

MACKWORTH, CECILY JOAN (1911 - 2006), writer, poet, journalist and traveller

Name: Cecily Joan Mackworth
Date of birth: 1911
Date of death: 2006
Spouse: Léon Donckier de Donceel
Spouse: Ebles de Chabannes La Palice
Child: Pascale Léonie Juliette Donckier de Donceel
Parent: Dorothy Conran Mackworth (née Lascelles)
Parent: Francis Julian Audley Mackworth
Gender: Female
Occupation: writer, poet, journalist and traveller
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Poetry; Travel and Exploration
Author: Angela V. John

Cecily Mackworth was born in the Mardy (Maerdy) within the parish of Llantilio Pertholey (Llandeilo Bertholau) near Abergavenny, Monmouthshire on 15 August 1911, the eldest child of Francis Julian Audley Mackworth (1876-1914) and his wife Dorothy Conran (née Lascelles, 1883-1976). Her father was from an old south Walian family of distinguished soldiers. He served in the Royal Field Artillery and died in action on the Western Front on 1 November 1914, two days after becoming a Major and less than a year after his second child was born. Cecily and her baby sister moved with their mother to Somerset. In 1922 Dorothy Mackworth married the equine artist Charles Edward Gatehouse. The family settled in Sidmouth, Devon.

After a succession of governesses, Cecily Mackworth boarded for two years at Sherborne School for Girls. She briefly attended a domestic science college (her mother's idea) before gladly taking up her aunt's suggestion to study journalism at the London School of Economics. This aunt was **Margaret Haig Thomas**, Lady Rhondda whose former husband was Sir Humphrey Mackworth, younger brother of Mackworth's father: he had been best man at her parents' wedding.

Mackworth completed a two-year diploma in academic journalism in 1931. Lady Rhondda owned and edited *Time and Tide*, providing her niece with her first employment as a journalist, writing reviews for her prestigious weekly. The *London Mercury* published some of her early poems.

Mackworth met the Hungarian student Nicholas Kaldor (later the economist Lord Kaldor) at the LSE. Funded by Lady Rhondda, she travelled to Hungary in 1931. She worked as a companion to the daughter of a wealthy family. After returning home briefly - this free spirit rarely saw eye to eye with her mother - she travelled to Berlin. She watched the burning of the German Reichstag in 1933. Working for a Jewish family, she witnessed escalating tensions.

She met Leon Donckier de Donceel, a Belgian lawyer, in a Swiss sanatorium. They married in 1935, and their daughter Pascale Léonie Juliette was born the following year. Mackworth's husband died of TB at the end of 1938, two months after another family tragedy. Hours before Mackworth's younger sister Helen was due to marry William McClintock, an army officer from Donegal, his mother, who had been depressed since her son's riding accident had left him paralysed, shot him dead then took her own life. On discovering this, Helen also took her own life. She was buried in her wedding gown.

Having lost her father, husband and only sibling whilst still in her twenties, Mackworth reinvented herself in Paris. She spent the late 1930s relishing the heady atmosphere of bohemian Paris, joining an international community of writers and artists. Henry Miller published her first poetry collection (*Eleven Poems*) in 1938 and she frequented his Villa Seurat studio. Lawrence Durrell was part of this circle and Mackworth later wrote an influential essay on The Alexandria Quartet.

When war began she worked with the art dealer René Gimpel for a library despatching books to soldiers. She joined the Red Cross, doing shifts at the Gare d'Austerlitz where about 5,000 Belgian refugees arrived daily. When Paris fell in June 1940, still wearing her Red Cross uniform, she fled to Rennes with friends in a battered car. Her papers were destroyed in its bombed station and with 'Refugees beside me, behind me, before me... like a column of drugged ants', she began walking to Chartres. Eventually after much grim trudging south on foot and journeys by train, she reached Portugal then crossed to England in mid-August. The following year her book *I Came Out Of France* graphically depicted these harrowing experiences. T.S. Eliot and many others praised it.

Mackworth spent the rest of the war in London. She was a secretary at the Free French Headquarters and claimed in old age that MI5 had recruited her. She lectured for the Alliance Française and also for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, travelling weekly to south Wales, addressing groups of workers including miners and women making munitions and parachutes.

She worked hard and played hard. Cyril Connolly published her poetry in *Horizon*. She wrote book reviews and features for the press, sometimes under the pseudonym 'Rhiannon'. In 1942 her book *Czechoslovakia Fights Back* told of the country's Nazi occupation. The following year she and Dr Jan Stransky published *Czechoslovakia* with a preface by the former Czech ambassador, Jan Masaryk. She also did radio broadcasts and research for the Labour Party. She socialised with literary figures such as **Dylan Thomas**, Nancy Cunard, Inez Holden and Stevie Smith.

Mackworth returned to Paris when war ended, living in St-Germain-des-Prés amongst Surrealists, Existentialists and Communists. She wrote for the new monthly literary review *Paru* and published two books in 1947. One was a study of the poetry of François Villon, and the other was *A Mirror of French Poetry 1840-1940*, an anthology accompanied by translations into English by British poets. **Vernon Watkins** translated five poems and Mackworth included some of her own translations. She also translated Renée Massip's French novel *La Régente* into English as *The Schoolmistress* (1957).

Attracted by the lives of French literary figures, in 1961 she published a biography of Guillaume Apollinaire, the French lyrical poet, art critic and champion of Cubism. It divided opinion amongst art critics but was seen as a significant study by literary reviewers such as Anthony Powell. Widely praised was *English Interludes* (1974), focusing on four Anglophile French poets who stayed in Britain (mostly in England, especially London) between 1862-1914. It explored shifting Anglo-French relations through the experiences of Mallarmé - about whom Mackworth was something of an expert - Verlaine, Valéry and the lesser-known Larbaud. He was also a novelist and his travels encompassed south-east Wales. The Guardian called it a 'clever little book'.

Mackworth was an intrepid and compulsive traveller. She was the Middle East correspondent for *Paris Presse* and *L'Aube*. Early in 1947 *L'Aube* commissioned her to spend a month observing life in Palestine. She travelled third class to Haifa on a boat full of Jewish immigrants then toured the country. A year later she returned, reporting in an overwhelmingly masculine environment and leaving Palestine just a few days before the creation of the State of Israel. *The Mouth of the Sword* (1949) recounts her travels there and in Syria, the Lebanon and Transjordan (where she interviewed King Abdullah).

The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt, Mackworth's favourite publication, appeared in 1951. The author's zest for adventure attracted her to this extraordinary tale of the daughter of a Russian Nihilist. After a tragic childhood in Switzerland Eberhardt fled to Algeria aged twenty and converted to Islam. She became a published writer and a mystic. A cross-dresser, she lived the life of a nomad and was drowned aged just 27 during a flash flood in the Sahara. Eberhardt provided Mackworth with a perfect excuse to travel in her footsteps.

For her study of 'Lucy R' from Freud's *Five Studies in Hysteria*, Mackworth visited Vienna. She found, however, that records of this Scottish governess no longer existed. So her book became largely an imagining of Lucy's story. *Lucy's Nose* (1992) also provided an opportunity for the writer to analyse her own younger self and ponder the borderline between biography and fiction.

Three years later came *Dreams and Poems*, a limited edition booklet produced in Paris. It brought together Mackworth's published poems, interspersed with extracts from a record of her dreams reaching back more than half a century. She saw dreams as an expression of the same creative imagination as painting, music or poetry.

As 'Our Woman in Paris', Mackworth regularly reviewed for the *Manchester Guardian* and became the Paris correspondent for *Twentieth Century*, also writing for a French daily. Such pressure culminated in a breakdown in 1956. About to return to live in the UK, she met her second husband, a French aristocrat: the Marquis de Chabannes La Palice. They married that year, spending summers in their Normandy château and winters in Paris. Mackworth became a French citizen.

Although widowed in 1980, this elegant, worldly writer lived on in Paris for another 30 years. She published *Ends of the World* (1987), an episodic yet vivid account of some of the most colourful years of her life, combining tales of relentless action with a characteristic self-reflection. She was an intellectual respected on both sides of the Channel who also possessed a journalistic inquisitiveness and fascination with people and places.

Interviewed in the 1970s as an exile choosing to live in France, Mackworth explained that any nostalgia she felt was for the Wales of her childhood. The socialist writer **Raymond Williams** had been born in the same border country just ten years after Mackworth. Although from very different backgrounds, their fiction was influenced by their native landscape. Mackworth's novel *Spring's Green Shadow* (1952, translated into French in 1956) is set in the shadow of the Skirrid Fawr as well as in Paris. Written in the first person, it reflects her bifurcated life and loyalties. The sections on Wales especially impressed John Betjeman.

Cecily Mackworth died in Paris on 22 July 2006, a few weeks before her 95th birthday. She was buried with her husband in Normandy. At the age of 93, she had begun an autobiography. She entitled her typescript *Out of the Black Mountains*.

Authors

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Revised by the editorial team, 2024

Sources

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Cecily Mackworth](#)

Additional Links

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