

BERYL BRISCOE—A PERSONAL MEMOIR

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Beryl Briscoe was a woman of parts—many parts. I have realized this more vividly since her passing, as many friends have expressed surprise at something they have just learned about her. It's unfortunate that they knew so little about her, because she had a remarkably active and interesting life and personality.

To most of her Academy and General Church colleagues Beryl was the quintessentially perfect secretary—Dr. Alfred Acton's "right arm," always there, but always self-effacing. Well, so she was, because of her modest disposition and her admiration and love for her "revered Uncle"—Dr. Acton was her mother's brother.

Beryl's preparation for this use went far back. Her primary education, as we have heard, was conducted by her mother, whose teaching of her six daughters (not counting Muriel, who died at four) was remarkable. Beside the basic skills, they all received and kept an abiding love for the church and its teachings. After this came courses, some by correspondence, some by classroom participation, that went on from the early years in England to the American thirties. There were German (interrupted by the first World War), French (which she loved all her life), English at Oxford, business (shorthand—Pitman of course, Mr. Pitman was New Church—and typing), and later Academy college courses in religion, philosophy and languages, including Greek with Mr. Leonard Gyllenhaal Sr. Then Italian in Philadelphia, so she could translate Dr. Acton's letters to and from New Church members in Italy. There were extensive courses in editorial skills—starting with proof-reading—which she would indeed need in her work. Every course ended with a diploma or praise for her achievement or diligence, as did many of the temporary jobs she held before coming to Bryn Athyn and during the year (1929-30) when Dr. Acton was researching in Sweden. That was the year when, in June, Beryl was the proud recording secretary for the London World Assembly. She claimed she was selected for the job because she was cheaper than the other applicants, but she loved doing it, and was highly praised for her accuracy.

Beryl's coming to America was to help her Uncle with the *Introduction to the Word Explained*. Every one of his books after that was "seen

through the press" by Beryl, as attested so often by Dr. Acton. She typed the copy, corrected it, dealt with the printer (often the Lancaster Press in Lancaster, Pa.), proofread it—the works. But that was by no means all. For many of his later years Dr. Acton was Dean of the Theological School, and Beryl was involved with that as well as corollary duties like keeping the Consistory minutes—highly confidential and very exciting—and teaching Hebrew in the Elementary School for several years, unpaid, of course. She was apparently considered qualified because she had worked very hard on Dr. Acton's text for elementary teaching of Hebrew, *An Introduction to the Study of the Hebrew Word*.

Also, Dr. Acton was intimately associated with the Swedenborg Scientific Association. He was president for some time, and he edited *The New Philosophy* for many years, often publishing his own articles and translations—and guess who got those out? Somewhere in there, Beryl took on an extra job, serving as treasurer of the Swedenborg Scientific Association. She loved the privilege of being the only woman who attended their executive committee meetings. This lasted into the fifties. After Dr. Acton died, Beryl spent several years on his papers, preserving his splendid lectures on the life of Swedenborg, among others. Then she set up the Swedenborgiana Collection, as its first Curator. After five years or so, she retired—not what I would consider retirement, exactly. She kept right on working, but now retrieving valuable but previously postponed projects, like translating Rev. J.P. Stuart's journal of his mid-19th Century missionary trips, which he had kept in shorthand—Pitman, of course.

But enough of this. We need to look at the rest of Beryl, and there was indeed more. She manifested a lively interest in art early in life, not creating it, but appreciating it keenly. One of her happiest memories was an "art tour" in the thirties with Fingal Rosenquist, who had won a Cresson Fellowship at the Pennsylvania Academy of Art. They went to Paris, to Spain (where they stayed with Hélène Iungerich at a beautiful old villa, of which their main memory was of the fleas who also lived there), and to Italy—Rome, Milan, Florence, museums, galleries, churches. These were magnets for her always, as shown by the many copies of art works, large prints down to postcards, that she collected all her life. She loved beautiful things, and showed her lovely taste in her dress and her home, always individual and feminine and

right for her. Everything was inexpensive as a rule, because there was never extra cash and she was frugal by nature, as well as by necessity, but successful nevertheless. She did love to do handwork, crocheting beautiful afghans which are still warming her friends.

Beryl also loved travel, starting with her daring decision in 1918 to leave her job in London with Scotland Yard for one in the south of France with Michelin—to improve her French? She left that to come to Bryn Athyn. For many years her travels were confined to sailing for visits with her family in Enfield (London). She did fit in a couple of weeks in Paris, in those years, beside her "art tour." Later, she was able to travel much more widely—all over England, a number of trips to the Continent, and across much of this country and Canada—always with keen interest in everything she saw and learned.

Then there was music. She loved concerts, and enjoyed many seasons of the Philadelphia Orchestra and other organizations such as the Society of Ancient Instruments and the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra, but also she tried valiantly to learn to play the piano. She never reached the level demanded by her own high standards, but she had many happy hours with it—both happily practicing and with friends who enjoyed playing duets with her, from Ruth (Mrs. Charley) Pendleton, in the thirties and forties, to Jane Synnestvedt Cronlund in the fifties and sixties, to Marion Cranch Kendig in the seventies and eighties. Quite a span.

This brings us to her other interests. Many acquaintances who thought they knew Beryl because they had worked near her for years may have missed a number of facets of her thought and personality. Her coworkers would have expected her to be a constant reader, since she was so obviously intellectual, but they might have been surprised at her keen interest in world affairs and in politics. Particularly surprising, perhaps, her humor and love of fun, masked as it was by her earnest and dutiful demeanor. Most important to all her close friends was her affectionate and generous nature, not necessarily with material gifts when funds were short, but giving of herself in many ways. She was quiet and apparently shy, but she had many devoted friends. Unfortunately, as often happens to those who stay with us to advanced age, she outlived most of them, and her last years, when she couldn't get around as before, were rather lonely. It was a great

blessing that her mind and her senses stayed sharp to the last, her interests many and varied.

A final word must be said about her spirit. Beryl was fiercely independent, and she kept her British stubbornness despite being proudly American. She loved the Acton family dearly and was deeply respectful of her Uncle, but she didn't always follow their lead. Dr. Acton loathed cats—Beryl delighted in a series of beautiful pets and had many years of joy with them. The Acton family, like most of Bryn Athyn, was staunchly Republican—Beryl, to all appearances the quiet conformist, was an enthusiastic and unwavering Democrat. To their credit, they didn't try to change her mind; they believed in freedom, too. Not that they would have been likely to succeed. She was tough, tiny and frail as she was.

Summing up, it's too bad that more people didn't appreciate Beryl in her entirety. Modesty, like diffidence, may be praiseworthy, but some appropriate horn-blowing might have allowed more people the pleasure of knowing her better, an advantage for them.