Mary Butts

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The tomb of Mary Butts lies in the windswept graveyard of Sennen Church, its entrance barely visible from the A30 that connects Sennen Cove to the rest of the Penwith peninsula and onward towards Land’s End. Butts moved to Cornwall in 1932 and purchased a small bungalow, the unimaginatively named 1 Marine View. Renaming her home Tebel Vos (House of Magic), this location would be the site of a prolific period in Butts’ published writing career, with the novel *The Death of Felicity Tavener* coming out in the same year, closely followed by *The Macedonian* [1933] and *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra* (1935). At the time of her death on 5 March 1937 at the West Cornwall Hospital in Penzance from a perforated duodenal ulcer and diabetes, Butts was working on a study of emperor Julian the Apostate and had recently completed her autobiography, *The Crystal Cabinet*. Published posthumously, the frontispiece of the book was a copy of a portrait made of Butts by her friend, the artist and filmmaker, Jean Cocteau. Her tombstone carries two epitaphs, an example, perhaps, of the contradictory nature of her life. The first, still clearly legible states ‘Mary Butts, wife of Gabriel Aitkin.’ The second, is now almost illegible, the carving eroded by salt, wind and the encroachment of lichen, but the words ‘I strove to seize the inmost form,’ can just about be read, under closer scrutiny. This second epitaph, a quote from
the poem ‘The Crystal Cabinet’ by William Blake, was placed by her daughter Camilla acknowledges the influence of this writer—whose life was entwined with Butts and her extended family. Butts’ grandfather was a patron and supporter of Blake, and his collection was installed in the Butts family home of Salt-erns in Poole, Dorset. The decision to sell this collection in 1906 preoccupied Butts for the remainder of her life, and her personal sense of loss and a dislocation of birthright foregrounds much of her writing. It would perhaps satisfy her to know that in 1939 the purchaser Graham Robertson bequeathed the Blakes to the Tate where it forms a substantial part of the national collection. The Crystal Cabinet was published by Methuen in June 1937.