

**Spinning the Colours of Lakeland: Annie Garnett's
Spinnery, textiles and garden**
*Report of Exhibition¹: 24th September 2016 - 29th January
2017; Blackwell, Bowness-on-Windermere*

David Ingram & Rachel Roberts

‘Colour I revel in’: words from the unpublished Diary of Annie Garnett (1864-1942), the creative designer and entrepreneur who became a key figure in the revival of hand spinning and weaving in the English Lake District².

John Ruskin’s teaching was the inspiration for this revival, which was firmly rooted in, and characteristic of, Lakeland³, although it also overlapped with the Arts and Crafts Movement, temporally, philosophically and stylistically. The earliest phase was initiated by Albert Fleming in the 1880s and successfully managed by Marian Twelves as the Langdale Linen Industry. Annie Garnett was the leader of a later phase, which followed in 1891. Located in Bowness-on-Windermere and named The Windermere Industry, the new business was started in collaboration with Rev and Mrs. Brownson, a local curate and his wife, but in 1898/9 Miss Garnett took full control and became the sole leader and manager of the enterprise, which she renamed The Spinnery. The task was immense, especially for a woman in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century Lakeland, but against all the odds the business, based on the hand spinning and weaving of flax, silk, wool and metallic threads to create textiles of great beauty, originality and of the very highest quality, was a resounding success. Miss Garnett’s Diary records her debt to Ruskin as follows.

Monday 22nd Jan [1900]: ‘The sad news of Ruskin’s death is in the papers today; dear old man, how much he has done to keep us in the right way will probably never be quite realized. Such a gentle influence he yielded which gathers in its folds all who read him ... everything is so beautiful; so noble ... We have lost a great and

¹ Based on Garnett Archive, Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry (Lakeland Arts), Kendal. [Booklet to be published by Lakeland Arts, 2017.](#)

² *Ruskin and the English Lakes*, H.D.Rawnsley (Glasgow, James MacLehose and Sons, 1901); G. Medland: Annie Garnett 1864-1942. *Embroidery*, Winter 1980, 118-120; J. Brunton: Annie Garnett: the Arts and Crafts Movement and the business of textile manufacture. *Textile History* 32, 217-238; *The Arts and Crafts Movement in the Lake District: A Social History*, Jennie Brunton (Lancaster: Centre for North West Regional Studies, 2001); we thank Dr. Brunton for valuable discussion.

³ *John Ruskin and the Lakeland Arts Revival, 1880-1920*, Sara E.Haslam (Cardiff: Merton Priory Press Ltd, 2004).

good man ... How well I remember him talking to me ... of painting and always going to nature for studies’.

An earlier entry acknowledges Ruskin’s indirect influence through the example of the Langdale Linen Industry:

Tuesday 11th July 1899: 'It was the end of the 80’s that I went ... to see the little spinning home at Elterwater [Great Langdale] founded ... by Mr. Fleming on Ruskin’s writings, chiefly. I was literally set down in the old world never to be again free from it and I found myself longing to be surrounded by ancient industry, were it spinning, or weaving, or carving ... All its beauty I would draw from it.'

At the height of production, between 1891 and the outbreak of the Great War, over ninety women ‘spinsters’, working in their fell-side homes, kept four male weavers and a small group of permanent female workers, including embroiderers, supplied with yarn. Miss Garnett, a hands-on manager, ruled this massive workforce with a ‘rod of iron’, a necessity in holding the enterprise together. The specialities of The Spinnery were embroidered textiles of rare beauty, and Throwan, a textile that combined a linen warp and silk weft, and created an ever-changing display of colour in response to light and movement.

Annie Garnett designed all the textiles herself: she was a colourist first and foremost, her colour sense being second to none, and a talented creator of patterns. Quality was her watchword, and her textiles won local, national and international acclaim, prizes and orders from a diversity of individuals ranging from local people to members of the royal family, generating income to keep the business going.

The Exhibition told the story of The Spinnery using artifacts, contemporary photographs and Annie Garnett’s writings, especially her unpublished Diary, all from the Garnett Archive (note 1). A special feature concerned the inspiration for her colours and designs: the scenery of Lakeland itself and her garden at Fairfield – like Ruskin she was a dedicated practical gardener⁴. On display were some of Annie Garnett’s watercolours and drawings, and ten Autochromes Lumière, pre-1918 colour images of plants which we discovered recently in the

⁴ Mary Lois Kissell: *An Artist’s Garden – A color laboratory in the English Lake Region. House Beautiful* (USA), March 1930; David Ingram: *The Gardens at Brantwood*, Pallas Athene/Ruskin Foundation, 2014.

Archive⁵. When digitized and projected, the latter brought to life Miss Garnett's long lost flower beds and borders, glowing with vibrant colours. The Exhibition also included details of: Miss Garnett's home, Fairfield, and associated Spinnery buildings and equipment; her management style and entrepreneurial skill; her designs and textiles; prizes, publicity and patrons; and the reasons for the slow decline of The Spinnery in the socially changed post-1918 world.

Despite the richness of the Archive, certain significant items are still missing ⁶, preventing a full appraisal of Annie Garnett's achievements. There is more than enough, however, to show that she was a woman of rare talent and an outstanding example of what could be achieved through the synergy between Ruskin's teaching and the creative energy and enterprise of his Lakeland followers.

⁵ Detailed paper accepted by *Trans. Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Arch. Soc.* (2017/18).

⁶ The most significant are: The Spinnery accounts; a complete plan of the garden; clothes and soft furnishings made from Spinnery textiles; finished design drawings; and most tantalizing of all, sections of the unpublished Diary cut out by Miss Garnett and presumably destroyed by her. If anyone is aware of the whereabouts of any of these, please contact the Museum of Lakeland Life and Industry, Kendal.