

SALLY CHILVER, 1914–2014

Those of us who have worked in the Cameroon Grassfields, as well as many scholars from Cameroon, owe a huge debt to Sally Chilver, who has recently died just a month short of her 100th birthday.

Born a little inconveniently in Turkey the day before the First World War broke out, Sally Graves spent her early years following her father, Phillip Perceval Graves, between England, Greece and Turkey. He was then a foreign correspondent for *The Times*; notably he exposed the anti-Semitic tract the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a plagiarized copy of a pamphlet on quite a different topic. Through him she came into contact with a variety of key contemporary figures, including T. E. Lawrence and Tommy Hodgkin, the radical African historian. Reading history at Somerville, Oxford, she became, in her own words, ‘a fairly typical left-wing groupie of the early thirties’, temporarily converted to Marxism and supported the Jarrow hunger marches. Following graduation, she spent the winter of 1935 travelling alone by bus and sometimes on foot through the Middle East, passing through Jerusalem, via the Lebanon to Damascus, and returning to Cairo. Back in England she found herself in the august company of luminaries such as Virginia Woolf, Isaiah Berlin and Robert Graves, her paternal uncle. She married Richard Chilver, a classics scholar, in 1937.

In her mid-twenties, Sally Chilver first came into contact with the French Cameroons when she was recruited to a new section of the War Cabinet Office dealing with the strategic overview of trade with the overseas territories of France and Belgium. In 1947 she joined the Colonial Office and, in time, became temporary principal and secretary of the Colonial Science Research Council, which brought her into contact with a number of the founding ancestors of British anthropology, including E. E. Evans-Pritchard, C. Daryll Forde, Raymond Firth and Audrey Richards, as well as with their ideas. She first encountered Phyllis Kaberry, who was to become her close friend and collaborator, in 1951 when she assisted in preparing *Women of the Grassfields* for publication. Around this time she also met Ruth Landes, who introduced her to American anthropology. In 1957 Sally moved to the Institute of Colonial Studies at Oxford where she was tasked with organizing courses and seminars for members of the Colonial Service, which was then in the process of being indigenized.

Having so far in her career dealt with the needs of researchers, institutions and colonial regions, she felt her lack of direct field experience. In this light she joined Phyllis Kaberry in 1958 in the Grassfields of British Cameroons. At this time not only did all sides sense a great change in the air but there were strong feelings that the history of the past and the place of local identities therein should not be lost. Sally recounted how on their way to Nso’ in Cameroon she and Phyllis were stopped at a barricade on the Ndop Plain by a group of men who demanded they halt and write down their own local history! Sally’s own interests as an historian turned towards understanding forms of resistance and accommodation to British and German colonial administrations. She was given free access to official archives and, together with Phyllis, became closely involved in the creation of local history societies. The anthropologists, ethnographers and historians who

later followed Sally and Phyllis to the Grassfields noted with no little envy the great access afforded to them by colonial and traditional authorities alike.

Further field trips to the Grassfields with Phyllis took place in 1960, and also in 1963 to the newly independent federal Cameroon. During these two trips, they covered much of what was then known as the Bamenda Grassfields and, anticipating later developments in anthropology, decided to eschew monographs for a more regional approach. The welcome outcome was their joint publication in 1968 of *Traditional Bamenda*, a foundation work on the ethnography and history of the Bamenda Grassfields.

In the meantime, while taking up the posts of Principal of Bedford College (1964–71) and then Principal of Lady Margaret Hall (1971–79), she published widely on the ethnography and political and economic history of various Grassfields communities. Sadly, Phyllis Kaberry died in 1977. After her retirement in 1979, Sally Chilver moved into a small house in Oxford; this became an informal research centre as she picked up the reins of Grassfields studies and revitalized the academic network Phyllis had formed among students both of and from Cameroon. She worked indefatigably from dawn to dusk daily, transcribing and indexing both her own field notes and Phyllis's, the latter written in a spidery scrawl only Sally could decipher. She combined these into sets of working notes. Her output encompassed commentaries, recensions and epitomes of a broad range of published and unpublished texts on the Grassfields, including very useful translations of early German archival documents.

All these materials she dutifully distributed widely among the growing community of Grassfields researchers. For over three decades her sitting room, with its huge table, typewriter and notes piled high, was a Mecca for Cameroon students coming to the UK and for researchers, new and old, working on the Grassfields. Longevity naturally has its drawbacks. A good number of the highly successful and admired Cameroonian scholars she encouraged and fostered in person and through deep correspondence have predeceased her – notably Faay Li Wong (Joseph Lafon), Chem Langhee, William Banboyee and Bernard Fonlon, the very first Anglophone Cameroonian to gain a PhD.

In her later years, Sally Chilver collaborated in her publications with Cameroonians and others. Her last major volume, published in 2001 and written together with Ute Rösenthaller in the Berghahn series *Cameroon Studies*, was on Max Esser and the economic foundations of the German colonial state of Kamerun. In 2009 she contributed a chapter to a festschrift dedicated to her very good friend, and fellow Cameroonist, Shirley Ardener. Fittingly, this was an epitome and translation of extracts from Hermann Detzner's largely unavailable 1923 volume, written in German, on the Anglo-German Boundary Commission of 1912–13.

Her eyesight failed, but her interest in Cameroon never did. She would concentrate intently if anything about the country were read to her. When, at the age of ninety-eight and a half, an article in *History Today* by Kathryn Hadley was read, she listened keenly for the necessary 15 minutes or so, needing only one word to be repeated, and at the end said decisively: 'There's enough there to correct a whole chapter of what has been written elsewhere.'

IAN FOWLER

SALLY CHILVER'S PUBLICATIONS

As Sally Graves

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Postscript

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