

# On Reuniting Poetry and Science: A Memoir of Elizabeth Sewell, 1919-2001

David Schenck and Phil Mullins

ABSTRACT Key Words: Elizabeth Sewell and Michael Polanyi

*This essay is an obituary notice for Elizabeth Sewell, a long-time friend of Michael Polanyi and a well-know poet, novelist and critic.*

Elizabeth Sewell, internationally known poet, critic, novelist, and friend of Michael Polanyi died January 12, 2001, in Greensboro NC. She was 81.

Sewell was born in India in 1919 of English parents and educated in England, taking her B.A. in Modern Languages from Cambridge University in 1942. She performed war service in the Ministry of Education in London from 1942-45, and then returned to Cambridge to complete her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, also in Modern Languages. Sewell received from her family background and classical education a familiarity with English literature, history, liturgy, and style that marked her entire life's work. She came to the United States in 1949, just after completing her graduate work. After many years of trans-Atlantic commuting, she became an American citizen in 1973.

Some readers will recall that Sewell was a participant in the 1991 Kent State Polanyi Centennial Conference where she enchanted the audience by reading a lengthy poem. She was delighted by the Kent State meeting where she renewed old friendships (some other earlier Polanyi-related conferences at Bowdoin and Dayton that she attended she reported were not so pleasant). After this 1991 gathering, she prepared and deposited in the University of Chicago Polanyi archives a 44 page memoir that comments on the ways in which Michael Polanyi's friendship contributed to her work as a poet.

Becoming acquainted with Polanyi was altogether serendipity: Sewell met Magda Polanyi in the summer of 1954 at an international conference at Alpbach in Austria, where she was running a seminar on the modern European novel. Magda and John Polanyi showed up the first day in her seminar; although Mrs. Polanyi did not take the seminar, she one day invited Sewell to join her for conversation in a local cafe. Sewell described herself to Mrs. Polanyi as a poet who had woven together mathematics, logic, physics and poetry; she was now beginning to explore the connection between poetry and natural history and was soon to depart for a year at Fordham University. By chance, Sewell reports that she made a comment that ultimately led to her coming to Manchester University on a fellowship from 1955-57 and to her friendship with Michael Polanyi:

But as I look back I have a funny sense that I uttered a key word somewhere along the line, and that word was crystallography. Magda in response uttered two key words, keys to my life though neither of us knew that at the time. She said, "You must meet my husband," and "You must apply for a Simon Fellowship at Manchester University."<sup>1</sup> (3)

Sewell applied for the Simon Fellowship after her year in New York and, with strong support from Michael Polanyi, received the award, although a poet had never previously been awarded this fellowship. She came to Manchester, a city that she grew to love, in 1955, and eventually became a frequent guest at the Polanyi household. She was formally attached to the Philosophy Department and this was an uneasy marriage that contributed to her link to the Polanyi family. In Manchester, Sewell began work on *The Orphic Voice*, a work that was dedicated to Michael Polanyi and her most popular book in North America. Clearly, Sewell found in Polanyi's interests and his writing a kindred spirit. She describes her joy in first reading *Science, Faith and Society*:

at finding an unimpeachable scientific voice so friendly, as it seemed to me, to what I was groping after in this second attempt on my part to reunite the disciplines of science and poetry as I had tried to do with my first book, *The Structure of Poetry*, originally my dissertation which had aroused so much antagonism, at college and university level, at Cambridge, that amnesiac place since poetry and science are its two great glories which it now determines to keep in total separation each from each. (8).

Sewell was in Manchester in the years just prior to the publication of *Personal Knowledge*. She is identified in the "Acknowledgments" (*PK*, xv) as one of four people who read the whole manuscript and suggested improvements. In her memoir, she describes the process of reading and responding to several chapters of the manuscript. She was particularly appreciative of "Intellectual Passions," which she found aptly described her work as a poet:

Intellectual Passion was Michael's subject-matter but also that which he embodied superbly and communicated to us, and when my own work suddenly and decisively found its own method and metaphor, that kind of passion, known to me since my first such experience at Cambridge and then resting awhile as one pursued other paths, returned with vehemence, indeed almost one might say, obsession. (13)

Sewell was a visiting writer or professor at many colleges and universities in the United States including, in addition to Fordham, Vassar, Princeton, Bennett, California State, Tugaloo, Central Washington State, Hunter, California at Irvine, Trent, Notre Dame, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Lehigh University, Converse College, and University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She received honorary degrees from many colleges and universities including Fordham University (1968) and the University of Notre Dame (1984). In addition to the Simon Fellowship at Manchester University (1955-57), Sewell also held the Howard Research Fellowship at Ohio State University (1949-50), and was an Ashley Fellow at Trent University (1979), and a Presidential Scholar at Mercer University (1982).

Sewell's major works include criticism—*The Structure of Poetry* (1951, 1963), *Paul Valéry: The Mind in the Mirror* (1952), *The Field of Nonsense* (1952), *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (1960, 1972), and *The Human Metaphor* (1964); novels—*The Dividing of Time* (1952), *The Singular Hope* (1955), *Now Bless Thyself* (1962), and *The Unlooked-For* (1995); poetry—*Poems, 1947-1961* (1962), *Signs and Cities* (1968), and *Acquist* (1984); essays—*To Be a True Poem* (1979); and a memoir—*An Idea* (1983).

In addition to these volumes, Sewell published dozens of short stories, essays, articles and poems in periodicals in the United States, Canada, England, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria and Russia. At her death, she left completed manuscripts on William Blake, and on the French reception of Lewis Carroll. Left incomplete was a translation and commentary project on Giordano Bruno and the Renaissance tradition of high magic. Her papers are on deposit with the Department of Special Collections of the Mugar Memorial Library at Boston University.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This and following direct quotations are from “Memoir of Michael Polanyi by Elizabeth Sewell”, which is in Box 46, Folder 12 of the Papers of Michael Polanyi in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Chicago Library. Quotations from the “Memoir” are noted simply in parenthesis by the typescript page number. This and succeeding quotations from and references to the Papers of Michael Polanyi are used with permission of the University of Chicago Library’s Department of Special Collections.

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**Phil Mullins** (mullins@mwsc.edu) has been the editor of *Tradition and Discovery* since 1991. He tried on more than one occasion to get Elizabeth Sewell to publish something in *TAD*.

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