

RUCK, AMY ROBERTA ('BERTA RUCK') (1878-1978), novelist

Name: Amy Roberta Ruck
Date of birth: 1878
Date of death: 1978
Spouse: George Oliver Onions
Child: William Oliver
Child: Arthur Oliver
Parent: Elizabeth Eleanor Ruck (née 'Arcy')
Parent: Arthur Ashley Ruck
Gender: Female
Occupation: novelist
Area of activity: Literature and Writing
Author: Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan

Berta Ruck was born on 2 August 1878 at Murree, Punjab, India, the eldest of eight children of an army officer, Arthur Ashley Ruck (1847-1939), and his wife, Elizabeth Eleanor (née D'Arcy, 1852-1928), also from an army family and of Irish and Norman-French descent. Four other daughters and three sons followed, among them the translator Richard Conyers Ruck (1887-1973). Through her father's sister Amy, Berta Ruck was related to the Darwin family, and through her mother to the Sackville-Wests.

At the age of two Berta Ruck, fluent in Hindustani and English, was sent home to her Welsh-speaking paternal grandmother, Mary Ann Ruck (née Matthews, 1822-1905), who would be a dominant influence on the young Berta. She had inherited the Esgair and Pantludw estates, overlooking the river Dyfi in Merioneth, and also had a house in Aberdyfi. Her mother, who came from Llanbryn-mair, traced her family back to the fifteenth-century poet *Dafydd Llwyd* o Fathafarn and to *John Jones* of Maes-y-garnedd, Merioneth, in the seventeenth century. In 1886, after a brief period serving with the Liverpool Volunteers, Colonel Ruck was appointed Chief Constable of Caernarfonshire and the family moved to Llwyn-y-brain, Llanrug. Berta was first educated at home but after a term at a boarding school in Germany, she was sent to St Winifred's School, Bangor. Her first love was for drawing and after a period as an au pair in Germany she moved to London where she attended art school at Lambeth before gaining a scholarship to the Slade; she moved on to Colarossi in Paris in 1904. She had already begun to contribute illustrations to magazines such as *The Idler*, supplementing her income with German-English translation work. Soon, however, she discovered a facility for fiction writing and from 1905 her short stories and serials began to appear in *Home Chat* and other periodicals.

In 1909 she married the novelist George Oliver Onions (1873-1961), whom she had first met in London in 1902; he changed his name to George Oliver in 1918, to avoid their two sons, Arthur (born 1911) and William ('Bill', born 1913), suffering ridicule. During the First World War Berta Ruck's career as a romantic novelist quickly blossomed and from then on hers would be the family's main income as she published more than ninety novels, as well as countless serials, short stories and articles. Her first novel, *His Official Fiancée* (1914), which had originally appeared as a serial in *Home Chat*, was an immediate success and was quickly followed by several novels with a wartime setting. *The Lad with Wings*, celebrating the emergence of the Royal Flying Corps, and *Khaki and Kisses* both appeared in 1915, and *The Girls at his Billet* in 1916, all under the name of 'Mrs Oliver Onions'. *Miss Million's Maid* (1916) was the first signed 'Berta Ruck'. These provided politically uncontroversial, escapist reading for a wartime audience. She had found her formula: a love story reflecting the lives of contemporary young women moving into new spheres of work and activity. Already, too, the author's strong sense of Welsh identity is apparent in her frequent choice of at least one Welsh (usually Welsh-speaking) protagonist, and Wales often provides a setting. *The Land Girl's Love-Story* (1919), for example, includes a vignette of *Hilda Vaughan* recruiting land girls and is largely set in Breconshire. Throughout her writing career Berta Ruck also continued to draw, mainly sketches of her characters accompanying plot outlines in her workbooks, but also adding illustrations or special covers when giving copies of her books as presents. She regarded writing as her profession and did it well within her chosen genre, with no false pretensions. Apart from her novels she wrote a history of her mother's family, *Ancestral Voices* (1972), and four works of autobiography. The first of these, *A Storyteller tells the Truth* (1935) is the best and most informative, for the later volumes *A Smile for the Past* (1959), *A Trickle of Welsh Blood* (1967) and *An Asset to Wales* (1970) are rather sentimental and tend to recycle the same anecdotes. Like her grandmother, she was as at home both in London literary and theatrical circles and in rural Merioneth, and in her writing Welsh farming families or passengers on a rural bus are portrayed with equal warmth as the famous.

Marriage and motherhood did not prevent Berta Ruck leading an independent life, and with her sons away at boarding school she spent long periods away from home, whether concentrating on her writing or travelling abroad while researching the background to a novel. Her concern with women's health and freedom is reflected in her habit of daily outdoor swimming and her interest in the Dress Reform movement, as well as her support of Marie Stopes, with whom she corresponded about sex education and contraception. She herself had a relationship with a young Austrian between the wars, and supported friends like Rebecca West and *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies* in their unconventional private lives.

Berta Ruck enjoyed the friendship of both sexes, but her women friends were crucial to her. They included the authors Muriel Ménie Dowie, one of the 'New Women' of the turn of the century, and the Austrian Vicki Baum, and especially *Alice Williams* ('Alys Meirion'), who came from a similar minor Merioneth gentry background, and whom she saw regularly in London at the women's Forum Club. Although she would never have called herself a nationalist, Berta Ruck was proud of her Welsh identity. She was not as fluent in Welsh as in German and French, but could understand and read it and conduct simple conversations. She eagerly followed current events in Wales, and in 1937, when the trial of *Saunders Lewis*, *Lewis Valentine* and *D. J. Williams* for arson at Penyborth was heard at the Old Bailey, she lobbied her cousin, judge *Richard Atkin*, for admission to the courtroom. She took notes and drew portraits of the defendants, sending a lively report back to her father.

Until 1939 Berta Ruck was based mainly in the London area, but at the outbreak of the Second World War she and her husband moved to Aberdyfi. During the war she became involved with voluntary work and public speaking, later moving on to occasional broadcasting with the BBC in Wales. She remained very active, continuing to swim outdoors well into her eighties, and was nearly ninety when her last novel, *Shopping for a Husband* (1967), appeared. She died at home, at Bryn Tegwel, Aberdyfi on 11 August 1978, nine days after celebrating her hundredth birthday.

Author

Dr Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan

Sources

Berta Ruck, *A Story-Teller tells the Truth* (1935)

NLW Archives: *Berta Ruck manuscripts* NLW MSS 23376-8, NLW MS 23437, NLW MS 23523, NLW MSS 23569-73, NLW MSS 23715-24, NLW MSS 23733-44, NLW MS 23782, NLW MS 23790, NLW MS 24031

National Library of Wales: *Berta Ruck Papers* 1-13

British Library, MS Add. 58498

Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Berta Ruck (1878-1978) of Aberdyfi: novelist', *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 15 (2007), 210-19

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: *Berta Ruck*

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