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Review of 'Elizabeth Bowen'

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Elizabeth Bowen: Death of the Heart

Prod: Seán Ó Mórdha

Araby Productions for BBC Television, in association with RTÉ.

(RTÉ 1, 2 Feb.)

Running Time: 50mins. approx.

Because of its inherent claims to instrumental factuality (etymologically, ‘document’ is related to the words ‘proof’ and ‘teach’), the documentary genre, in contrast with ‘creative’ filming, can often find itself having to resolve a tension between the imperatives of the subject and the available aesthetic possibilities of the medium. To play safe, to leave out the tricks, can be tempting. Even if a particular documentary’s artistic quality is below par, it can still satisfy the curious viewer merely by bombarding him with the information collected from good research. On the other, shakier hand, sheer inventive technique can compensate for dearth of documented material by entertaining the viewer visually. The classic happy medium of course, comes when the newsreel aspect is abetted rather than displaced by the skills of those intent on telling the news.

One of the best Irish examples of that happy medium is a fairly lengthy documentary called ‘Samuel Beckett: Silence to Silence’, made in 1984 by Seán Ó Mórdha. Along with providing considerable information on the then extant writer, Ó Mórdha included extensive atmospheric shots which, through a kind of pathetic fallacy, reflected the general mood of Beckett’s work (a closing crepuscular scene was particularly inspired). Ó Mórdha continues his interest in Irish writers with ‘Elizabeth Bowen: Death of the Heart’, and, though not quite as compelling as ‘Samuel Beckett’, this new piece also successfully combines visual entertainment with what is, for many, entirely new information on a writer somewhat neglected in Ireland. Given that a film version of one of Bowen’s most famous novels, ‘The Last September’ (1929), adapted by John Banville and directed by Deborah Warner, was premièred on the closing night of the Dublin Film Festival and will go on general release in the Autumn, this new encouragement of interest is timely.

A novelist and short-story writer, Elizabeth Bowen was a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class who, though she achieved fame mainly in English literary circles, lived considerable periods of her life in Dublin and Co. Cork. She died of lung cancer in 1973, and this documentary was made to coincide with the centenary of her birth. The opening shot is unexpected, and is as moody as its equivalent in ‘Beckett’: accompanied by sonorous, almost atonal music, the camera is taken on a quick night-drive around Regent’s Park in London, thus beginning the Bowen story in the middle. Taking her residency in London, at which point she might be said to have been socially and artistically at the apex of her life, as the focus, the film ranges backwards, covering her birth and first years in Ireland, and forwards, covering her eventual leaving of Ireland for good and her travels in the United States and England.

Two sets of interviewees are employed to cast light on what she herself would have called ‘the Bowen terrain’. Various surviving relatives provide some personal anecdotes, as do friends such as John Bayley, Lady Natasha Spender, and the splendidly-named Lord Tweedsmuir who insists that Bowen remained ‘absolutely and immovably an Anglo-Irish Lady of breeding’. The sense of the mannered upbringing Bowen had is perhaps best achieved by a patrician line from Veronica Hall-Dare: ‘... she was always very untidy when she was growing up ... her hair falling down, her blouse hanging out of her skirt and that sort of thing’. An album Bowen kept for three decades was made available to the documentary team by these relatives, and some scans are provided of rare photographs, almost all of which include Bowen in characteristic pose, bearded and with a cigarette as prop.

Three academics provide some weightier, literary contextualisation. Victoria Glendenning and Hermione Lee, both of whom have written books on Bowen, argue for her significant place in the fiction tradition, reject the view of her as just a Jane Austen of the thirties, and claim that she is ‘much more dangerous’ than usually allowed. Expectedly, Roy Foster assumes the task of revealing

Bowen's 'Irishness', and his comments on the importance of 'The Last September' are complemented by some archive footage of the Anglo-Irish War which acts as the backdrop to that novel. One of the best moments on this aspect of Bowen is when excerpts are included from a 1987 interview with Molly O'Brien, erstwhile housekeeper at Bowen's ancestral home in Cork, who is nostalgic about the fact that life at the Bowen Big House is 'a life that is very hard to meet in the present day'. The homelessness of that nostalgia is accentuated by the numerous shots included of dilapidated and ruined Ascendancy houses. (Bowen's own mansion near Doneraile was bought by a local farmer and demolished in 1959.) There are also some intriguing comments from Julia O'Faoláin who reads, on-screen, a love letter written by Bowen to her father, Seán O'Faoláin. These interview segments are particularly well edited, and all information is offered to the viewer in a neat and concise fashion.

The film employs voiceover quotations from a wide range of Bowen's work, both creative and autobiographical, and the care taken to ensure that sources are indicated to viewers is to be commended. Some recordings of her own voice, with its slight stammer and almost stereotypical aristocratic timbre, are preserved and excerpts from one of her broadcasts are included at the beginning and end. In terms of general readership, Bowen is perhaps most famous for her portrayal of London during WWII in 'The Heat of the Day' (1949), and, as illustrative background to readings from that novel, Ó Mórdha includes some dramatic amateur film of the Blitz, much of it in colour.

The only point at which the pace flags is towards the end when too much time is taken over pictures of the area of south England where Bowen settled in late life. While the tone at that point veers towards the elegiac, the feel of the piece overall is in empathy with the famed reserve of its subject. The style and self-control Bowen sought to uphold in her life and in her work is crystallized in one friend's anecdote. Receiving some coffee-takers on the terrace of her London house at one point when an air-raid broke out, she reassured them: 'I feel I should apologise for the noise'.

John Kenny.