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The Gallant Edith Bratt: J.R.R. Tolkien's Inspiration by Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2021. Cormare Series no. 46. xviii, 261 pp. \$24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703467.

There can be no question that Edith Bratt was a significant figure in the life of J.R.R. Tolkien. She was his wife for fifty-two years, the mother of their four children, and the focus of his devoted love. Their youthful romance, at times forbidden, entered Tolkien's private mythology as that of the star-crossed lovers Beren and Lúthien. Readers' main, sometimes only, source of information about Edith, however, has been Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien published in 1977, which has been criticized, with some justification, for portraying Edith as a peripheral, even inferior presence.

Since 2019, the most extensive study of Carpenter's treatment was the *Mythlore* essay by Nicole M. duPlessis, "On the Shoulders of Humphrey Carpenter: Reconsidering Biographical Representation and Scholarly Perception of Edith Tolkien". Little is known about Edith, duPlessis comments, compared with what is known about Ronald Tolkien, and yet her

relationship with her husband is invoked in analyses of women in Tolkien's works, in discussions of his religious beliefs, in evaluations of his friendships, and in general accounts of his character. Given the tendency of scholars and critics to rely on Carpenter's account, treating as fact his assumptions, his judgments, and his interpretations of the material that he synthesized during the relatively short process of researching and writing the biography, the positioning of Edith Tolkien in Tolkien scholarship as a controversial figure – an elf-maid, a shy, mousy figure, a non-intellectual, an aspiring pianist with thwarted ambitions, a victim of spousal neglect, an invalid, a shrewish, nagging wife – deserves consideration. Without her own words, and with only a portrait that is highly mediated by Humphrey Carpenter, there has been little attempt to understand Edith Tolkien as an individual and a woman – the woman beloved by J.R.R. Tolkien – and the place she occupies in Tolkien's life, including her importance to his work.
[40]

There is no arguing with this, at least not with its general import. Our picture of Edith Tolkien has indeed been "highly mediated" by Carpenter. His view of her is slanted, and sometimes uncomfortably negative; and he does not say nearly as much about her as Tolkien's partner in life as she deserves. He seems to have met her only briefly, and could not personally have formed a fair impression of her as an individual. Instead, he had to rely on the opinions of those who did know her,

themselves subject to bias, and to the extent they survived – and they reportedly survive in great quantity – on Edith’s letters to her husband or her family.

DuPlessis advocates cogently¹ for a fresh appraisal of Edith “as a fully-realized individual and participant in her marriage”, out of the shadow of Carpenter’s perspective, with a view to enriching “our current understanding of Tolkien’s life and works” (73). This is the purpose Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays bring to *The Gallant Edith Bratt: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Inspiration*. They object in the strongest terms to Carpenter’s “official biography” and offer their own book as a counter. Carpenter, they claim, presents a “legend” of Edith rather than a true picture. “Due to editorial decisions made by Christopher Tolkien, only a ghost of [J.R.R.] Tolkien’s ‘gallant’ Edith Bratt” – echoing a phrase Tolkien used in a letter – is left in Carpenter’s biography, which he was made to rewrite after an unacceptable first draft.²

Bunting and Hamill-Keays usefully expand our sources of information on Edith’s early life. Their industry in doing so is commendable. They explore the families of her mother, Frances “Fannie” Bratt, and her father, Alfred Warrilow, and say more than has been said before about young Edith’s birth out of wedlock, her stay in foster care for her first few years, and her time at the Dresden House boarding school following her mother’s death in 1903. Like all of Tolkien’s biographers after Carpenter, they did not have direct access to his family papers; they complain that those who control the Tolkien archives, primarily the Tolkien Estate, are overprotective about the items in their care, which prevents a “richer understanding of Tolkien’s works and imaginative creativity” (229). Instead, the authors drew upon “a widely divergent array of materials” open to the public, including legal documents, census records, newspapers, and published works such as *The Tolkien Family Album* and our *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*. Ironically, the latter also include Carpenter’s biography, which Bunting and Hamill-Keays are forced to admit “does contain a great deal of information which must be used as the starting point for any biographical investigation of Tolkien and consequently of his wife, Edith” (xiv). To better understand Edith’s life “in the context of the Victorian and Edwardian England in which she was raised”, they used as well a variety of historical sources and analyses.

They describe, for example, the importance attached in Britain, during the period under discussion, to class and circumstances of birth. One of their more formidable aims is to show how Edith Bratt “triumphed over her background to snatch love and happiness from the iron jaws of social strictures and rigid class consciousness in a life with Ronald Tolkien” (xvi), and foremost in her background was her illegitimacy, “the deciding factor in her childhood” (13). In his *Biography*, Carpenter describes Edith’s childhood as “moderately happy” (39), a statement presumably based on evidence he found in the Tolkien family papers. Bunting and Hamill-Keays dismiss this idea as

contradicted by historical evidence of the treatment typical for illegitimate children in Victorian England. As an illegitimate child, Edith's treatment at her foster parents' home, from birth until an unknown older age, would have typically been one of hunger, neglect, and ostracism. Further, Edith's mother was unlikely to welcome a child she had not seen for years, if only from the fear the child might reveal a past Fannie Bratt would wish to conceal. [15]

But individuals do not always follow what is "typical" of a larger group. As unmarried lovers, Fannie Bratt and Alfred Warrilow were themselves atypical of their society. Fannie did conceal her daughter's illegitimacy – in the 1901 census, Edith is listed as living with Frances Bratt as her "niece" – and yet it is presumptuous to conclude that because it was true of others, Fannie was driven only by fear of "the risk Edith presented" to her "reputation in the community", that is, fear of being exposed as an unwed mother, and not also by love. By what evidence, beyond a generalization, should one decide that a mother was "unlikely to welcome" her daughter? The same question could be asked about the "likelihood" of Alfred Warrilow having "mixed feelings about Edith" (22). There is no good evidence to think one way or the other.

"While the information from primary and new secondary sources creates a fuller picture," Bunting and Hamill-Keays explain, "gaps and omissions are always present in the available documents. Logical projections, based on the available data, [therefore] are presented for the reader's consideration" (xv). Sometimes these "projections" are not unreasonable – we are not sure they are always "logical" – but others require a leap of faith, and altogether, speculation occupies too great a portion of *The Gallant Edith Bratt*. Too often, Bunting and Hamill-Keays choose to present dramatic scenarios, built upon their preferences and interpretations and on modern sensibilities.

One of these is their picture of Edith as an "heiress". The term is strictly true, in that she inherited investments of value in her mother's estate, but the common association of the word with wealth and rank does not seem appropriate to the circumstances. There is no evidence that Edith behaved like an heiress, in the grander sense of the word, nor does Tolkien seem to have treated her as one. Moreover, although Frances Bratt's probate document records a healthy value for her estate, we do not know if there were liabilities to set against it, or what fees were charged by its trustees, or what level of income Edith's investments produced, or what became of them over time. Edith's behavior, so far as we know it, suggests that her resources were no more than modest, enough to allow her to live comfortably but not lavishly. Nevertheless, Bunting and Hamill-Keays imagine Edith's guardian, solicitor Stephen Gateley, seeing her as "a marriageable young

heiress who needed careful supervision to protect her from any unscrupulous fellow who would be interested in marrying her only for her money” (45). And when it became known that Tolkien had feelings for Edith, Gateley is said to have considered “young Tolkien” to be “an opportunistic gold digger, i.e. planning to compromise Edith in order to marry her for her money” (57).

These fanciful notions are tied further to the authors’ most uncomfortable tableau, in which Tolkien’s reference long afterwards to “goodnights” with Edith “when sometimes you were in your little white nightgown” (quoted in Carpenter, 40) is interpreted as sexual intimacy. They also quote Carpenter’s comment that Tolkien’s guardian, Father Francis Morgan, “demanded that the affair [i.e. Tolkien’s clandestine relationship with Edith] should stop” (41), interpreting *affair* as something necessarily scandalous, and they similarly point to Tolkien’s use of the word *lover* in referring to Edith in a letter to his son Michael, in today’s overcharged sensibility apparently not considering that it could mean simply “the one I loved”. Carpenter, they argue, “appears to have been instructed” by the Tolkien Estate “to downplay Ronald Tolkien’s intense, ardent, and amorous relationship with Edith and consequently redacted any impact it might have on his writing. Carpenter’s ‘During the summer of 1909 they decided they were in love’ . . . becomes a decorous fig-leaf for a blazing ardor, which in 1909/1910 was socially and morally unacceptable” (61).

In their closing chapters, Bunting and Hamill-Keays recount Tolkien’s final terms at Oxford, his peripatetic army service, and his convalescence after returning ill from France. They examine some of Tolkien’s pictures, seeking connections with Edith: they interpret *The Land of Pohja*, for example, as a representation of Ronald, Edith, and Ronald’s brother Hilary in the form of three fir trees, rather than simply an illustration of a scene in the *Kalevala*. Some works of art by Tolkien, such as *Here, There, and Everywhere*, are associated by the authors with Edith only through a process of interpretation – there is no physical or documentary evidence to support it. With the same purpose and approach, Bunting and Hamill-Keays also cite several of Tolkien’s poems, for some of which they divine contents and meaning even though the works are known only by their titles. Discussion of *Sparrow-song*, for instance, written for Edith in 1915 but unpublished, is accompanied by speculation about pet birds, the singing of nightingales, and whether Edith knew musical compositions imitating birds. Finally, Bunting and Hamill-Keays make a concentrated siege of Humphrey Carpenter, accusing him of inaccuracy, deletion, downplaying, minimizing, obscuring, concealing, and depreciating. By extension, they also fault the Tolkien Estate for choosing to “keep secret” Edith’s “vitality and her co-creation with Ronald Tolkien”, that is, her relationship with him, without which “her reputed transformation into the brave and gay Lúthien [in Tolkien’s mythology] seems baseless and puzzling” (223).

The Gallant Edith Bratt is not a complete biography, contrary to advertising, but is severely truncated, concluding in 1917. Edith would live another fifty-four years, until November 1971, a not inconsiderable or uneventful period. A longer and more thoughtful book about her would be possible, or a more considered treatment within a new biography of her husband; either, however, would require access to the full range of letters and manuscripts Carpenter enjoyed, and berating the trustees of such collections is not likely to encourage them to open their files. Bunting and Hamill-Keays's book, meanwhile, is haphazardly argued, excessively speculative, and sometimes vituperative, and cannot be recommended except for the few new facts it firmly documents.

It is not our task here to defend Humphrey Carpenter,³ but it should be acknowledged, granting his faults with more respect than Bunting and Hamill-Keays allow, that his research was both prodigious and pioneering. He was the first to sift through enormous files of Tolkien family papers, including thousands of letters, which were not yet organized. That he made as much out of these as he did, while also needing to fathom the history of Tolkien's writings not yet laid out by Christopher Tolkien, and in only a year's time (to the point he completed his first draft), is astounding. We agree with Douglas A. Anderson that Carpenter's *Biography* remains "both readable and unusually accurate . . . despite many advances in Tolkien scholarship" (220), and also despite the comparative lack of general information available to Carpenter in the mid-1970s – the U.K. national censuses after 1871, for example, were still embargoed.⁴ When he states in the *Biography* that "if Edith knew the name of her father, she never passed it on to her own children" (38–9), Carpenter may not have known it himself. Priscilla Tolkien, always a fount of knowledge on Tolkien family history, told us that she did not hear the name of Alfred Warrilow until later in life, long after Carpenter's book was published.

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1. Maria Artamanova makes the same argument more briefly in an essay, "Edith Tolkien in the Eye of the Beholder", published in 2021. Edith's fictional parallel with Lúthien "somewhat pre-defines" how she "is approached by Tolkien fans", as there is forever around her a "romantic aura" (199). In accounts of Tolkien's life, in particular in discussions of his female friends and colleagues, Edith is "a largely silent presence", whose mark "is hard to pinpoint with accuracy" and open to interpretation according to each observer's particular agenda (202). Artamanova takes the view that Carpenter's biography was deliberately limited in its

information about Edith by the Tolkien family's desire to protect its privacy; in this may have been influenced by the original version of Bunting and Hamill-Keays' text, published in the *Journal of Tolkien Research* in 2019 (later withdrawn, then revised, but withdrawn a second time). She argues that Edith "deserves her right to privacy, but she equally deserves to be understood in the context of her time and her own individual story, rather than becoming a token of attitudes ultimately produced by 'the eye of the beholder'" (209). She does not suggest how one should balance privacy and public knowledge, which is always a dilemma.

2. No critic of Carpenter, to our knowledge, has read his first version, and cannot say definitively why it was not accepted. Bunting and Hamill-Keays imply that it revealed Tolkien family "secrets" which could not be allowed to be made public, but there is no direct evidence of this. In one interview, Carpenter stated that there was nothing in his book that was censored by the Tolkien family, but in another he recalled that in rewriting his text he removed anything likely to be contentious, apparently self-censoring.

3. We ourselves have found errors in the *Biography* (as others have found fault with our own writings; that is a risk of publication), and we agree with Nicole duPlessis that Carpenter's view of Edith Tolkien is open to dispute and revision. In conversation with us, the artist Pauline Baynes recalled Edith fondly, and in letters Edith wrote to Pauline, which we have read, she comes across always as intelligent and caring.

4. Of course, Carpenter did his research before the Internet was in common use, and long before online resources began to develop substantially. Our own experience in writing *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* provides a good illustration: when we revised our book for its 2017 edition, we found a great deal of information online which had not existed more than a decade earlier when we wrote the original edition of 2006.

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