

Introduction

*He who bends to himself a Joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.*

William Blake

The difficulty of describing Katharine Briggs to those who never came into contact with her or her work is that she fits into no obvious category. In an age of increasing specialisation she was not a specialist, although she became an undoubted authority in one particular field, in which she has no serious competitors. She received a doctorate from Oxford for her books on fairy lore and magic in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, and lectured widely in England and America, but she never fully belonged to the academic world. She made a special study of the English Civil War, and wrote historical novels set in this period, together with two books for children which are likely to endure, *Hobberdy Dick* and *Kate Crackernuts*, but she was never recognised as a successful novelist and published no further work in children's fiction. She completed the enormous *Dictionary of British Folktales*, filling a serious gap and leaving something on which future students could build, but she was not a professional worker in the field of oral literature, and relied largely on literary sources. She devoted herself for years to dramatic work, acting, writing and producing plays, and organising a small travelling theatre, but was never a professional actress or serious dramatist. She proved an inspired teacher of Guides and Brownies, and was once sent to Newfoundland to win converts to the movement, but was never really accepted into the upper hierarchy of the organisation. When she joined the WAAF, her ability to provide entertainment won her many friends in what was at first an alien world, while she gained respect for her work as a medical orderly, but she never obtained a commission.

Yet she was far more than a gifted amateur with varied interests, who could afford to indulge in many activities because she was under no necessity to earn her own living. Her different interests and skills came together creatively in a manner all too rare in our time, rather

in the tradition of the seventeenth century, that period in which she took such delight. Her energy and enjoyment in what she did brought inspiration into the discussions in which she took part. Katharine loved talking all her life, but never stayed at a superficial level; she constantly introduced a new element of perceptive enthusiasm, tempered by robust common sense and a puckish sense of humour. Carmen Blacker once referred to her 'quality of wisdom which would put you on the right touch, or light up with a kind of flashing dazzle a hitherto humdrum discussion.' Moreover Katharine's interests in different fields crystallised, as it were, in her outstanding gift, that of story-telling.

This is an art which belongs largely to a vanished world, although there are signs that it may be coming back into our lives, helped by an increasing preference among the young for hearing and watching rather than reading printed books. The value now put on story-telling sessions is at least partly due to the contribution of Katharine Briggs in keeping the art alive and making such rich material available. She excelled in the telling of tales, continually adding to her repertoire from ballads, folktales and robust fairy tales, until like some famous story-tellers of the past she had a vast treasury of tales stored in her memory to be recalled at will. She fought hard to save the fairy tale from the degradation it had suffered in children's books, transformed into a sugary, sentimental panacea instead of the disturbing tradition of a strange hidden race whose values differ from those of mankind. *The Penguin Dictionary of Fairies* gives some idea of the extent of her work in this field, bringing back much forgotten and neglected tradition. She made this available not only for imaginative children — and the effects of this are incalculable — but also for writers and thinkers to explore. Katharine believed that it was a good thing for the young to manufacture their own amusements, and also that they should be brought in touch from an early age with the traditions of the countryside and the homely wisdom of the folktale, part of the roots from which they sprang.

Her collection of tales and studies in fairy tradition will ensure that her name is remembered. She made another contribution, however, within her own wide circle by her rare personality and the extent of her influence. She made many friends, and in hospitality she was unrivalled, with a stock of vivid memories as well as stories to enrich her later years. She was an exquisite figure in her old age, elegant and gracious, with a low soft voice, and a gentle firmness

which disarmed opposition. Unfailingly courteous, she could also be wholly unconventional, and she detested above all things insincerity and pretension. It is surprising that with all her warm and eager response to many people, men and women, Katharine never married. This may have been due to her great love and admiration for her father, the painter Ernest Briggs, who died when she was fourteen, and to the closeness of the tie with her sisters, particularly her younger sister Elspeth, whose gifts and interests were akin to her own. For years Katharine saw herself as the man of the family, planning for her mother and sisters, and throwing much energy into organising their lives in the house her father had built in Perthshire, set like an enchanted castle in woods beside the River Tay. In this isolated spot, the girls were cut off from others of their own age, and for years created their own imaginative world of art, literature and drama, gradually gathering a group of women friends around them and organising a travelling theatre. In their energetic and creative pursuits, the three sisters merit a place in the tradition of English eccentrics, and it is all the more astonishing that in later life Katharine was so fully at home in a wider, cosmopolitan world. Fame came to her late, and she enjoyed it greatly. In her journeys to the States, she charmed many audiences with her story-telling and personality, and made many new friends, until her visits were almost like royal progresses.

The life of Katharine Briggs is that of a most unusual person, whose gifts and way of life were unconventional ones, and whose influence ranged surprisingly far. Those who came into contact with her have been anxious to see an account of her life and development as a whole. Her activities were so varied that she came into touch with those from many different backgrounds, and even friends who knew her well were often ignorant of other facets of her life. This book is an attempt to fill the gap, and present a record of the background against which Katharine grew up, and her growth as a personality and writer. There may be something here of relevance for our perplexed and troubled times. Katharine refused to make a career for herself in the accepted way, or to live in accordance with the fashions of her time and class. She found her own way to enrich her life and the lives of others, to achieve good and lasting relationships, and to accept life as it came. To meet her was to encounter a serene and balanced mind, and it might be said of her in Blake's words that she was one of those who lived 'in Eternity's sunrise'.