

BROMWICH, RACHEL SHELDON (1915-2010), scholar

Name: Rachel Sheldon Bromwich
Date of birth: 1915
Date of death: 2010
Spouse: John I'Anson Bromwich
Child: Brian Bromwich
Parent: Lucy Amos (née Scott-Moncrieff)
Parent: Percy Maurice Maclardie Sheldon Amos
Gender: Female
Occupation: scholar
Area of activity: Scholarship and Languages
Author: Morfydd E. Owen

Rachel Sheldon Amos was born on 30 July 1915 in Hove, Sussex, the fourth of five children and the second daughter of Sir Percy Maurice Maclardie Sheldon Amos (1872-1940) and his wife Lucy Scott Moncrieff (1880-1958), both of Scottish descent. Amos was both an academic lawyer and a practising barrister and by the end of the British Protectorate in 1922 was judicial advisor to the Egyptian government. Rachel spent the first seven years of her life in Egypt. On returning to Britain, Amos became Quain Professor of Jurisprudence at University College London, the third of his line to hold a legal chair. The family were Quakers; after attending schools in Cuckfield in Sussex and Ambleside in Cumbria, Rachel was educated at the Mount, the Quaker school at York. She attended Quaker meetings for as long as she was able.

After the Mount, and a period of private coaching, Rachel went in 1934 up to Newnham College Cambridge. For Part 1 of her Tripos she read English, in which she was awarded a first, but as part of the tripos she took a paper in Anglo-Saxon taught by her supervisor Mrs Dorothy de Navarro. For Part 2 Rachel came into the orbit of the famous Hector Munro Chadwick's department, namely Section B of the Archaeology and Anthropology Tripos, 'Anglo Saxon, Norse and Archaeological Studies', where she was taught the Celtic languages by Kenneth Jackson and once again gained a first-class. Chadwick also encouraged those of his pupils interested in Celtic to acquire greater expertise in the Celtic vernaculars. After graduating in 1938, Rachel went, like Kenneth Jackson before her, to sit at the feet of Sir Ifor Williams in Bangor, the textual scholar par excellence whom she hero-worshipped, considering him a greater scholar than Chadwick himself. Encouraged by him Rachel began her work on the Triads.

On the eve of the war in 1939 Rachel married a brilliant fellow student, John I'A Bromwich, (1915-1990) the son of a distinguished mathematician, Thomas Bromwich (1875-1929) who had once held the chair in Queen's College, Galway. John Bromwich's chief academic interest was the history of the English Language. He enlisted in the army and was posted to Belfast where their son, given the Irish name Brian, was born. Brian became an engineer and spent much of his life working abroad in developing countries. In the course of time Brian and his wife Christine (née Shire) provided Rachel with three grandchildren to whom she revealed the playful and mischievous streak in her nature.

While in Ireland Rachel followed Irish classes at Queen's University given by Michael O'Brien and continued working on the Triads, but disaster struck when her thesis notes were destroyed in a bombing raid. When her husband was posted abroad after a short sojourn in mid Wales Rachel returned to her mother's home at Ulpha in the Lake District. Despite the difficulties of the war years Rachel persevered in her study, taking the opportunity to read widely.

After the war in 1945 Rachel Bromwich succeeded Kenneth Jackson as lecturer in Celtic Languages and Literature at Cambridge. Her early publications include seminal articles. The first was the text of the triads from MS Peniarth 16 which contains the earliest copy of Trioedd Ynys Prydein. Two articles of the same period showed her interest in the later Irish traditions, 'The Continuity of the Gaelic Tradition in eighteenth-century Ireland', and her penetrating study of the 'Keen for Art O'Leary' where she compared the oral keens collected by Crofton Croker with the native Gaelic keening tradition. In the Chadwick Memorial Volume, *The Early Cultures of North-west Europe* (1950), Rachel showed an early interest in Brittany and contributed a chapter comparing the inundation stories of Cantre'r Gwaelod and the Breton Ker Is, editing a poem from the Black Book of Carmarthen.

Rachel Bromwich's magnum opus was her edition of the Welsh Triads, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, first published in 1961, which is without doubt one of the major works of Welsh scholarship of the twentieth century. This series of texts, preserved in a number of medieval manuscripts, provides an index to the traditions of early Wales. The greatest treasure of Bromwich's edition are the Notes on Personal Names, over four hundred of them, which constitute a veritable dictionary of the Welsh Heroic Age. Revised and expanded editions of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* appeared in 1978, 2006 and 2014. The volume was followed by a series of articles on triad-related topics, such as her G. J. Williams Memorial Lecture for 1968, 'Trioedd Ynys Prydain in Welsh Literature and Scholarship' (1969), the papers on 'William Camden and "Trioedd Ynys Prydein"' (1968) and 'Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Myvyrian Third Series' (1968). At the same time a constant stream of articles and reviews on other subjects stemmed from her pen. Rachel Bromwich was an assiduous reviewer and a devoted member of the International Arthurian Society, and many of her articles deal with Arthuriana and the Medieval Romances such as 'Scotland and the earliest Arthurian Tradition' (1963).

The main focus of her intellectual life in the second half of her career was a different one, namely the study of the work of Wales's greatest poet, Dafydd ap Gwilym. Her Cymmrodorion lecture of 1964, 'Tradition and Innovation in the Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym', was followed by an overview of the poet's work in her 'Writers of Wales' volume, *Dafydd ap Gwilym* (1974). Her various critical papers were brought together in 1986 in *Aspects of the Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym: collected papers*. The high spot of her work on Dafydd ap Gwilym was perhaps her Welsh Classics translation volume *Dafydd ap Gwilym, a Selection of Poems* (1982), republished and revised several times.

Rachel Bromwich was also a person who showed great pietas towards those who had taught or helped her. She made available for a wider public the work of Sir Ifor Williams by translating his edition of *Armes Prydein* for the Dublin Institute series of Welsh texts (1972), and by translating and publishing a selection of his papers in *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry* (1972). She prepared with D. Simon Evans both English and Welsh editions of the major medieval tale of *Culhwch and Olwen* (1988 and 1997), based on the study which had been pioneered by her friend Sir Idris Foster. Conscious of her own duty towards scholarship she organised with Professor Foster *Cylch yr Hengerdd* at Oxford and edited together with Dr Brinley Jones its fruits in *Astudiaethau ar yr Hengerdd* (1978) in honour of the professor. She was one of the editors of *The Arthur of the Welsh* (1991), presenting an up-to-date account of Arthurian scholarship. Her two volumes of bibliography: *Medieval Celtic Bibliography* (Vol. 5 in the Toronto Series of Bibliographies, 1974) and *Medieval Welsh Literature to 1400* (1996) as well as the *Glossary to Culhwch ac Olwen* (1992) all testify to her diligence in providing guidelines for others.

Rachel Bromwich made seminal contributions to the study of all the historic Celtic literatures, and her achievements were recognised in various ways. She became a Reader in Celtic at the University of Cambridge, and was the first Sir John Rhys Fellow at Oxford. She was given an honorary Professorial Fellowship at University College of North Wales, Bangor and a D.Litt. honoris causa was conferred on her by the University of Wales through Bangor. She was an honorary Vice President of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion and of the International Arthurian Society, as well as being a member of the Council of the Irish Texts Society.

Rachel was a thorough teacher, quietly encouraging and loyal to her students. She taught the prescribed texts carefully; not essentially a linguist, the real contribution of her teaching were her lectures on the medieval literatures of Ireland and Wales. The Cambridge Section B during her term of office produced a continual stream of distinguished scholars and Rachel taught many of them. Life had not always been straightforward for her and she was quickly alert to the difficulties of others and offered practical help and support where she could.

Rachel Bromwich's early upbringing meant that she always craved the background of a stable community, which she found in Wales. After retirement she made her home in Tyddyn Sabel, the highest house on Moel Faban in Eryri, two fields away from the home of her friend, Sir Idris Foster, and later in the village of Carneddi. After Sir Idris's death when the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies was established in Aberystwyth in 1985, she moved there. She was generous in her bequests of books to the Centre. She died in Aberystwyth on 15 December 2010.

Author

Morfydd E. Owen

Sources

Gerald Morgan, 'A Scholar of Early Britain: Rachel Bromwich (1915-)', in Jane Chance (ed.), *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (Madison London 2005), 769-81

Marged Haycock, *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 2010, 1-3

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For a bibliography of Rachel Bromwich's works, see *Dwned* 20 (2014), 97-104

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Rachel Bromwich](#)

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