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DEATH OF HENRIETTA GROUNDWATER

By Ernest Marwick

She wrote a book at eighty-five

Henrietta Groundwater, who died in Kirkwall last week in her ninety-second year, became known to Orkney readers four years ago through a remarkable little book which she began to write when she was already eight-five.

In "Memories of an Orkney Family" she gathered together family reminiscences which extended over a century and a half, and presented in clear unsentimental language a picture of Orkney life as it was in days when physical and economic conditions often called for courage and resource.

Her book, which was published by The Kirkwall Press, attracted far more readers than had been anticipated and was quickly sold out. It was Miss Groundwater's most ardent wish that another impression should be prepared, and she was still discussing plans for this a day or two before her death, although by then she was very weak and spoke with difficulty. It is sad that she should not have lived to see her book once more in print, but she was satisfied to know that all arrangements had been completed and that later in the summer copies of it will be in our bookshops.

Published 4 years ago

The success of "Memories" when first published in 1967 gave her intense satisfaction. The quality of its prose was commented on. To most readers it was a surprise and delight that someone who had come to authorship so late in life should express herself so well. The authoress herself smiled at such comments; it was a well-kept secret that for over sixty years she had been putting her thoughts on to paper, and as frequently destroying the result, for she was her own sternest critic.

When she had poems or letters printed in our local newspapers, as she frequently had, they were almost always signed with pseudonyms.

No one knew that the verses of 'Islander' or 'Thorald' were the work of the busy, matter-of-fact little lady who worked so hard at her dressmaking in Junction Road. This to her was part of the fun, for she had a strong sense of humour. As far back as 1904 she had a set of verses, "Ambition and I" published in Ebenezeriana, the manuscript magazine of the Ebenezer Literary and Debating Society, of Leith. Poems and stories were written for her Sunday School classes, but the children did not know that the author was their teacher.

Remarkable memory

An unusually powerful and accurate memory was one of Miss Groundwater's many notable endowments. She could recall the past in intimate detail. Yet with all her respect for tradition she lived firmly in the present. The development plan for Kirkwall or decimal currency were typical subjects which she would discuss with knowledge, and about which she held firm opinions.

Without any question the central thing in her life was her religious faith. It sweetened a personality which was by nature sturdy, even austere. Her Christian convictions she held to unswervingly. Her love of truth and her absolute integrity were apparent to everyone who knew her. But, although she practised strong self-discipline, she had a great tolerance for human frailty and a generous appreciation of the quirks and eccentricities of her fellow beings. She loved to hear or tell a good story, particularly if it highlighted the individuality and drollery of the Orkney character.

She gave a lifetime of devoted service to the former Paterson congregation. For a long period she was leading alto in the choir. Her memories of the church were both grave and gay. She could give outlines of sermons heard many decades ago, or would chuckle delightedly at her grandmother's story of the stir that was caused when Cattie Maggie let a piglet she was nursing in her plaid escape down the aisle during a service.

While she could look at life as a whole with faith and optimism, she was unrelenting in her opposition to the drink trade, being convinced that it was responsible for a great deal of human misery. As a local officer of the International Order of Good Templars she gave good service to the Viking Lodge, located in Kirkwall, offering much positive help to people with alcoholic problems. She was also an active member of the British Women's Temperance Association.

Her candid, cheerful, completely sincere personality shines through every page of her book, so that by her own work she will be gratefully remembered in Orkney.