



FINE LINES: Bramble by Annie Farrer, above; and Arisaema paintings, right.



FAMILY ROOTS THE DESCENDANT OF YORKSHIRE'S GARDENING REVOLUTIONARY IS MOUNTING HER OWN SHOW OF PLANTS. MICHAEL HICKLING TALKS TO ANNIE FARRER.

NATURALLY DRAWN TO BOTANY

annie Farrer revealed her colour preferences early on. At an art class at her primary school in Settle she took a green and put some red in it. The result was a muddy colour that made her teacher so cross she banned Annie from having a colouring book. Her predilections were eventually to take her in a direction that was to make her one of the country's foremost botanical artists – painting the bits that other people throw away, as someone has described it. “My interest isn't in portraying pretty flowers,” she says. “Bamboos, tangles of grass and moss are what I like. I find them really attractive. I've got quite a few pictures of grasses on Ingleborough. The sheep seem to pull them up – tiny tufts of

grass which the wind dries slightly – rolled by the wind, caught up with bits of moss. A lovely clump is like heaven to me.” As a child growing up in limestone country, her family home was filled with the paintings, photographs and writings of the eccentric adventurer who helped shape the way we garden today. Reginald Farrer, the “Father of Rock Gardening” also wandered these same Ingleborough slopes, in breaks between his intrepid plant-hunting expeditions to



some of the world's most inaccessible and inhospitable corners. At the turn of the 20th century, this Indiana Jones of the botanical world travelled East to spots where no western face had ever been seen. Reginald Farrer braved warlords, bandits and disease to bring home plants and seeds that were unique over here. He helped start a revolution that gave ordinary people the opportunity to cultivate exotic plants, a pleasure previously the preserve of the rich equipped with hothouses and teams of gardeners. Reginald Farrer, born in 1880, lived at Ingleborough Hall, Clapham, a few miles from Settle and must have cut an extraordinary figure in the traditionally-minded Dales community. By nature a shy man, he had a harelip beneath his moustache and a squeaky voice. But he attracted attention to himself by

LABOUR OF LOVE: Annie Farrer, botanical artist.

becoming a Buddhist and wearing Buddhist robes. It was said he would prostrate himself in front of plants he especially cherished. The homage he paid them was duly returned. The plant *Geranium Farreri* was named after him. He also left a local legacy by planting groves of rhododendrons and bamboos on the sides of the gorge above Ingleborough Lake to create the appearance of a Himalayan valley. Annie Farrer came on the scene in 1953 at the age of three. Her father, a doctor in Melbourne, had inherited the Ingleborough estate and brought the family over from Australia to their new home. “Ingleborough Hall had already

been sold by then,” says Annie. “The only memory I have of our arrival is the whole village coming out to welcome us.” Her mother's father and mother also came over with them to live in the village. “Grandmother was very artistic. When she wrote to me at school she used to send illustrations of things like primroses, just in Biro, but all beautifully drawn. When she died, a matter of a month or so later I started drawing flowers for the first time. I swear she passed the talent on to me. In my teens I was given a book of Japanese fairy stories, all in water colours. I used to translate those into pen-and-ink bamboos and grasses.”

After university she took a temporary job, and then aged 22, wrote a letter to the Natural History Museum, offering her talents as a botanical artist. “As I posted it, I felt it would change my life. They tried to put me off, they said the work was difficult, and I didn't have any talent. That was the spur I needed, although it was hard to find out how to do it all by myself, there were no classes in those days.” The effort paid off and she has worked for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew as a freelance since 1974. In 1977, her life took a turn which carried another echo of Reginald Farrer's career. She was invited to go overland to the Himalayas to do a book and got a six-month travelling fellowship to do so. This started a love of the Himalayas and from 1983 Annie regularly led treks once or twice a year up to 17,000 feet. There's been other globe-trotting. She worked in Hawaii at their National Tropical Botanical Garden and also lived in France for four-and-a-half years working at the Bambooserie, an enormous, privately-owned bamboo garden in the Cevennes. Where Reginald got a medal from the Royal Horticultural Society for his plants,

“My interest isn't in pretty flowers. Bamboos, tangles of grass and moss are what I like. I find them really attractive.”

Annie has received them for her paintings. It is precision work, often employing a microscope, to represent the parts of a plant, sometimes down to a fraction of a millimetre, for botanical identification. How does Reginald score in this respect? “He wasn't intending to be a botanical artist – he was showing how the plants would be growing in the landscape – how they fitted into the environment.” But these days, what does the botanical artist bring to this task that a photograph could not do equally well? “You just can't see the detail with a camera lens. “Although you are painting exactly what you see, 20 botanical artists would have 20 different visions of it. It's like musicians following a score. In our case, the score is the plant.” The investment in time is so prodigious, it seems scarcely human. The brambles illustration shown here took 560 hours. It began with a detailed drawing, using dividers to do the measurements at the start. Fine miniature brushes were employed for the painting and this was overlaid with layers like glazes on oil paintings, to give depth. Maybe 12 layers in this case. Annie teaches one- and two-week courses at Kew. “Because

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I floundered around and had to find out things for myself, I tried all sorts of ways until I hit on the one that worked best. So it's easy to put myself in a student's shoes."

The Ingleborough estate, about 11,000 acres, is still run by her father. Annie has come up to stay for a month for the start of the exhibition. "It is about a fresh approach, getting away from botanical confines where you have to show things in a particular way. I have had the freedom to do as I wish, such as enlarging a courgette tendril 20 times. It's an interesting thing to play around with."

The originals for the bramble and the geranium images were all picked up from up the back roads around Ingleborough.

Another Yorkshire artist, Katherine Holmes, has recently persuaded Annie that where control is concerned, less is more. "She had me drawing in ink with a big twig. It's so liberating and I'm hoping to combine freedom with precision. Nature is so fantastic." Has she thought of trying other sorts of painting? "I like acrylics. But there's only one life and there isn't quite time. It takes so long to get anywhere near where you want to be. I'm making six-foot long banners for the stairs at the exhibition from panels of rice paper. They show huge grasses and bamboo that I've done by throwing ink at the paper. The idea is that people will come to see my work and hardly realise it's by the same



FAMILY SEAT: Ingleborough Hall, Clapham, the former home of Reginald Farrer.

artist." There is one particular phrase of her forbear that sticks in her head. "In Reginald Farrer's book *The Eaves of the World* he talks about "people looking, looking and never seeing". His writing style was rather flowery for our tastes, but he was very astute in his observation of people. It's easy to admire a pretty flower, but you may not have noticed a bit of grass sticking out of wall, and you suddenly realise you are looking at something beautiful.

"My intention is to draw to your attention things that you may not have noticed. It requires an awful lot of time, it can be quite meditative, you go off in a kind of dream. I work 10 to 12 hours a day – unless I'm in Yorkshire and Ingleborough is beckoning."

■ **Annie Farrer's exhibition, *Plant Forms on Paper: a Fresh Approach*, is at the Folly, Settle, North Yorkshire, March 21-May 6.**

ADVENTUROUS LIFE OF REGINALD FARRER



Reginald Farrer was a man of extraordinary talents and stamina – both in pursuit of out-of-the-way plants and in his literary and artistic output. He turned out a seemingly ceaseless flow of books (often dedicated to his Siamese cats) about plant-collecting and gardening, as well as novels, plays, letters and articles, and he also painted stunning watercolours of his finds. His two major expeditions were to Kansu in China and to Upper Burma. Worn out, this eminent Edwardian died on an expedition to Burma in 1920.



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