

Of Nymphs and Pans and *a StubbyDub* ?

The story of 'RAB' – Rachel Cassels Brown
Children's Illustrator and Etcher

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Castle Park Publishing



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The Story of 'RAB' – Rachel Cassels Brown

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The Two Muriel Wilsons – An Artistic Confusion



Rachel Wilson in 1900 and her future husband Andrew Cassels Brown ca 1899

PREFACE

The title for this book was always going to be difficult. By the very nature of the way in which both Rachel Cassels Brown and her family doctor husband, Andrew, presented their published works to public scrutiny, they courted anonymity rather than open promotion. This runs contrary to all normal criteria for developing a recognised reputation – at least in so far as a professional artistic or literary career is concerned. It also makes life difficult when trying to revive that recognition after a century or so has passed.

What will quickly become evident is that this book is not just about Rachel Cassels Brown, although it is her art and her undeniable ability that are the prime focus. The range of media that she tackled over the years spanned almost everything in which the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements took an interest. So the focus attempts to follow this somewhat meandering course of interests, and to highlight those that produced valuable results.

However, because she also worked in tandem with her husband on a variety of book projects, where he would write the text and she would draw the illustrations, and because neither one appended their full or real name to this area of their work, the whole job of identification becomes convoluted without the relevant explanation. In these instances, either one of them could be the lead in the project in hand – depending on whether it was the text or the illustration of the book that was of prime importance. Primarily, it is the latter within this book.

It is understandable that Andrew Cassels Brown might have wished to remain anonymous in his early written works, while he continued to pursue his medical practice. This is particularly so in respect of his series of satirical political booklets, published so successfully under the *Artemas* pseudonym during the First and Second World Wars. Indeed, in their case, he hid his identity so well (even within his private diaries) that it is only in recent years and by discovering and linking a number of different statements and facts

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When Rachel Wilson made her entrance into this world on 29th December 1875, the occasion would naturally have been greeted with much pleasure – but, at the same time, probably not with a great deal of ceremony. This lack of ceremony would not have been due simply to the strictures of the Scottish Presbyterian family into which Rachel had been born, but rather that she had, after all, merely arrived as number nine in the middle of an almost constant stream of 16 offspring that her remarkable mother, Anna, had produced over a period of just 21 years. This mammoth effort in clan building commenced in 1865, the year after Anna's marriage at the age of 22 to her first cousin, John Wilson, and it eventually only ended in 1886 with the arrival of Rachel's youngest brother, Walter, in Anna's 44th year!

Since three of Rachel's earlier sisters did not survive their first year, her family station was immediately settled as the fourth daughter in the surviving family of seven girls and six boys. Her father was John Wilson, whose prime occupation continued an almost hereditary office over several generations within the Wilson family as Factor* to one or other of the vast estates owned by Scottish aristocracy in the north-east Highlands. In John's case, this was to the estates of the Duke of Richmond and Gordon in Huntly, Aberdeenshire. His father, and several Wilson predecessors before him, had acted in the same office for the Cullen district estates of the Earls of

* Land Agent, Steward and Estate Manager

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Findlater and Seafeld, which lay along the Moray coast of Banffshire. It had only been due to a falling out with a new line in that earldom by John Wilson's uncle Alexander, his *de facto* guardian and last Wilson factor to the Seafields, that had persuaded John to seek out a different master. He had firstly been approached by the Duke of Buccleuch to manage his Branhholm estates near Hawick in the Borders, but John had preferred to stay in his home region. A man described widely as being renowned for his wisdom and integrity and for his absolute fairness towards others, he chaired every local and surrounding area board and committee of any importance, and he was a member of Aberdeenshire County Council and a Justice of the Peace for the county, as well as being an Elder of the Kirk.

The Factor's house was called Castle Park in Huntly. It was a substantial building - and it certainly needed to be to house all John Wilson's family plus numerous servants and visitors). The house stood a short distance to the south-east of the ruined shell of the ancient Gordon bastion, Huntly Castle. In addition to his considerable duties for the Duke, John Wilson farmed over one thousand acres in his own right and was a highly successful and much sought-after breeder of Shorthorn cattle. In 1910, shortly before he died, he broke all records by being the first breeder to achieve the then considerable sum of 1,000 guineas for a bull calf in the October sales. He was much respected, not only around the small town of Huntly, but also far beyond, and when he died in December 1910 at the age of 74, the town held a public funeral for him.

In 1864, John had married his first cousin, Anna (née Thurburn – from another ancient Scottish dynasty), who was eventually to outlive him by 12 years. It was in deference to the esteem in which the family was held that the Duke allowed Anna to continue to live on in the Factor's house long after her husband's death. Apart from the stream of children that Anna bore over the years, she was a remarkable woman in so many ways. She ruled the household without remorse, but was equally kind and devoted to all those whom (in her own rather rigorous opinion) were deemed to deserve it. She might well have invented the idiom of 'not suffering fools gladly'! She maintained a regular weekly correspondence with those of her children who had left home or travelled abroad, forwarding letters and information back and forth from each one to the others in turn.

The shrewd business skills of John Wilson and the several generations before him ensured that the Wilsons were by no means impoverished. Apart from their factory offices and their own farming enterprises and cattle breeding, they were also distillers of fine malt whisky, building the

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Returning to Rachel’s own career; in 1898, she had entered her first four exhibition works, at that time in her maiden name of course, into the Aberdeen Artists’ Society Annual Exhibition at the Aberdeen Art Gallery. This was just five years after the very successful first retrospective exhibition of her late uncle George Wilson’s work in that same gallery’s annual Artists’ Society event of 1893. Rachel’s entries included a bookplate design and three designs for Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales – largely influenced by her recent Parisian training. The three Fairy Tale designs were from an eventual full set of 12 designs made between 1897 and 1899 that were drawn, painted or printed via a presently unidentified technique onto woven silk place mats.

This appears to be the first notable application of her art towards practical and hopefully, no doubt, saleable objects. She had already developed a clear direction influenced by an Art Nouveau style in design and drawing, which had undoubtedly commenced during her early training in Paris, and which later became somewhat reminiscent of the Glasgow School. Thus began a concentration of work in the design of figurative drawings and children’s nursery illustrations in that manner. This was a theme that was to continue throughout the first two decades of the new century, although these were later interspersed with some delightful allegorical figurative and landscape etchings – the latter made occasionally near Huntly, but mainly around Liverpool and Birkenhead.

Rachel Wilson and Andrew Cassels Brown eventually married on 25th July 1901, in St. Bernard’s Church in Edinburgh. Andrew had spent the previous two years gaining practical clinical experience in the Edinburgh Maternity and the Royal Infirmary hospitals, and one placement as the private physician to the Invergarry Estate of the Ellice family. This latter stint seems not

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Two of Rachel's designs from her set of 12 illustrated silk place mats depicting Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales. Shown here are *The Garden of Paradise* and *Everything in its Right Place*, both with indistinct monogram and date. Approx. 138 mm x 177 mm (to inside of fringe – irregular).

The technique used to produce these place mats is presently not ascertained. The black outline may have been either block or litho printed, possibly followed by hand-colouring with dyes or another fast medium. Three unnamed designs from the set of 12 were exhibited at Aberdeen Art Gallery, 1898.



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Two examples from Rachel Cassels Brown's earlier (ca. 1905) set of (probably 12) children's nursery rhyme illustrations (courtesy of the Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead).

When the Girls [sic] Came Out to Play, 260 mm x 415 mm, and *The New Master*, 281 mm x 633 mm; both watercolour and gouache on paper. It is interesting that Rachel has used wording that is either not entirely correct, or at least is unusual, in the text for some of these rhymes!



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Had Great Marvel (1893, Victoria and Albert Museum) is probably entirely coincidental in view of the latter picture's blatant sexuality, but the similarity of style cannot be dismissed.

It was in *Annabella* that Rachel also remembered her uncle, George Wilson, who was, without doubt, largely responsible for encouraging Rachel's early interest in painting. He had died in her father's house, Castle Park in Huntly, when she was only fifteen years old, but over the years he had frequently painted her or included her in a number of his own works. So perhaps it was 'in return' that she chose to incorporate the amusing and skilful caricature of her uncle under the guise of 'Mr Potts the Painter' within an illustration for *Annabella*. George Wilson would undoubtedly have found this extremely amusing – and would have been more than a little flattered by the caricature. Furthermore, he would indeed have been proud that his niece should have followed a school of art that, partially at least, found its roots in the further development of the Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts tradition.

During the first two decades of the 20th Century, Rachel Cassels Brown developed a confident style in her illustrative work, but also in her etching and lithography. At the same time, she continued to work in the background on her three books – and was still contemplating their publication as late as 1925, somewhat after she had finally succumbed to her failing eyesight. However, in the earlier 1900s, her already demanding life as the wife of a conscientious, but also society-conscious, doctor in a very busy pre-NHS family medical practice, made concentration on her work increasingly difficult to maintain. In addition to the rapid arrival of a young family, the practice took up much time from both of them. This was at a period when a doctor's reputation and popularity dictated how many patients he gained – and consequently, of course, how much he might earn.

It was a further pity that it was only during this busy domestic period of Rachel's early married life that, as her husband recorded in his diaries, she developed a valuable friendship with the two Macdonald sisters – in particular, Frances (1874-1921). She and her sister, Margaret (1864-1933), had married respectively, the designers and architects, James Herbert MacNair (1868-1955) and Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), and in so doing, formed the group loosely known as the 'Glasgow Four'. But by this time, the MacNairs had moved to Liverpool, where Herbert had taken up the appointment as Instructor in Design at the School of Architecture and Applied Art – known colloquially as 'The Art Sheds' because of the nature of its buildings. In 1905,

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'Mr Potts the Painter.'

Illustration for the
proposed book
Annabella, ca 1908–
1917, unpublished.
Plate size 238 mm x
184 mm.

This illustration is a
comical and skilful
caricature of Rachel's
uncle, George Wilson,
the late Pre-Raphaelite
follower who in turn
painted Rachel on a
number of occasions
himself.



THE STORY OF 'RAB' – FOUR

Despite her reserved nature, the Della Robbia type of experimentation was typical of Rachel's approach to her art. Since her earliest drawing days, she had often aimed to incorporate her designs into practical and three-dimensional objects. Between 1897 and 1899 – and clearly commenced while she was still working in Paris – she had undertaken the designing of the sets of 12 Art Nouveau style illustrations from Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales to create colourful silk dining place mats. In December 1902, her husband recorded that she was '*busily engaged designing enamelled buckles and brooches and clasps – all of which are very pretty and original...*' It is not known if any of these items went into production, nor indeed what materials or processes Rachel utilised for their manufacture. Regrettably, apart from a few examples of the illustrated place mats, and some book plates and Christmas cards, no such items appear to remain within family descent.

Bookplate design held a strong revival interest for many of the illustrators of the day, and collections are often found to include examples by such artists as Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway, Rex Whistler, Charles Ricketts, Lucien Pissarro and Frank Brangwyn, amongst many others. Rachel also designed a number of bookplates for private clients, including Andrew's brother Arthur and his first wife. But of all of these, the one that she produced in 1904 for her husband and herself must be one of the most charming. This depicts a nymphean naked Eve standing, with the inevitable apple in one hand and a symbolic book in the other, in front of one slender stylised entwining apple tree, with two more peripheral trees similarly forming a frame for the whole design. This tiny half-tone print, measuring just 64 mm by 23 mm, is strongly reminiscent of the Glasgow School. In October 1905, she exhibited a design for a bookplate, made

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Rachel and Andrew Cassels Brown's personal bookplate. Signed with a monogram and dated 1904. Printed in half-tone. Plate size 64 mm x 23 mm on lightweight paper trimmed to 85 mm x 40 mm.

A litho printed bookplate designed for the Cassels Browns' friend Ethel Nickels on her marriage. Signed with an almost imperceptibly minute monogram (lower right) and dated 1904(?). Image size 102 mm x 62 mm (max) on unevenly shaped lightweight paper.



An etched bookplate for an unknown client. Etching on hand-made laid paper. Without signature or date. Plate size 100 mm x 75 mm.



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(unusually) in oils, at the Autumn Exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery (no. 1267), no doubt with the intention that this should attract commissions – and certainly, a number of examples of commissioned bookplates do still exist. Some of these are, like her own plate, litho or half-tone prints, whilst others are etchings.

Initially, Rachel's Nursery Rhyme paintings from this earlier period were similarly commercially-influenced designs. She had been working on an extended series of watercolour and gouache designs from around the time of the birth of her daughter, Jean, in May 1903, and so following Jean's arrival, and that of her brother, David, four years later, Rachel proceeded to decorate the children's nursery by filling it with such drawings. These pictures attracted and promoted much interest, which in turn created opportunities to sell copies to various clients.

In 1918, a privately purchased set of five designs from this earlier series of Nursery Rhyme watercolour paintings (Rachel produced a second series in a somewhat softer aesthetic style in 1918-1919) was donated to the Central Library in Birkenhead. Those paintings were subsequently transferred to the collection of the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead, where they still reside – although there is now some confusion as to the date of the bequest and the number of drawings donated. Records at the Williamson appear to identify that a Mr Morris Jones donated 12 pictures in all, but six of these are no longer immediately traceable. More recently, in 2002, an etching entitled *Diana's Pool* (first exhibited at the Walker Gallery, Liverpool, in 1919) was donated to the gallery by the author. The gallery has also subsequently managed to source and procure a copy of Rachel's published book, *The Story of the StubbyDub*.

The 'StubbyDub' was originally commenced in January 1906, but with the incursions of the busy growing medical practice and a closely-related social life, plus the arrival of two children, and then the demands of the First World War, the book was ultimately only published by W. Westall & Co Ltd just in time for Christmas in 1917, at the princely sum of 3/6^d. Andrew recorded a number of the press reviews for the book in his diaries, and these all seem to have been most enthusiastic. Indeed, the book did sell quite well, with over 4,000 copies bought in the first year.

By the time 'The StubbyDub' was eventually published, Rachel had already successfully completed the sets of illustrations for her two further books, *The Land of Nod* and *Annabella*. As with 'The StubbyDub', these were scheduled for publication one at a time in good time for Christmas over the following two years, and again were secured by Westall & Co.

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From *Annabella*.
The story-line is based around Rachel's daughter Jean's favourite doll of this name. The first opening coloured illustration depicts the purchase of the doll from the toyshop, with all the other toys objecting vehemently to not being chosen, while Jean's mother (although definitely not a self-portrait of Rachel!) sits in apparent serene oblivion. The fine detailing in this illustration is of a miniaturist quality, while the colouring is simply vivid. Plate size 238 mm x 185 mm.

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Recollections of early family life by Rachel's son, David, some 80 years later, described events that were remarkably similar to those illustrated by Rachel, in that much of the story-line was based on his mother's (and his own!) experiences of Jean's often wildly extrovert activities!

The original illustrations for the two unpublished books remain within the family collection. These brightly coloured paintings show deliberately 'starched' figures – whether depicting humans or toys – which are distinctly in contrast to her delicate allegorical figure drawings found elsewhere. This technique has the effect of creating a perpetual series of inter-linked comic incidences, where it frequently becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between which are actually toys and which are human. It is a clever device to reduce the whole perspective to that as perceived through the eyes of a child. Indeed, on occasions the difference is deliberately and skilfully fudged to enhance the magic and to encourage the young reader's imagination. It is an interesting formula that works particularly well in relation to the period in which the books were designed. The black ink line drawings that hold each story together between the colour plates, again show the influence of the Glasgow school, and often incorporate entwining and stylised border devices to enclose the areas of the text.

What certainly is most evident, though, is the great sense of imagination that Rachel displayed within the ideas for her compositions and the quite extraordinary degree of detail that she then incorporated into her drawing. And, as Andrew recorded later, it was this minute detailing that became the prime factor in forcing her to give up her work as her eyesight failed. While all her black and white line drawings were undertaken in pen and Indian ink, she used a variety of fine line drawing techniques for her watercolour illustrations. Although she does not appear to have used pencil, charcoal, or chalk, occasionally if the scene or the atmosphere demanded it, she would use the very finest of pen-nibs with Indian or, more rarely, brown ink for the outline drawing. However, in the most important and most detailed scenes, it appears that, in addition to very fine brushwork, she may have applied watercolour lines using her pens to create the softest migration from drawing to painting, as well as to enable the finest coloured detail.

Rachel and Andrew always intended to remain broadly anonymous in print and *The Story of the StubbyDub* was published (as would have been the other two books) under the joint acronym of 'RAB'. In the same vein, Andrew Cassels Brown can also now be exposed as the anonymous 'scribe' of the satirical series of First World War *Artemas* pocket books. For the first three of these, Rachel designed the front board and dust cover illustrations. The books satirised wartime and

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Rachel recuperated there for several weeks before being pronounced entirely fit and well once again – and so promptly returned home to take up her work anew, and with increasing gusto.

By May 1917, she was evidently fully-recovered and was attending her 'studio' once again, as Andrew recorded on 21st of that month that '*She carried off the first prize at her Studio today for a design of a Christmas card...*'. He doesn't identify whether this was the Sandon Studios or the Liver Sketching Club; but it was probably the former, as he recorded later that she was working on '*some first-class illustrations for "The Marsh King's Daughter" in readiness for the Autumn Exhibition that the Liver Sketching Club are promoting.*' Then, in addition, there were a couple more book cover commissions from Westall's, before the latter firm finally issued the first print of *The Story of the StubbyDub* in late November 1917.

With Andrew away again for the most of 1918, regrettably little is recorded about Rachel's specific work at that increasingly busy time in her career. In January, Mason at Westall's was already pushing Rachel to complete her work on *Annabella*, apparently in preference to *The Land of Nod*, so that it could be scheduled for publication the following Christmas. However, this appears to be when the problems started with Westall's, as nothing further had happened with the book that year, nor indeed, before April 1919, when Andrew had returned from his second commission and was threatening to take the book away from Westall's. This they did shortly afterwards when he recorded that they were trying other publishers. The firm of Westall and Co itself appears in any case to have completely disappeared from the scene by around 1920. But it seems that any form of publishing was becoming almost impossible by that time, and so with other matters taking up their time and attention Andrew and Rachel evidently gave up trying – at least with Rachel's children's books – as little further mention is made of them until some years later.

Rachel, in any case it seems, may well have moved on herself by then, since by the end of 1918, she had already started to concentrate on two new main areas of interest – both of which involved printing techniques – in etching and lithography.

She was still convinced of her ability to design and sell her nursery rhyme pictures and proceeded to produce a new series of six lithographic designs in a somewhat simpler, yet much freer and softer aesthetic style compared to the 1905 series. Certainly, their smaller dimensions and cleaner and less fussy line drawing rendered them somewhat simpler for her to hand-colour for sale. Rachel commenced the designs in 1918 and ran into 1919 with the last three. She had

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Little Bo-Peep. Lithograph printed onto hand-made laid paper, watermarked 'Hand Made' and 'F J Head & Co', then hand-coloured in watercolour. From Rachel Cassels Brown's 1918-19 series of Nursery Rhyme illustrations. Monogrammed and dated 1918 in the plate, and signed beneath in pencil 'Printed by Gerard Bragg' and 'Del. et Lith. "Rab"'. 247 mm x 197 mm (max – irregular).

Each illustration in the set differs in size and some have irregular edges with Rachel's trait of breaking through the edge with a detail of the design. Exhibited (1297) as one of the full set of six at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Autumn Exhibition, 1919.



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these drawings litho-printed by a firm called Gerard Bragg onto the same good quality hand-made laid paper, watermarked 'Hand Made' and 'F J Head & Co', that she used for all her etching and other printed work.* Evidently she did indeed manage to sell a certain number of these designs, although not necessarily always in sets, it seems, as there remain in her surviving portfolio just one completed hand-painted print, plus a varying number of unpainted prints from each design. In addition to '*Little Bo Peep*', the other five designs were '*Humpty Dumpty*', '*Tom he was a piper's son*', '*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe*', and '*Dog, dog, bite pig*'. When she exhibited these at the 1919 Walker Gallery Autumn Exhibition, they were offered as a complete set at the price of six guineas.

At the same time, she also started to pursue her more 'serious' side to her work, mainly through her etchings and occasional individual lithographs, depicting her allegorical figurative drawings, as well as a series of local landscape subjects. For these new techniques, Rachel felt that she needed to study afresh, and indeed, for as long as she was working actively, Rachel continued to study actively as well. And so in February 1918 she was back at the Liverpool Art School concentrating on lithography and etching. Initially, she started attending evening classes, but over the next three years until the spring of 1921 (when they finally decided to leave the area), she was attending regularly two days per week.

In addition, in 1920, Andrew recorded that she was also studying under their friend and well-known local painter-etcher and collector, S.H. Nazeby Harrington – no doubt in order to

* The firm of Gerard Bragg presently remains untraceable today, and may simply have been a local printing firm.

F.J. Head and Co was a small paper manufacturing company whose paper was much valued by many of the well-known etchers and specialist printers of the day. Mr F.J. Head died on the battlefield during World War II, and the company later became part of J.B. Green and Co.

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The Docks, Liverpool, No.2. Etching on hand-made laid paper, watermarked 'Hand Made' and 'F J Head & Co'. 1920, Plate size 115 mm x 70 mm. Exhibited (1477) at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Autumn Exhibition, 1920. One of a series of three etchings she made of Liverpool docks. Signed and titled.



The Old Castle, Huntly. Etching on hand-made laid paper, watermarked 'Hand Made' and 'F J Head & Co'. Plate size 184 mm x 127 mm. Date not known – possibly 1920. This view of Huntly Castle is remarkably similar to the two extant watercolour paintings of the subject made by her uncle George Wilson. The view looks across from Pirriesmill, one of her father's farmsteads, over the River Bogie in the foreground, towards the rear (south facing) façade of the old ruined castle. Signed.

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Rachel Cassels Brown, aged 77; photographed at Christmas 1952 by her son, David, at her daughter's house, Holloway House in Heybridge, near Maldon, Essex. This was the Christmas before her death in November 1953. Always wishing to be kept busy, Rachel is pictured assiduously darning a pair of shorts (complete with their *Eagle* comic braces!) belonging to one of her grandsons. Rachel's poor eyesight, behind her heavy spectacles, is evident in this photograph.