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Conference paper

**Elizabeth Bowen, ' Possibly it was England made me a Novelist'
Hirst, D.**

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'POSSIBLY, IT WAS ENGLAND MADE ME A NOVELIST': HOW ELIZABETH BOWEN REFLECTS EAST KENT IN HER WRITING, BOTH FICTION AND NON- FICTION

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Elizabeth Bowen is generally regarded as an Irish or Anglo-Irish novelist, but looking back over nearly fifty years of writing, she said: 'Possibly, it was England made me a novelist.'¹ She describes herself as a visual writer, and running through her work are many visual leitmotifs. These include landscapes (often unpeopled), buildings (sometimes anthropomorphic with windows for eyes), mirrors and reflections, and the creation of something from disparate pieces. Many of these leitmotifs can be traced to her early experiences in East Kent.

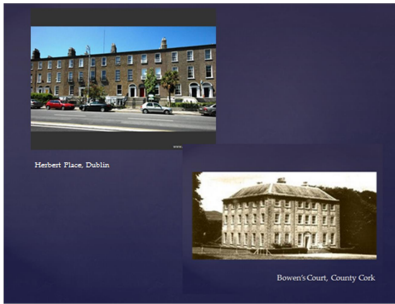
East Kent is a place she frequently chooses as a setting for her novels, so that we can track not only her use of these leitmotifs, but the social history of two towns, Folkestone and Hythe, in the earlier part of the twentieth century. From her fiction, I will highlight the short story 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps'² set in 1910 and 1944, and the two novels, *The Death of the Heart*³ set in the late thirties and *The Little Girls*⁴ set in the early 1960s, with a flashback to 1914. In these works, Bowen grants Folkestone and Hythe a light veil of anonymity by calling them 'Southstone' and 'Seale'. I'll also touch on *Pictures and Conversations*, her uncompleted autobiography, and some non-fiction from the years of the Second World War and the 1950s.

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, London, Allen Lane, 1975, p.23

² Elizabeth Bowen, 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', *Ivy Gripp'd the Steps*, New York, Knopf, 1946, pp.138-183

³ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*, 1938, London, Vintage, 1998

⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Little Girls*, 1982, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982



Born in Dublin in 1899, when Bowen was seven her mother was advised to move to England because of her father's mental instability, and the two of them arrived in the Folkestone /Hythe area. Endowed with a strong visual sense, the child delighted in her new environment with its 'phantasmagoric'⁵ variety of villas, so different to Georgian Herbert Place in Dublin or the Palladian Bowen's Court. Bowen describes the blotting-out of her visual past as 'so total as to become giddy'.⁶



Here 'Buildings either [were] of rubicund brick, with yellow-stone trimmings, or stucco, white, cream, pearl or dove-grey.'⁷ She enthusiastically embraces Kent's history, bursting 'from under the contemporary surface at every point'⁸ and the comparative newness of its geology and topography. In her foreword to the 1952 *The Cinque Ports* she writes: 'Few parts of the coast of England could offer a more ideal study for the historical geographer than does

⁵ *Pictures and Conversations*, p.27

⁶ *Pictures and Conversations*, p.33

⁷ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p.32

⁸ Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations*, p.25

this, with its layer upon layer of extinct, eroded or shrunken civilisations'⁹ and she lists those who have contributed to its archaeology: Romans, Normans, the Plantagenets. She pays tribute to the character of the landscape: 'the somnolent beauty of landlocked Romney; Sandwich's steep-roofed streets lit by estuarial gleams; the changing light over Hythe, with its Great Marsh vista, on its forehead of hill [. . .] and Dover's strange blend of the utilitarian, military and romantic.'¹⁰ In East Kent she first realises how fiction can be set in the real world: reading *Kipps* by H.G. Wells¹¹, she is 'made dizzy by the discovery that [she] had, for years, been living in two places, Hythe and Folkestone, that were in a book.'¹² It was from Folkestone, too, that she first sees France, a country whose literature would become so important to her, and realises that France actually exists.¹³ This idyll came to an abrupt end: when Bowen was 13 her mother died of cancer, and she went to live with an aunt in Harpenden. But already by its sharp contrast to Ireland, East Kent had opened her eyes.

In 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps' and *The Little Girls* Bowen draws on early memories, so that we see pre-First World War Folkestone and Hythe through the eyes of children: eight-year-old Gavin in 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', and Dicey, Mumbo and Sheikie who are aged ten or eleven in *The Little Girls*. Gavin, a delicate child, is invited to stay with Mrs Nicholson, a widowed, childless friend of his mother's. 'Southstone was, for the poor landowner's son, the first glimpse of the enchanted existence of the *rentier*. [. . .] This society gained by smallness: it could be comprehended. People here, the company [Mrs Nicholson] kept, commanded everything they desired. [. . .] The expenditure of their incomes – expenditure calculated so long ago and so nicely that it could now seem artless – occupied them. What there was to show for it showed at every turn; though at no turn too much, for it was not too

⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Foreword', in *The Cinque Ports*, Ronald and Frank Jessup, London, Batsford, 1952, p.11

¹⁰ Bowen, *The Cinque Ports*, p.15

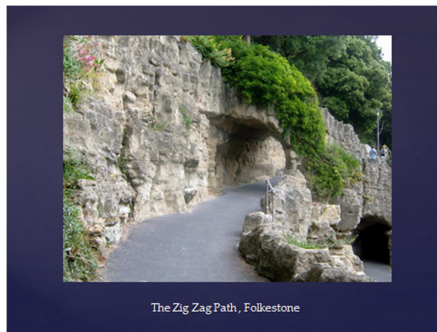
¹¹ H.G. Wells, *Kipps*, London, Macmillan, 1905

¹² Elizabeth Bowen, 'Out of a Book', 1946, *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee, Virago, London, 1986, p.53

¹³ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Idea of France', *People, Places, Things*, p.65

much. [. . .] Best of all, there were no poor to be seen.’¹⁴ This is emphasised when Admiral Concannon, a friend of Mrs Nicholson, sees a stray fragment of paper and consigns it to a litter bin, bursting out: ‘I should like to know what this place is coming to – we shall have trippers next!’¹⁵

Like the child Bowen, Gavin admires the architecture of Southstone: ‘[It] was ostentatious, fiddling, bulky and mixed [. . .] and bows, bays, balustrades, glazed-in balconies, and French-type mansardes [. . .] took up their part in the fairy tale.’¹⁶ On their daily walk, Gavin and the maid Rockham walk ‘zigzag down by the cliff path’ to the beach where he can play by the sea.¹⁷ That Zigzag path still exists today.



While Gavin is escorted to the beach by his hostess’s maid, the Little Girls are under no such supervision and seem free to roam about Folkestone, perhaps because they are a notch down the social scale: Sheikie’s father is an estate agent; Mumbo’s an army major, while Dicey’s mother is widowed and financially supported by a cousin. Their main adventure stems from a conversation Dicey has with a school-friend’s aunt, a suffragette who is alleged to have been chained to railings. The aunt questions her about the Roman landings nearby and

¹⁴ Bowen, ‘Ivy Grippled the Steps’, p. 146

¹⁵ Bowen, ‘Ivy Grippled the Steps’, p.156

¹⁶ Bowen, ‘Ivy Grippled the Steps’, p.147

¹⁷ Bowen, ‘Ivy Grippled the Steps’, p.152

suggests the girls might try to discover things the Romans left behind.¹⁸ But rather than going excavating themselves, the three of them collect together a variety of artefacts which they bury in a coffer in their school grounds for Posterity to discover. Among the artefacts are a scroll in an Unknown Language invented by Mumbo (the writing is in blood, not ink!), bits of flint, a supernumerary toe once amputated from Sheikie, sparkle from an acting-box tiara, and, with a nod to the suffragette aunt, a heavy chain – or fetter – which they buy from an ironmongers in the old town on another adventure. This collection of artefacts – what we might today call a time-capsule - is an example of Bowen characters making something from broken or disparate pieces. It is an assemblage of found objects, an art form which Bowen often draws on, along with jigsaw puzzles and mosaics. A further example in *The Little Girls* is Mrs Piggott's once priceless china, which has been mended with delicate metal stitchery and cement. 'These ingenuities had for the children more merit than had the pieces themselves. Still 'perfect' pieces seemed deficient.'¹⁹

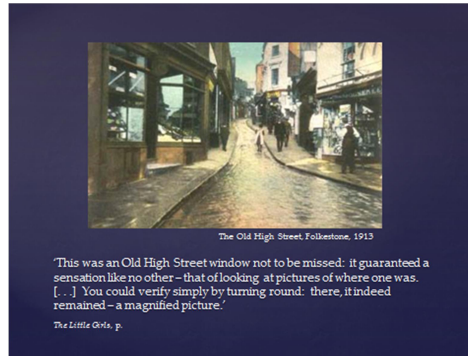
Another art form Bowen uses in this novel is the *Spiegel im Spiegel* or *mise-en-abyme* which arises from her fascination with mirrors and reflection. In 'Mirrors are Magic', from 1967 she writes that:

[Mirrors] extend, or seem to extend, space; they increase light. [. . .] Were they gone, we should find our world cut in half [. . .] But mirrors are far from going: they spread, they breed and increase. Can one always be certain where "reality" stops and its reflections begin? To enter a much-mirrored room can be disconcerting [. . .] To-and-fro bounce the reflections extended endlessly.²⁰

¹⁸ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p.90

¹⁹ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p.76

²⁰ Bowen, 'Mirrors are Magic', *People, Places, Things*, p. 203.



This is borne out by her description of an Old High Street shop that displays pictures of the Old High Street in its windows, windows which also reflect the original image from across the street.

'This was an Old High Street window not to be missed: it guaranteed a sensation like no other – that of looking at pictures of where one was. [...] You could verify simply by turning round: there, it indeed remained – a magnified picture.'²¹

We now move forward a quarter of a century to 1938 and *The Death of the Heart*. The 16-year-old orphan Portia is living with her half-brother and sister-in-law in Regents' Park in London.

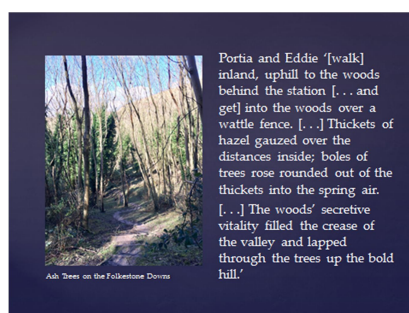


When they go abroad, she is foisted onto her sister-in-law's former governess, Mrs Heccomb, who lives in Seale in a house on the sea front called Waikiki, 'constructed largely of glass and blistered white paint'²², which Bowen based on a real house in Hythe.

²¹ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p.97-8

²² Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*, p.133

In a 1950 radio conversation with Bowen, Jocelyn Brooke (who also lived in East Kent) recognises it as ‘That terrible house called Waikiki on the sea front.’²³ Bowen doesn’t correct him: perhaps he is referring to its inhabitants, rather than its architecture. Up till now Bowen’s characters have almost always been drawn from her own social background, but somehow Seale allows her to explore the *petit bourgeoisie*. We are told how careful Mrs Heccomb is about money: when she pays with coppers she has saved up she feels she is getting a bargain. Her step-children, Dickie and Daphne, are older than Portia; both earn their living and contribute to household costs. Dickie works in a bank in Southstone and Daphne works a lending library in Seale called Smoots, where armed with knitting she terrifies the borrowers. (The name Smoots is an amalgam of Smiths and Boots, the principal lending libraries of the time.) As Maud Ellmann remarks, their manners are brash, and Daphne, in particular, has few social graces.²⁴ Resentful of Portia’s sister-in-law, she takes her inverted snobbery out on Portia. In particular she berates Portia for the jigsaw puzzle she is doing, into which, Bowen tells us, Portia had been fitting her hopes and fears.²⁵ Some of those hopes are pinned on her friend Eddie who she invites for a weekend visit.



Eddie’s arrival is an opportunity for Bowen to introduce the East Kent landscape: Portia and Eddie ‘walked inland, uphill to the woods behind the station [...] Thickets of hazel gauzed over the distances inside; boles of trees rose rounded out of the thickets into the spring air. [...] The woods’ secretive vitality filled the crease of the valley and lapped through the trees up

²³ Bowen, ‘A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke’, *Listening In*, p.279

²⁴ Maud Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p.133

²⁵ *The Death of the Heart*, p.190

the bold hill.²⁶ [. . .] Following uphill dog paths, parting hazels, crossing thickets upright, they reached the ridge of the woods. From here they could see out.²⁷ These passages are echoed in her posthumous autobiography, *Pictures and Conversations*.



Later that day, with some other young people Eddie and Portia visit East Cliff Pavilion, a concert hall in Southstone obviously based on the Leas Cliff Pavilion. A chromium and glass door leads onto a balcony where the party look down on the Lower Road, at the tops of the pines.



Inside Daphne and her boyfriend from the School of Musketry (the military are still here) are enjoying a ‘cosy drink’ among the mirrors and pillars, which we can just make out in these photos. One drink leads to another and things get out of hand. Eddie behaves rather badly, literally dashing Portia’s hopes; the next morning she finds her puzzle has been knocked about and undone.

²⁶ Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*, p.210

²⁷ Bowen, *The Death of the Heart*, p.217

Oddly enough, given the year *The Death of the Heart* was published – 1938 – there is no sense of the impending war. By 1940 Hythe and Folkestone had become prohibited areas, but after 1943 Bowen is able to visit and writes about the effect of war on those towns both in her fiction and her non-fiction. Visiting Hythe in 1943 she is uncertain what to expect, but finds she is invigorated by the vitality of the place, which after nearly four years of peril, seems intensified.²⁸ Sadly because of a heat haze, she's unable to see France.

A visit to Folkestone in 1945 is the inspiration for 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps'. We take up that story in September 1944 when the adult Gavin returns to Southstone to find that Mrs Nicholson's house, left empty during the war, is covered by ivy. Those windows – the eyes of the house – which are not covered by ivy are sightless: 'sheets of some dark composition [. . .] were sealed closely into their frames.'²⁹ The narrator describes Southstone's general decline, dating it from 1940. Now no longer needed in Southstone, the military have all moved away and the narrator remarks that: 'the turn of the tide of war [has given] Southstone a final air of defeat'.³⁰ In the article 'Folkestone: July, 1945' Bowen also discusses this air of impending dereliction and charts the gradual decline of the resort.³¹ She records how the old town, with its toy-sized High Street, 'that at least one memory holds dear', took the greater part of the bombing. She ends by warning: 'It is essential for Folkestone to get going. War damage cannot account for everything; [. . .] for years before this war she had been feeling the draught.'³²

We move on to 1964. The 'Little Girls' meet up after fifty years and set out to exhume their coffer. Their old school grounds have since been built over, but they locate the

²⁸ Elizabeth Bowen, 'By the Unapproachable Sea', *People, Places, Things, Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited and introduced by Allan Hepburn, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2008, p.56

²⁹ Bowen, 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', p.138

³⁰ Bowen, 'Ivy Gripp'd the Steps', p.140

³¹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Folkestone, July 1945', *Collected Impressions*, London, Longmans, 1950, p.225

³² Bowen, 'Folkestone, July 1945', p.230

coffer. Alas, it is empty. It has been found. Disillusionment sets in and Dicey (now Dinah) at first admires and then rejects a watercolour of Southstone Old High Street hanging in Sheikie (now Sheila)'s lounge: 'It might be better to have no pictures of places which are gone. Let them go completely.'³³



Just after *The Little Girls* was published, Bowen moved back to Hythe, where she wrote her final novel, *Eva Trout*, setting part of it, not in Hythe but in Broadstairs, thirty miles to the north-east. Perhaps *The Little Girls* is Bowen's requiem for old Folkestone and Hythe, in which she lets them go completely, for she never wrote about them again.

³³ Bowen, 'The Little Girls', p.169