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The Gallant Edith Bratt: J.R.R. Tolkien's Inspiration, by Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays. Reviewed by Mattie E. Gustafson.

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REVIEWS

Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays. *The Gallant Edith Bratt: J.R.R. Tolkien's Inspiration*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2021. 286pp. \$25.82. Reviewed by Mattie E. Gustafson.

In *The Gallant Edith Bratt* by Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays the authors seek to rectify what they see as an incomplete and one-dimensional portrait of Edith Mary Bratt (1889-1971), J.R.R. Tolkien's wife. That portrait has been widely accepted as accurate ever since Humphrey Carpenter's "official" biography, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* was published in 1977.

I was so ready to learn more about this intriguing person who grew up to be muse and mate to Tolkien. I had heard the story of how she and Tolkien met, the obstacles they overcame, love triumphing in the end, and that enduring love being reflected not only in the story of Beren and Luthien, but also carved for eternity on their gravestone.

But the picture of Edith that emerges from the Carpenter biography, the authors point out, is problematic. She appears as the little woman tending home, hearth, and kids, while Tolkien is off teaching, and meeting with his

fellow Inklings. Carpenter is not totally to blame for this regrettable picture. His first draft, which had to be submitted to the Tolkien family for approval, was, in fact, *not* approved. Carpenter then “cut out everything that was likely to be contentious.” (p.xiii) He went on to rewrite the book – and this time the family approved.

Many subsequent writers and biographers accepted Carpenter’s biography and his characterizations as accurate, even though Carpenter himself, the authors say, admitted to its limitations. (p.xiv)

Bunting and Hamill-Keays’ goal is to give a better, more complete, and accurate picture of Edith Bratt. More specifically they seek to –

1. Illustrate and correct what they see as Carpenter’s skewed portrait of Edith Bratt.
2. Expand our knowledge of Edith’s life and set her life within the context of Victorian and Edwardian England.
3. Help readers to understand the “powerful role” (p.xiii) Edith played in Tolkien’s life.

I have already pointed out the author’s views with regard to Carpenter and subsequent biographers’ portraits of Edith. Bunting and Hamill-Keays make their points clearly.

They also succeed creditably with the second goal, putting Edith’s early life in context. The first few chapters are a fascinating look at the times, especially with regard to women and most particularly concerning Edith’s mother, Fannie Bratt, and Edith.

In 1881, Fannie was hired as a governess for Nellie Elizabeth Warrillow, only child to Charlotte and Alfred Frederick Warrillow. Mr. Warrillow, 17 years older than his 17-year-old governess, was quite handsome. He was also unfaithful. Long story short, Fannie got pregnant and Mrs. Warrillow filed for “judicial separation,” (p.6), - a Victorian euphemism for “I was wronged.” Frederick and Fannie, determined to be together, moved, still unmarried, to a house in Gloucester. Edith was

born in January 1889 and was given her mother’s last name.

Fannie, despite being an unwed mother, seems to have avoided many of the stigma associated with that circumstance. Edith was not so lucky. She was keenly aware of her unfavorable social status and even though a lot of care and contrivance was employed along the way to keep this scandalous secret from being known, it plagued her for much of her life.

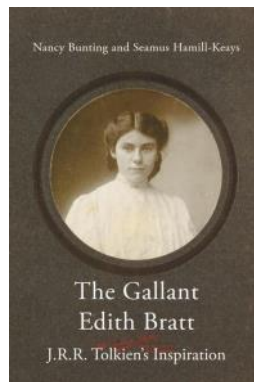
With regard to the authors’ third goal – demonstrating the great source of inspiration and support that Edith was to Tolkien, both personally and in his writing – I am not sure they are quite as successful.

I certainly would like to believe, and do believe, that Edith was a large part of Tolkien’s life, serving as inspiration and muse, helpmate and support. And I think that her part in his life has been overlooked and minimized by subsequent biographers. But I am not at all sure that Bunting and Hamill-Keays have fully established this point.

One of my COVID occupations was diving deep into genealogy and researching my family’s history. From this experience I learned many lessons about the nature of research.

I have sat in front of my computer and at countless library tables pouring over census records, deeds, plat maps, city maps, newspapers, wills, marriage records, etc. trying to piece together an accurate portrait of my ancestors and the tenor of their lives. And while you can be reasonably certain about many facts, you still do not have a firm grasp on what these people were like and what they were feeling. Bunting and Hamill-Keays have amassed an impressive amount of data, but I think they make some intuitive leaps that are just that – intuitive.

In addition to drawing problematic conclusions from this accumulation of information, they spend a good deal of time evaluating Tolkien’s artwork and deducing from these works



relationships, feelings and psychological states of mind. Carpenter asserts that Tolkien took “the business of drawing and painting” very seriously. And I am willing to accept that several of his paintings may depict metaphorical images of himself and Edith – but again, it is hard to be certain of this interpretation. Bunting and Hamill-Keays’ conclusions may be correct – but they are their own conclusions and not necessarily fact.

My final comment is that although I have not done a formal textual analysis, there seems to be a lot more on Tolkien than Edith. Perhaps this is inevitable. Once Edith marries, researchers are hard-pressed to find much of substance on this important woman.

On the whole it is a fascinating book – and certainly gave me a much fuller picture of Edith Bratt and her life. As more information becomes public and available, I hope a clearer picture of her continues to emerge. *The Gallant Edith Bratt* is certainly a step in the right direction.