

BLAKE, LOIS (1890 - 1974), historian and promoter of Welsh folk dancing

Name: Lois Blake
Date of birth: 1890
Date of death: 1974
Spouse: Leonard James Blake
Child: Felicity Blake
Child: James Blake
Parent: Amy Turner (née Dickes)
Parent: Henry Fownes Turner
Gender: Female
Occupation: historian and promoter of Welsh folk dancing
Area of activity: History and Culture; Performing Arts
Author: Eiry Palfrey

Lois Blake was born in Streatham, London, on 21 May 1890, the daughter of Amy (née Dickes) and Henry Fownes Turner, and was christened Lois Agnes Fownes Turner. After her mother's death (when she was three years old) she was brought up by her aunt and uncle Mary and James Watt. She received an upper-class comprehensive education and travelled Europe extensively.

She served as a nurse in the Great War in Serbia, Romania and Russia; she also cooked and drove vehicles on the battlefield. In 1917 she married Leonard James Blake, a marine architect and engineer. They had two children, James (1918-1945) and Felicity (1920-2013).

After spending time in London and Liverpool, in 1930 Lois and her husband settled in Melysfan, Llangwm near Corwen, Merionethshire, and from there they moved to Corwen in 1950. Leonard died in 1959, and in 1960 Lois left Wales and moved in with her daughter Felicity in Bristol and thence to Marshfield near Chippenham.

The years that Lois Blake spent in Llangwm represented a significant point in the history of Welsh folk dance. At that time the influence of puritanism on rural life was immense, and folk dancing was considered sinful and the work of the devil. Very few people were aware of the wealth of dances that Wales possessed. Lois Blake was an enthusiastic member of the EFDSS (The English Folk Dance and Song Society), and on moving to Wales she intended to add Welsh folk dances to her repertoire. To her utter disappointment no-one, apart from the Romanies, were either aware of or practised our dances. With the encouragement of Mr David Williams, headmaster of Llangwm primary school, she began to teach the school children some simple dances. Then Lois Blake began to seriously research and discover as much as possible about the tradition of folk dance in Wales. She had invaluable support and help from **W. S. Gwynn Williams** (Llangollen), Ceinwen Thomas (daughter of Margretta Thomas who recalled the Nantgarw dances) and a number of dancers, P. E. teachers and historians. She was a very determined woman, and set to promptly to learn everything about the lost tradition of folk dancing in Wales and thereby discovered treasures; amongst them the fair dances of Nantgarw, the Llangadfan dances, the Llanover dances and a great number of others lurking in English collections such as those by Hugh Mellor, John and Henry Playford and John Walsh.

In 1948 Gwennant Gillespie, Organiser of the Urdd (The Welsh League of Youth) invited Lois Blake to a residential course at Pantyfedwen (Borth) to teach Welsh folk dances to the Urdd officers, and so began the Urdd's long and productive relationship with folk dance under the leadership of Lois Blake. A year later in 1949 the Welsh Folk Dance Society was formed, with Lois Blake as President, a position she held until her death in 1974, serving the Society with unwavering dedication. She was also a talented artist and painter, and illustrated several of the early publications of the Welsh Folk Dance Society, as well designing greetings cards. She continued during this period to research and discover dances, and also composed dances herself - many of them popular and in the repertoire of dance teams in Wales and beyond, such as 'Pont Caerodor', 'Y Gelynnen' and 'Robin Ddiog'. She adjudicated folk dance in the Urdd and National Eisteddfodau many times. In 1960 at the National Eisteddfod in Cardiff Lois Blake was admitted into the Gorsedd of the Bards, and in 1979 the Welsh Folk Dance Society presented the Eisteddfod with the Lois Blake trophy as the award for the main folk dance competition at the National Eisteddfod.

Lois Blake died in Marshfield, Gloucestershire on 19 November 1974, aged 84. The funeral service was at Marshfield church. During the service one of her favourite tunes, 'Meillionen' was played (the tune for a slow and elegant court dance). Her remains were cremated at Haycombe Crematorium, Bath on 22 November.

Author

Eiry Palfrey

Sources

Lois Blake's personal letters through her daughter Felicity Blake and St Fagan's Folk Museum

Several volumes of *Dawns: Welsh Folk Dance Society journal*, including 1974-75, 1977-78, 1987-88, 2001

Emma Lile, *A step in time: folk dancing in Wales* (National Museums and Galleries of Wales 1999)

Further reading

Dawnsio, The official website of the Welsh Folk Dance Society

Eiry Palfrey, 'Lois Blake (1890-1974)', *Cydymaith i Gerddoriaeth Cymru* (Talybont 2018), p.207

Images

Eisteddfod Genedlaethol yr Urdd, Aberdar 1961

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