

The Gallant Edith Bratt J.R.R. Tolkien's Inspiration

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Nancy Bunting² has written a fascinating biography of the first years of Tolkien's wife Edith's life. But Bunting's vision of Edith's significance for Tolkien's work is a little too compelling.

Anyone who reads Carpenter's biography will probably not have a very positive image of his wife Edith at the end, no matter how romantic their meeting and their 'forbidden love', followed by a separation of many years and a marriage of more than 50 years. Carpenter's biography gives the impression that the lives of Tolkien, professor and world-famous writer, and of Edith, housewife and mother of their four children, drifted apart more and more as the years passed and that this led to what might be called Edith's souring. To this drifting apart may have contributed that at a certain point Edith turned away from the Catholic faith which was the foundation of Tolkien's existence.

From that point of view, it may be somewhat unsatisfactory that Bunting's biography ends in 1917, when Ronald and Edith's relationship was still good. However, I might immediately point out that a biography about those later years would most likely be highly speculative, as the idea that the family would provide access to personal correspondence and the like seems unrealistic. But in a moment, more about the why of this end point.

The first chapters of the book are about Edith's early years. In doing so, Bunting explores the relationship between her father Alfred Warrilow and her mother Fannie Bratt. Edith was born in 1889 as an illegitimate child of the two - Frannie had been employed (classic situation!) as a governess to Alfred's daughter Nellie and his wife Charlotte, and one thing led to another. The book is interesting when it tries to interpret this relationship and Edith's social position in the context of the Victorian class society of the time. Hard facts, derived from documents from that time, are alternated with more speculative assumptions. It seems to be a fact, for instance, that after Alfred's early death in 1891, Fannie successfully took over his business and that Edith, after her mother's death in 1903, also had the necessary money at her disposal. Her guardian was a lawyer and Bunting suggests, not unjustly I think, that he will not have been pleased with the attention paid to Edith by one Ronald Tolkien, an orphan with no money and little prospects, in other words: a possible gold-digger! It is also nice to read how much Edith liked her school, Dresden House. "Edith appears to have thrived at Dresden House", Bunting writes, basing herself among other things on the prizes she won as a schoolgirl. But much is uncertain. Nevertheless, when her schooling ended in 1907, she, 18 years old, was given shelter by Mrs. Faulkner, in whose care the Tolkien brothers were also placed by their guardian, later on. The rest is history.

The book can be understood better if the introduction is also read. Bunting makes an effort to detract from the reliability of Carpenter's biography. She emphasizes that Christopher tore the first version of the biography to pieces and that only a second, revised version was acceptable. She links this with her reading of the biography that Edith is presented too negatively in it, "creating a picture of dysfunction or sentimentalism".³ It is clear from everything that Bunting wrote the book with a certain "programme" in mind: to present Edith as the main source of inspiration⁴ for her husband: "The muse,

¹ Thanks to Renée Vink, with whom I talked about the book and the review.

² From all indications, the book was written primarily by Bunting. Hamill-Keays' contribution seems to be limited to certain parts concerning Tolkien's stay in the army during WWI. That is why I only mention Bunting as the author hereafter.

³ Bunting quotes here from an article by Nicole duPlessis. See there for details.

⁴ More than the TCBS, for example.

anchor, wife, and keeper of Ronald's heart."⁵ This programme goes so far that she wants to put the origin of the work on the legendarium at an earlier date, including the origin of the story of Númenor. She concludes from this that Tolkien, in his legendarium, wanted to give expression to his separation from Edith. It is going too far here to elaborate that this can hardly be right. This programme will be the reason why the book ends in 1917. After that, there are few or no leads to see Edith as Ronald's muse.

Why this programme would be necessary is questionable. I have read Carpenter's biography several times and although at the end the picture of Edith is (in my view) not very positive, it is very positive precisely when it comes to the first years of her relationship with Ronald Tolkien. Ronald and Edith's romance was quite passionate, Edith broke off an engagement for him despite his poor prospects, sacrificed much by following her husband during his long stay in military hospitals after his return from France, she was involved in *The Book of Lost Tales* and was the inspiration for Lúthien, one of the most important characters of the First Era. The fact that Edith later, it seems, lost touch with her husband's work and that the relationship deteriorated, might be so, but says nothing about the way she was presented in the first part of Carpenter's biography. In addition, it is difficult to see why Christopher would have torn up the first part of Carpenter's biography because (as the introduction suggests) his own mother was presented too positively in it.

Those who, like me, already had a positive image of Edith Bratt's early years, see that image not only confirmed but also strengthened in this otherwise excellent biography.

⁵ P. 223. The whole paragraph of this quotation is too long to quote, but it forms the starting point of Bunting's 'programme'.