

Comparing Obituaries: Maggie Smith & Patricia Bredin

The BBC's obituaries for Patricia Bredin, the UK's first Eurovision representative, and Dame Maggie Smith, an acclaimed actress, highlight the art of capturing both the personal and professional achievements of notable figures. Both women were beloved by fans and influential in British culture.

Patricia Bredin's obituary was newsworthy due to her status as a trailblazer in British music history. At just 22, she represented the UK at Eurovision in 1957, marking the country's debut in the competition. Her later work in acting and philanthropy added depth to her public life.

In contrast, Dame Maggie Smith's obituary chronicles her six-decade career, including iconic roles in "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie", "Harry Potter", and "Downton Abbey". Smith's longevity and versatility in film, theater, and television made her a global cultural icon, ensuring her obituary would attract a wide readership.

Both obituaries adhere to traditional formats, beginning with the announcement of death and followed by biographical highlights.

Bredin's piece focuses on her Eurovision moment and subsequent endeavors, reflecting the fame and opportunities that came after becoming a Eurovision star. Smith's obituary, by contrast, is expansive, detailing her early life and career milestones, such as her Academy Awards.

Smith's obituary excels in its vivid storytelling and breadth, capturing her career's evolution and personality. However, it could have benefitted from multimedia elements, such as video clips from her stage performances or interviews. Bredin's obituary, though concise and informative, feels less engaging due to its brevity and lack of personal anecdotes or direct quotes.

While Bredin's obituary is brief, Smith's dives into anecdotes, such as her humorous rivalry with Richard Burton and her post-illness return to acting. This richer storytelling underscores the depth of Smith's impact on the arts.

Neither obituary uses multimedia extensively. With the given subjects, this may have been a missed opportunity as there is undoubtedly a vast collection of clips, videos, photos, performances and more about these two celebrities.

If I were writing these obituaries, I would balance professional achievements with personal insights to humanize both figures and speak more on their families and personal lives. While the obituaries did include some photos of both figures, I would have liked to see more. Including links to performance clips from both women.

The obituaries of Patricia Bredin and Dame Maggie Smith reflect the varying depths of their public legacies. While both succeed in honoring their subjects, Smith's extensive career and cultural significance allow for a more detailed and compelling narrative.

Links:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crggzy42v30o>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-humber-66509586>

New York Times shining a light on overlooked obituaries

The New York Times editors likely saw the undertaking of a comprehensive obituary project as crucial for several reasons. One of the central motivations was to highlight the often overlooked and forgotten contributions of influential figures like Ida B. Wells, who shaped history through their courage and conviction.

The NY Times obituary project reflects the importance of documenting legacies that have shaped society, especially for marginalized individuals whose stories have been left untold or misrepresented. Wells' powerful journalism and advocacy for anti-lynching, though monumental, were eclipsed by the progress and recognition granted to other figures in the civil rights movement.

The editors likely recognized the need to reframe her legacy within the context of modern-day conversations about racial injustice and the ongoing fight for equality. Wells' impactful, often controversial journalism has shaped the way we view race relations, gender, and journalistic integrity today. For a newspaper like The New York Times to revisit her contributions so long after her death underscores the value in reflecting on historical figures who were ahead of their time.

There is significant value in writing obituaries many decades after an individual's death, particularly for those whose work or impact was suppressed or minimized during their lifetime. Ida B. Wells is a prime example.

Her anti-lynching journalism and activism were overshadowed by male-dominated movements in the early 20th century, and she was often excluded from mainstream historical narratives.

Revisiting and amplifying her life's work through an obituary more than 90 years after her death

allows contemporary readers to understand her as not only a key figure in early civil rights activism but also a revolutionary force in journalism.

Writing obituaries long after the fact provides an opportunity to contextualize a person's contributions in a new light, especially as societal values evolve and historical perspectives shift.

In the NY Times obituary project, Ida B. Wells' stood out to me because of the unique blend of personal, historical, and journalistic storytelling. Wells' life spanned a tumultuous period in American history, yet her tenacity in the face of enormous challenges has influenced generations of journalists and activists.

Her story is compelling not just because of her historical significance, but also because of the way her personal experiences shaped her professional choices. Her courage, both in her writing and in her activism, spoke to the larger issue of structural racism in America. Wells' story stood out because her work is a timeless reminder of the impact of truth-telling, even when it is unpopular or dangerous.

I had heard the name Ida B. Wells prior to reading this article and her obituary. But frankly, I knew nothing about her or her legacy. I had also not fully grasped how she contributed to laying the groundwork for modern journalistic practices, especially in her relentless pursuit of truth in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Her commitment to exposing the lies used to justify racial violence and her role in advocating for the African-American community, particularly African-American women, were much more expansive than I had previously understood.