

Anthony Sampson: THE SCHOLAR GYPSY. THE QUEST FOR A FAMILY SECRET. John Murray, London 1997, 229 pp.

The book under review is a biography of John Sampson, written by his grandson. John Sampson (1862-1931) is the author of the monumental *The Dialect of the Gypsies of Wales* (1926, Oxford, reprinted 1968, Oxford). It is monumental in two senses: it is the tombstone of a Romani dialect which is now, in all likelihood, extinct, and it is the most impressive grammar of any Romani dialect ever written. Someone once said about it "It is the only dictionary I know which is really good reading wherever you open it" (Charles Reilly, quoted on p.152). Linguists with no special interest in Romani find a very good grammar. The book, even the 1926 reprint, is a collector's item but very hard to find.

The Welsh Romani book is a remarkable achievement for a man who had to quit school when he was fourteen, when he became an apprentice lithographer and engraver. The book covers the historical phonology of the development of Indic to Romani and a detailed and illustrative grammar (230 pages), and a very complete dictionary of 410 pages, with many example sentences. Sampson said about these: "Every Romanī sentence given in the Grammar or Vocabulary is a spontaneous utterance of some Welsh Gypsy ..." (p. x). An unpublished English-to-Romani index covers an estimated 20.000 English for which a meaning is given in Romani. In addition there is a classified index of etymons of all the roots. Of the classical trinity 'grammar, texts, vocabulary', only connected texts are lacking in the book, but these have been published in the third series of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* in the beginning of this century.

According to his biographer it took him a few decades to complete the work, combining it with his later job as a librarian at the University of Liverpool. For this work he was assisted by a number of young women, who may not have received the credit they deserved according to some (p.152). John Sampson thanked them as follows:

"Three other members [of the Gypsy Lore Society], Miss. D.E. Yates, Miss. L.E. Lyster, and the late Miss. A. Marston, have greatly lightened my task by generous assistance in the collation and arrangement of the material." (p. xiii)

Strangely enough, another young woman who helped Sampson called Gladys Imlach (Romani name Damaris) was not acknowledged at all – which becomes understandable after reading this biography.

John Sampson's ashes were spread over his beloved hills of Wales after his death in 1931, in a ceremony accompanied by a large contingent of Kalo's (as the Welsh Gypsies call themselves) who respected the man they called *Rai* very much. John Sampson is certainly one of the greatest Romanists who ever lived. Even though in hindsight we may find

some mistakes in his work (such as his list of 20 Rumanian etymons on p.417, none of which are actually likely to be Rumanianisms), it set a standard which has never been equalled after.

Anthony Sampson is not a linguist. The book deals with his grandfather's life, who is called *The Rai* throughout the book. The story of John Sampson's life is captivating. Since Anthony Sampson's father never spoke about his father, he hardly knew his grandfather. His grandfather died when he was five years old. Much of it is based on the letters preserved in different archives. He and his friends must have left an incredible amount of correspondence and poetry, both in Romani and English. The Rai is portrayed in the book as a nonconformist, somewhat mysterious man, both admired and feared, hated and respected, bitter and merry, sometimes drinking heavily. He led several double lives: his academic life as a librarian (for which he received an honorary doctor's degree) as well as (literally) the time of his life he spent with the Kalo's in Wales. Further he had his official family (three children), his second family (one child) and his extramarital escapades (three women? Kale and non-Kale? one child with a Romani woman?). He seems to have loved his extramural family more than his legal family, and the latter were hardly remunerated in his testament – on the other hand, he left very little.

The book contains many facts interesting for linguists. Not only about the genesis of Sampson's book but also his other works (such as a book of poems in Romani, plus an anthology of writings about Gypsies (*Wind on the Heath*, 1930), plus a posthumous anthology *In lighter moments*, edited by one of his disciples Dora Yates. Some fragments of the letters in Romani, or in a kind of Angloromani, are printed in the book, but usually in translation (except for some of the "bawdy" ones). There must be much more material on Romani and Shelta among his manuscripts.

There are many interesting facts about other people involved in Romani studies: Bernard Gilliat-Smith was disappointed that his work was not fully acknowledged in Sampson's grammar, and Sampson had no respect whatsoever for Frederick Ackerley (who wrote articles about Basque Romani and Catalan Romani). George Borrow was one of Sampson's inspirations. Kuno Meyer, the Keltologist, lost all his friends in Liverpool, including Sampson, when he defended German aggression towards the English, arguing that the English were also the enemies of the Irish. Derek Tipler, the last linguist to work on Welsh Romani for a day or two in the 1950s and a former RAF corporal, was very unpredictable and unreliable one time he was found in a prison for car theft. Dora Yates, one of the girls called 'disciples' in the book, idolized Sampson, and her life seems to have been thoroughly influenced by the Rai.

The question arises whether Welsh Romani is still a living language. The rumours among linguists are contradictory. A dialect with perhaps a dozen or so speakers early this

century is most likely extinct by now. But Tipler met speakers in their twenties 50 years ago, and they may still be alive. Manfri Wood, the son of Sampson's main teacher Matthew "the mole" Wood, is mentioned as a non-speaker at p.179, but that is incorrect: there are commercial tapes available with him as one of the speakers of Welsh Romani. Some Welsh Kalo claim that it is still used in the home by a few families, but these families themselves deny such knowledge. But perhaps it is not so important whether it is still spoken. If the Kalo's had wanted to transmit the language, they could have done so, and their variety is undoubtedly the best documented of all Romani dialects. There are many undocumented Romani dialects, some rather deviant, about which nothing at all is known to linguists. And some of these communities need work on the language. These would have a much higher research priority than the language documented so magnificantly by the Rai.

Even though John Sampson is quoted (p.150) in a bitter remark that one of his reviewers wrote Gypsies with a small 'g', no capital is used for Gypsies throughout the book. It is surely a pity that the Rai's grandson or his publisher decided to use a small 'g', but this is a minor note of criticism about this book which I read with increasing fascination.

Literature

- Sampson, J. 1926 [1968] *The Dialect of the Gypsies of Wales. Being the older form of British Romani preserved in the speech of the clan of Abram Wood*, Oxford.

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