



Phyllis with Ethne, Diamhar-Geal, Bioultach, Dhulagh & Roseen Dhu of Coolafin

She was a young artist inspired by the Celtic Twilight who championed one of the symbols of the Irish nationalist moment, the Irish Wolfhound.

But Phyllis Gardner had one other great secret love in her life. When it was revealed 60 years after her death, it rocked the literary world on its heels.

She not only lent her artistic talents to promote the Irish Wolfhound, Gardner used her meticulous research and writing skills to defend the breed against the many antagonists in the 1920s and 30s who claimed wolfhounds were a “**manufactured**” breed.

Gardner’s book, “**The Irish Wolfhound: A Short Historical Sketch**”, demonstrates that the Irish were breeding an unbroken line of wolfhounds for a century when they were reputedly extinct. She validated George Augustus Graham’s revival of the breed and helped him edit his own book on the breed.

She was all but forgotten in the year 2000 when the British Museum released letters and a memoir she’d written in 1918 of her time with one of Britain’s greatest poets, the doomed war poet Rupert Brooke. Her intimate words from another age brought the elusive golden boy of Edwardian England into sharper focus.



Gardner was born in 1890 and spent her early childhood in Athens, where her father was director of the British School of Archaeology. She and her sister Delphis grew up surrounded by art and the world of mythology.

She trained in classical art at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in England and specialized in the craft of wood carving, but was also accomplished at drawing and painting animals.

Graham had just revived the Irish Wolfhound and it got off to a precarious recovery thanks to the clamour from critics who were outraged at his claims that he’d brought back the hound of Irish myth. They said he’d “**manufactured**” the breed.

What Was The Wolfhound Artist's Secret?

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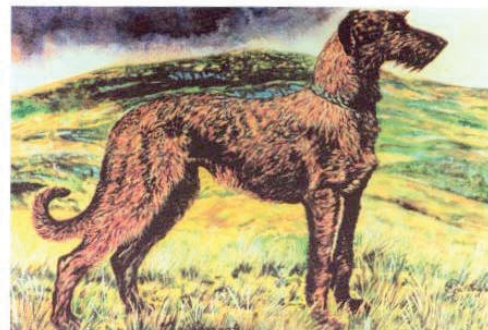
Technically, all modern breeds were “**manufactured**.” There were no formal breed standards before breed clubs formed in Victorian England. They were all carefully shaped by selective breeding.

But the wolfhound wasn’t just any dog. The Irish wolf dog was the hound of kings and warriors dating back to the beginning of Ireland itself, world-famous for its ferocity, prowess in the hunt and —not the least — for its near-human qualities.

Gardner fell in love with the romance of the wolfhound portrayed by the artists and poets of the Celtic Revival, which was then in full swing. W.B. Yeats used the symbols of the harp, the shamrock and the Irish Wolfhound to stir the fires of Irish nationalism.

But the young woman was also hard-headed enough to thoroughly research the breed’s history and lineage, which led to her “**The Irish Wolfhound: A Short Historical Sketch**” in 1931, illustrated throughout by her own woodcut engravings. She’d gathered a wealth of old pedigrees, relics, paintings and old photos on the breed.

She wrote, “*It has recently struck me that we who keep and breed Irish Wolfhounds ought not to take it lying down*” when writers of her day disparaged the breed. They were ignorant of the facts.



Old Donagh: a painting from a Phyllis Gardner woodcut. Courtesy of A Killykeen-Doyle.

Her books demonstrated that some of the dogs used in Graham’s work were from the **Kilfane and Ballytobin** strains, the last survivors of a long line of hounds bred in Ireland with pedigrees going back more than 100 years. They were never extinct and Graham’s hound were the real thing.

Gardner had by then established her own Irish Wolfhound kennel, **Coolafin**, named after her mother's home village in County Sligo, Ireland. The kennel produced several generations of wolfhounds known for their intelligence and vigor.



A group of puppies (members of three different litters)

l to r: Bioultach, Cormac, Maga, Rayleen, Conacia, Manus, Roseen Dhu, Mononia and Lagenia of Coolafin
Phyllis Gardner in the centre, brother Christopher on left and sister Delphis on right of picture

Her work with wolfhounds helped her overcome great personal tragedy.

Sitting with her mother in a tea room at King's Cross station in 1911, she first spotted English poet Rupert Brooke. She and her mother shared a train compartment with him on a journey to Cambridge. She was 22. He was 25 and was called by W.B. Yeats "**the most handsome man in England.**"

She spent the train ride sketching Brooke and later wrote in her memoir, "*The more I sketched him, the better I liked him.*" Her mother, a would-be poet, nudged Gardner to get to know the blond-haired man with the brilliant blue eyes.

Publicly, Brooke was perceived as a talented young poet, something of a mercurial, Byronic figure. His circle of friends knew him as jealous, moody and ill-balanced and he didn't care much for women. He was staunch conservative and enraged by the suffragette movement, of which Gardner was an avid follower. Brooke was a conflicted young man with a repressed sexual identity.

Nonetheless, Gardner, a beautiful redhead, intrigued Brooke and they saw one another regularly at his home in the Old Vicarage, Granchester, where one unchaperoned night, he invited her to go skinny-dipping. She said he told her, "*You've got nice legs just like a rather pretty boy.*"

Their relationship went unconsummated. They exchanged more than 100 intimate letters, but the strain of their relationship eventually brought out his dark side and they quarrelled over women's rights and, indeed, over the nature of women themselves. He called them "**beasts.**" Finally, in a neurotic funk, Brooke sailed for Tahiti and Gardner never saw him again.

Brooke got caught up in the fervour for war, enlisted and died in 1915 of a blood infection two days before the Battle of Gallipoli and three weeks after his poem, "**The Soldier**," was read on Easter Sunday from the pulpit of St. Paul's Cathedral. He inspired a generation of young British

soldiers to go to war, the Lost Generation, and Brooke became myth, the tortured poet cut down young.

Gardner grieved privately, her relationship with the poet unknown for decades. She devoted herself to working in the local hospital, which treated soldiers from the front. In 1918, she wrote her 92-page memoir, "**A True History**," and stashed it and her letters from Brooke away.

And she dove into her art and research of the Irish Wolfhound and opened her own kennel not long after the end of WWI. She launched her line with **Eva**, an exceptionally large female, and **Bournstream Simba**, a male known for protecting his humans against lions in Kenya. Gardner became active in the Irish Wolfhound Club and was a strong proponent of producing modern wolfhounds capable of doing what they were bred for, chasing down and killing large game. She promoted wolfhound coursing in the 1930s.

She'd planned a second book to showcase the mountain of old photos of wolfhounds that she'd accumulated, many depicting wolfhounds before Graham's revival, but she got sidetracked working on publishing Graham's stud book for the wolfhound club.

Gardner died before it was completed. In 1939 at the age of 48, Phyllis Gardner succumbed to cancer. Her sister Delphis carried on her work and the Graham stud book was finally published in 1959. But Delphis never saw it. She was broke, and to save the cost of a train ticket to the book's publisher in Dublin, she rode her bike for 100 miles and contracted pneumonia and died.

Meanwhile, the Gardner sisters' wolfhound album project lay shelved for 40 years until Elizabeth C. Murphy of Ireland funded its publication as a special Millennium project for the Irish Wolfhound Club of Ireland.

And Phyllis Gardner's legacy slipped into obscurity until the year 2000, when the British Museum was permitted to unseal and release Gardner's letters and memoir. It made sensational headlines. Little was known about Gardner, much less about her relationship with the renowned poet.

The story of Gardner, Brooke and the memoir is told in "**The Second I Saw You**," by Lorna C. Beckett.

After Gardner's secret was revealed, members of the Rupert Brooke Society were distressed to learn that Gardner was buried in an unmarked grave and raised funds for a special headstone.

On it is a copy of one of her woodcut engravings of an Irish Wolfhound.

