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Lynette Roberts

When Lynette Roberts died in 1995 aged eighty-six in a west Wales nursing home, her poetry, published by TS Eliot at Faber and Faber and championed by, among others, Robert Graves, had been out of print for nearly half a century. Her published work consisted of two books of poetry, *Poems* (1944) and *Gods with Stainless Ears* (1951), a pamphlet of short stories with an essay on 'Village Dialect', and a number of uncollected essays on subjects as diverse as renaissance art, modern farming, Welsh architecture, and the history of coracles. She also wrote two novels, *The Endeavour: Captain Cook's First Voyage to Australia* (Peter Owen, 1954) and *Nesta*, written between 1941 and 1943, which she described as 'A Historical Novel', set in medieval Wales and telling the story of Nêst or Nesta, the grandmother of Gerald of Wales. 'A quite extraordinary affair' is how Eliot described it in a 1945 letter, finely hedging his bets. The novel had been assumed lost, but was recently found by a researcher visiting in the Harry Ransome Humanities Centre in Texas, along with several other boxes of Roberts's work containing radio scripts, another long poem and more shorter poems, and various essays on contemporary poets.

Roberts was born in Buenos Aires in 1909, of Welsh-Australian descent. Her father was head of Western Railways in Argentina (she has a poem, 'Argentine Railways', about him) and a prominent member of the expatriate community in Buenos Aires. The family was comfortably-off: Lynette and her two sisters Winifred and Rosemary, and her brother Dymock whose sad life (he was sent to boarding school in England, had a breakdown, was institutionalized from the age of sixteen and died in the 1980s) haunts her own poetry, notably in her long epic poem *Gods With Stainless Ears* where the speaker remembers 'my brother./ His Cathedral mind in Bedlam'. In 1923, the day before Lynette's fourteenth birthday, her mother died of typhoid.

Her South American childhood returns in her first book, where her poems about wartime austerity, her West Wales village of Llanybri and, most importantly, its community, are contrasted with the South American landscapes she re-exoticises as she remembers them. 'Homesickness' is what she calls it, a poignantly banal word for her perpetual, often painful, unsettledness.

In the 1930s, Lynette moved to London to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and visited Europe several times. She trained with Constance Spry as a florist and opened a flower arranging business called Bruska. In 1939, at one of Tambimuttu's Poetry London parties, she met Keidrych Rhys, the editor of *Wales* magazine. 'He was charming and spoke like a prince' she recalled. They were married in Llansteffan, a village on the Tywi estuary, on 4 October 1939, and Dylan Thomas was Keidrych's best man. The couple moved to Llanybri, a small village within walking distance of Llansteffan, and it was there, over an intense and difficult decade, that Lynette produced the bulk of her work: her two published books of poems, her essays, her marvellous diary and her novel, *Nesta*. Keidrych was called up to work on coastal defences in July 1940, and for much of her time Lynette was alone and looking after her two children, Angharad (born in 1945) and Prydein (born the following year).

By 1948 the marriage had come to an end. Lynette and Keidrych divorced the following year, but Lynette had already moved to Laugharne (the village that inspired Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*) and lived temporarily (and in many ways symbolically) in a caravan beside Laugharne graveyard. She moved back to England in 1949, first to London and then to Hertfordshire, where she lived in another caravan in Bell's Wood. She was still writing, publishing poems in prestigious journals, giving readings, writing her book on Captain Cook, and in 1953 her 'Radio Ballad' *Le Dorado*, about Welsh colonists in Patagonia was broadcast on the Third Programme.

In 1955-6 she set up the Chislehurst Caves Art Project in Kent, exhibiting paintings on the cave walls. After an accident in which one of the cave ceilings collapsed, the project was abandoned. In 1956, Roberts had a mental breakdown, and later that year became a Jehovah's Witness, which she remained for the rest of her life. She returned to Llanybri in 1970, and then to Carmarthen, and finally, in 1989, to a residential

home in Ferryside, from which she could overlook, across the bay, Llansteffan and the landscape which had defined her poetry. She died in September 1995 and is buried in Llanybri churchyard.

Roberts was by all accounts proud of her poetry, but after the mid-50s she had no interest in promoting either it or herself. When she stopped writing her reputation faded too. It was not just her own retreat from the literary scene that accounts for this; it was also the change in taste that affected many poets of her generation who had come to prominence in the 1940s. The casualty list here includes not just Roberts but a plethora of those poets usually grouped under the titles ‘New Romantic’ and ‘Apocalypse’. Besides, as her own unpublished third collection, *The Fifth Pillar of Song* (rejected by Eliot in 1953), shows, she found the transition from war poetry difficult, and seemed unable to find her subjects once she had left the particular cultural and geographical contexts of Wales. Her poetry – what is most unusual and memorable about it – is to do with what we might call its *local modernism*, its ability to give a mythical dimension to the grounded community in which she lives, and to dramatise the landscape’s memory of itself as a scene of unfolding and multiply-overlaid epochs. Thus in her work the 1939-45 war and Catteraeth are made brought together; the Mabinogion’s cast of legendary characters are rhymed with the inhabitants of Llanybri, the shopkeepers and pub landlords, the schoolchildren and the evacuees; the drone of warplanes over Swansea provokes an association with the Dogs of Annwn, mythical omens, as she puts it, of ‘Hell and Death’. David Jones seemed able to do this sort of thing from the comfort of his London home. Roberts could not. Her last book of poems often feels reheated, carelessly vatic, filler temporarily energized by rhetoric.

Of the critics who kept her work in view, three in particular need to be acknowledged. The first is the poet and critic Tony Conran, himself a poet working in that marooned anglo-Welsh modernistic tradition of David Jones and Lynette Roberts, who in several essays and memoirs has insisted not just on the capaciousness of Roberts’s imagination, but on the peculiar precision and exactitude of its detail. Two academic critics, Nigel Wheale and John Pikoulis took up her cause in the 1990s: Wheale writing two brilliant essays on her work and its relation to post-war cultural climate, and Pikoulis patiently elucidating her life and Welsh contexts. I should also mention

the poet John Wilkinson's long poem 'Sarn Helen' (subtitled 'Homage to Lynette Roberts and for Friends in Swansea'), which appeared in 1997. It is a poem of extraordinary, bewitching difficulty, but one thing that is clear about it is that comes from a profound engagement with Roberts's themes (war, domestic life, the experience of a chaotic modernity) and her poetic language (broken but with holistic aspirations it never fully believes in). Wilkinson is a poet in the Cambridge School, with all the associations that implies: allegedly mandarin language and high modernism, but more importantly poetry that takes upon itself the role previously assigned to critical theory, namely to uncover language's hidden treachery and violence while at the same time trying to keep in mind the fundamental gesture of lyric poetry and enable it to survive such uncoverings.

In 2005 Carcanet published Lynette Roberts's *Collected Poems*, which included her two first books and a selection of the final unpublished collection. It also printed as an appendix her radio poem, *El Dorado*. In 2008 a selection of her prose appeared, also from Carcanet. This contained her extraordinary diary, give us the opportunity to see the process of poem-making as she turns the small details and larger dramas of everyday life into poetry. The book also contains her short stories, essays and memoirs, and a selection of her letters to Robert Graves.