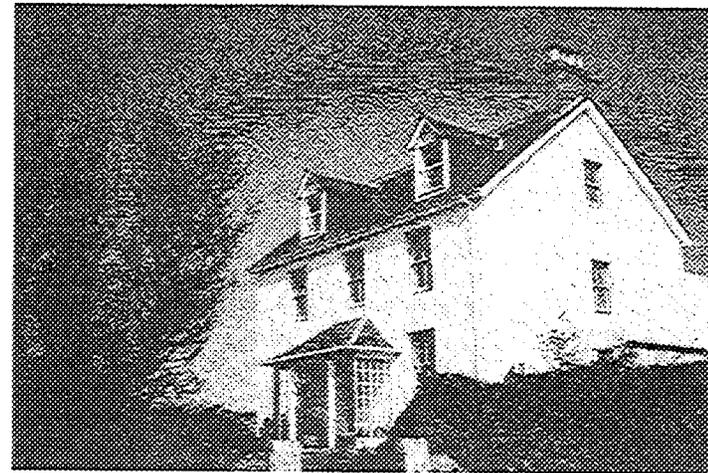
The first chapter of Kate's book, *My Father Bertrand Russell*,³ is about Carn Voel and Cornwall. Titled "The Garden of Eden", the chapter is 37 pages in length. In it she had the space to relate family and guest anecdotes in fuller detail than she can in *Carn Voel*, and to spend more time on her father, the subject of the book. The chapter ends with Kate still a child. In *Carn Voel* she carries the story forward to the present day and devotes more time to her mother's life. She writes of the long and difficult years that Dora managed at Carn Voel on her own. With the perspective of age and distance Kate is able to paint a more sympathetic picture of Dora than she did in 1975 and to include some humour about the aging Dora, too busy on occasion with all her causes to waste time bathing, or to bother much about the house she lived in.

My first visit to Carn Voel was made more than a decade ago in September of 1988. Kate and I had become friends during her several visits to McMaster University in the early 1980s. She had moved back to Cornwall from the United States to care for her brother John after Dora's death. Short-

¹ Information leaflet on *Patten People*.

² Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1975), pp. 159–61.

³ New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975; London: Gollancz, 1976; Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1996.



Carn Voel in 1992 (photo by S. Turcon)

ly after that, John himself died. When I arrived the house was in a state of disrepair, cold and something of a challenge to live in, as Kate describes in her monograph (pp. 29–31). She and her son were readying the house for the winter that lay ahead. We ate in the kitchen, the dining-room (nicknamed the "nicotine cave") not useable because of its murky brown stains from John's smoking habit. I remember standing in the room on the third floor (usually the domain of servants and children) that Dora and Bertie had chosen for their bedroom, and it was still decorated in the rather garish, though faded, colours that Dora loved. The view from the window was sweeping, traversing the green curving pastures to the bright sea which skimmed the horizon and was capped with a blue dome of sky. Kate was determined to restore the home to "its former glory. No, not glory; it never had that, but bright cheerfulness, simple comfort, a sense of home" (p. 18), a promise she had made to herself when her parents' marriage dissolved and the house began a long, downward slide into near ruin.

Although I feel it never lost its sense of home as long as Kate was in residence, she has succeeded in restoring the comfort which she describes briefly (p. 32). When I visited again in May 1992 the house's exterior was once again a dazzling white and was topped with a new roof. Restored pillars on the

Chinese-style porch, a working heating system, a modern kitchen, and snug windows were all in place. To finance this, Carn Voel had had to be duplexed, with Kate taking the second and third floors. She has recently been able to buy back the ground floor and add a glass garden room on the far side of the house from the road, the old greenhouse on the near side serving as the entrance to the ground floor. Dora's house has now become Kate's house, her home. Although I am but one in a long, long line of guests who have stayed at Carn Voel, I trust they leave there with some of the memories I have: surrounding pastures of green and grazing cows, sunshine and jasmine under glass, paths through the woods with hidden flowers, hedge rows and yellow gorse, black cats, the smell of the sea, walks along the edges of cliffs dizzy in their beauty, the never-ending wind, but most of all friendship, good conversation, and the feeling of home.
