

## *The Gallant Edith Bratt*

by Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays  
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It is fair to say that, as of November 2022, countless biographical books of J.R.R. Tolkien's life are mirrored in my silver(ish) bookcases. We now know in impressively granular detail where he was, what he was doing, and who he was with at almost every point in his life. We have broader and deeper insights into his influences, inspirations, and creative processes than ever before. And we continue to see in the world around us his lasting impact on us all. But, one area does stand out as having less attention paid to it: Tolkien's family.

This book – *The Gallant Edith Bratt* – goes some way to redressing the balance, in arguing that Tolkien's childhood sweetheart and wife of fifty-five years, Edith, was of more significance to Tolkien's life and works than has previously been suggested.

Considering this for a moment, when I began the book it became clear to me that the authors – Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays – have a point: there has been very little biographical study or investigation of Edith Bratt, and beyond some notable events (such as Edith dancing in the hemlock glade near Roos, East Yorkshire), comparatively little work has been done in looking into Edith's life and the impact this had on Tolkien. The authors therefore have correctly spotted a gap in Tolkien academic studies that they hope this book fills.

As with most biographies, this book starts with Edith's birth. But curiously, for a book which is supposedly about rescuing Edith's reputation as a central force in Tolkien's life, it finishes at 1917. Perhaps it is due to the size and scale of the task, but no reason is given for why they have chosen not to discuss 54 years of the 55 years of the Tolkiens' marriage. No matter, we will have to go with what we've got.

And what we've got is genuinely very interesting. The book investigates Edith's father and family, who she lived with, the money she had, and the education she had. The research here is also very thorough, going through probate records, censuses, and more to discover everything they can about Edith, and in particular her financial situation. She is shown to be clearly an heiress of significant inherited wealth which facilitated her having a more comfortable transition into adulthood than may otherwise have been the case.

If you want an education about what growing up is like in Birmingham in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, this is an excellent primer. However, it does struggle to make the leap from the general to the specifics, suggesting that Edith suffered malnutrition or that, at another point, she probably had no friends, simply because that is what likely happened to children in her circumstances.

Also, those of us who are familiar with the idea of Tolkien as a gentleman professor in an Edwardian mould will struggle to reconcile that with the "scandalous passion" described of their early liaisons. I shall leave readers' imaginations to guess what this suggests – and whether that is a fair description – but it is no wonder, therefore, that in the Introduction the authors admit that the Tolkien Estate refused them permission to reproduce anything.

However, the book often reads more like it wants to start an argument, specifically with Humphrey Carpenter. They feel that Carpenter's biography was over-edited, which downplayed Edith's role and misrepresented the Tolkiens' early relationship. Fine. But they make this point, over and over again. In chapter after chapter, they repeatedly complain about Carpenter's biography as if this treatment was written purely to justify their critiques of *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. They first spoke about Carpenter's biography in the second paragraph, and the conclusion to the book is not about their own work, but their work through the prism of critique of Carpenter's biography. Someone should tell the authors that other biographies are available.

And then, having finished the book, there is a tangential Appendix, "Concerning Tolkien and Sanscrit" which is all about critiquing an article by Nelson Goering. Goering and Carpenter aren't the only targets for critique in this work, with John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* being criticised, as well as Christopher Tolkien.

It does come across as slightly personal, but even if it were not, it does feel pretty pointed. But it would perhaps be more justified if the authors themselves were a little less... imprecise. Too often they make suggestions about Edith's upbringing based purely on what the average person in similar circumstances to her would have experienced. They regularly use phrases such as 'it is likely that, 'may', and 'probable', and this perhaps explains the pretty firm critique of others; is this insecurity on the part of the authors for their own findings?

Would I recommend this book? Partially. The authors have done a genuinely thorough job in looking into Edith's early life and upbringing, teaching about her family, education, wealth, and accommodation. There are nuggets in here

which do indeed help us to understand Edith as a person, and help paint a picture of what life was like for children in Edith's position at the time.

However, the book is incomplete – in that it ends in 1917 – and therefore fails to prosecute the argument of Edith's central importance. It also has some difficulty in conclusively defending its claims about the passionate early relationship of Ronald and Edith, as well as some of the specifics around Edith's upbringing which are covered up with weasel words. But if you do read this book, ignore any and every sentence or paragraph which starts off with a comparison to *J.R.R.*

*Tolkien: A Biography*: not only will it become tiresome, but if the Bunting and Hamill-Keays arguments cannot stand up on their own merit without contradistinction to Carpenter, then you have to ask how valid they are.

Reviewed by Shaun Gunner

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