

LYNETTE ROBERTS (1909-95)

The poet Lynette Roberts was part of that remarkable group of Welsh writers of the thirties and forties and as Nigel Wheale writes, "is the one and only Latino-Welsh modernist". Her friends included Robert Graves (for whom she researched and resourced much material toward *The White Goddess*), Dylan Thomas (best man at her wedding), Glyn Jones who shared her attachment to the area around Llansteffan, and Alan Lewis, to whom she dedicated her best known poem "Poem from Llanybri". Roberts was championed by many writers of her time including T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Wyndham Lewis, Martin Seymour Smith, Vernon Watkins and David Jones.

Born July 4th 1909, Evelyn Beatrice in Buenos Aires, Argentine of Welsh heritage parents, Spanish speaking Roberts came to Britain after the WW1, educated at the Central school of Art and then Constant Spry's School of Craft and Floristry. Introduced to Keidrych Rhys, then editing *Wales*, by Tambimuttu the Ceylonese poet and editor of *Poetry London*, she eloped to Llansteffan marrying Rhys in 1939. Together they rented a small cottage in Llanybri, the small Carmarthenshire hamlet on the Laugharne side of the Llansteffan peninsular. Within months WWII was declared, Keidrych called-up and within weeks alone in Llanybri she miscarries her first child, nearly losing her own life from severe haemorrhaging.



During the early part of the forties Roberts embarked on an intense creative period of painting and writing often in ill-health, poverty and bleak isolation, there she wrote the majority of the poems for which she is celebrated. T. S. Eliot at Faber published her Poems in 1944, and Rhys from his newly formed Druid Press *Village Dialect*. Her first unpublished novel *Nesta* of village life in Llanybri is lost. During 1940-42 she wrote her acclaimed "Heroic Poem", initially publishing the final fifth section as 'Cwmcelyn' in *Poems*, not until 1951 was the poem, all 681 lines long, finally published as *Gods with Stainless Ears* by Eliot at Faber. She tells us in the Preface that when she was writing it the scenes and vision ran before like a newsreel, and that the poem is written for filming.

Trees crisp with Maeterlinck blue, screen
Submarine suns and baskets of bees: but
Men nettled with pie-powdered feet, angry
As rooks on their pernickety beds 'training
For another Cattræth' said Evans shop.

DISSIMILAR. DISSUNDERED. CRANCH-CRAKE
CRANCH-CRAKE

ASHIVER. ANHUNGERED ANHELATION.
CERAUNIC CLOUDS CRACK IN THEIR BRAIN.
Who was to be ring carrier for Jerrymandering
Gerontocracy. The officer yellow with argyria?
Soldiers seldom suffered from this; for silver
Scarcely smoothed their palm. CONGRIEVED.

CONSTRAINED.

CONDEMNED. *Subversive* (?) for humanity blast this
And much else besides. Hell would chill a chitter
Chatter at the sight of their conflowing misery.

SHUN. *Father Precipice of Denbigh Rock,*
Mother Mild of Pembroke Streams, Have mercy on.
Cantation us to shoal deep winter.

Men fall to arms. Men stemmed to die
For the century. Then leap fast to the bone
Take wailing bayonets from the ice of wound.
Emblaze your handrails. Men fall to arms.

Men purred to fight - each other. So can we foresee
Death. Set each life against time. Jagged bitterns:
Gradgrinds all. - Now we ruined in life, bound
For detention in field, again build on lime
And rubble. To what age can this be compared?
Men slave, spit and spade. Glean life pure.
Accelerate oxidized roads. Drill new hearts and hearths.
Impale the money-goaders' palisade. .../...

[from *Gods with Stainless Ears*, Pt.1, lines 51-80]

Roberts and Rhys had two children, Angharad and Prydein, both born in the forties (and brought up almost solely by Lynette), she divorced Rhys in 1949. Divorce at that time carried a tremendous stigma and with two small children she tried to sustain her life in Llanybri but was befriended and indoctrinated by religious evangelists. In 1949 she had fled Llanybri with the children to Laugharne living in a caravan next to the churchyard, the Graves' attempted to bring her and the children to Mallorca, but she was prevented by an acrimonious custody battle with Rhys for the children. It is remarkable to consider that neither Dylan nor Caitlin Thomas, famously living in Laugharne at this time, mention Lynette Roberts, though they spent much time together in 1939-40? By 1953 she left Wales for Gloucester and in that period Roberts published an account of Captain Cook's first voyage of exploration to Australia called *'The Endeavour'* (Peter Owen, 1954).



A third volume of poems *'The Fifth Pillar of Song'*, although supported by Wyndham Lewis and Edith Sitwell was rejected by Elliot. Shortly afterwards she was plagued by mental and physical ill-health and abandoned her writing,. She returned to Llanybri in 1969 and lived for awhile there and in Carmarthen and Llandeilo. Her final years were spent at a nursing home in Ferryside where she died on September 28th 1995. She is buried at Llanybri.

In recent years a younger generation of writers and academics have begun to look closely at the work of Lynette Roberts. There were few women poets writing in the forties at the level of accomplishment Roberts achieved, yet she is seriously neglected. A Lynette Roberts special issue of *Poetry Wales* in 1983 [vol 19, no. 2], published *Parts of an Autobiography* (which contains accounts of life at Llanybri and visits by the Thomases), plus extracts from letters to Robert Graves held at the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at Buffalo, New York. Apart from academic articles, this has been the only publication to date on Lynette Roberts, as in 1998 John Pikoulis' much awaited 'Collected Poems' was withdrawn.

There is in Roberts' exceptional original work and life much needed research; especially in bringing to focus the context of Lynette Roberts with other women writers of the 1940's and early 1950's; especially in examining the 'visual literate' tradition which Tony Conran alludes to in his essay *Lynette Roberts in Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* recognising Roberts association with Brenda Chamberlain, plus the groundbreaking use of cinematography in her poetry. Lynette Roberts' absence from Welsh letters and more profoundly modernist literature of the twentieth century is deleterious. Attempting to rectify this position, American editor Keith Tuma in his *ANTHOLOGY of Twentieth-century British & Irish Poetry*, [Oxford University Press, New York: 2001], succeeds in publishing extracts Pts IV and V of *Gods with Stainless Ears* (p348), and is the only Roberts' currently available in print. In his introduction to Lynette Roberts, Tuma writes, "Gods with Stainless Ears bears comparison with T.S.Eliot's *Four Quartets*, H.D.'s *Trilogy* as key modernist sequences responding to the blitz".

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Bibliography:

This Bibliography of Lynette Roberts is faithfully reproduced from a typescript found in Carmarthen Public Library's reference section. Apart from a photocopy of various articles, PW vol. 19, Tony Conran's articles supplied over the years, there's a single copy of Village Dialect, John Pikoulis's obituary from the Guardian and the bibliography. The bibliography was supplied (the library staff believe) by Lynette in the 1950's, it's certainly written before publication of her novel *The Endeavour* was printed. In the anthology section there are a number of handwritten annotations in Lynette's handwriting, made sometime in 1958 when she lived in Carmarthen, these are marked *** before the entry.

1. Books Published:

POEMS, Faber and Faber, Nov, 1944, 2nd Impression Jan, 1945

VILLAGE DIALECT, The Druid Press, 1944. [500 copies]

GODS WITH STAINLESS EARS, Faber and Faber, 1951. (Heroic poem).

POEMS was chosen as 'Ambassador' book between the United States and Gt. Britain by the "Books Across the Sea Society" & *GODS WITH STAINLESS EARS* exhibited by the National Book League.

THE ENDEAVOUR, Peter Owen Feb, 1954. (reconstruction of Captain James Cook's 1st. Voyage, 1768-71)

2. Poetry In The Following Anthologies:

New Directions, ed. J. Laughlin, USA 1949

New British Poets, [np], USA 1948-49

Poetry in Wartime, Faber & Faber, [nd?]

Modern Welsh Poetry, Faber & Faber, 1944

Celtic Anthology, [np, nd?], USA

****Poems in Wartime*, ed. Charles Hamblett, 1966

****Anthology by Elizabeth Jennings*, 1958

****The Chatto Book of Modern Poetry*, 1955

****Anthology of Poems 1939-45*

****Poems from Llanybri*, 1966

***+ *3 Anthologies of Welsh Poetry*, 1985

3. Articles , Short Stories, Criticism, Poetry:

On James Joyce. (Finnegans Wake) *La Nacion Argentine*.

On Lorenzo da Monaco, (Sienese painter) *Life & Letters and La Nacion*, B.A.

Reviews on Poetry: for *The Times Literary Supplement*.

On The Coracle (main article) *The Field*. Jan.: 6th, 1945.

On Welsh Architecture. (main article) *The Field*, June 10th, 1944.

On Painters and Art Galleries for *Western Mail: South Wales Evening Post*.

One Year's Survey of Welsh Writers, 1951-52. *The Times Literary Supplement*.

4. Contributor to Following Magazines:

Horizon. *Life and Letters*. *Listener*. *New Statesman and Nation*. *The World Review*.

The Times Literary Supplement. *The Field*, *Departure*. *Penguin New Writing*.

Tribune. *Here and now*, U. S. A. *Poetry London*. *Now*. *Poetry Quarterly*. *Time and Tide*.

Poetry and Poverty. *Wales*. *The Welsh Review*. *Dublin Magazine*. *Fantasy*, USA

Furioso, USA *New Directions* USA *Poetry Chicago*, USA *Voices*, USA.

Briarcliff Quarterly, Canada. *Epoch*, USA *Quarto*, *Agonia*, Buenos Aires, &c:

5. BBC Scripts and work broadcast:

"Tonight at Eight". Feb. 1939, Television 15 mins. Dec. 1939, (Author broke contract)

Eight, 15 min: scripts on 'Modern Poets' series for Overseas and Transatlantic programmes. May 1945, especially for Latin America, via British Council

6. Poetry on Third Programme, Welsh Regional and Home Service

April 6th, 1944, Home Service.

May, 1945, Welsh regional

November, approx. 23rd 1946. Welsh regional.

April 5th, 1949. Third programme. (Eight poems)

October 23rd, 1951. Welsh regional

"Gods with Stainless Ears" reviewed on Welsh Regional, May 1st, 1951.

"New Verse Series", June 1950, Welsh Home Service

New Soundings. Third Programme, January 9th 1952

New Soundings. Third Programme, June 6th, 1952.

Ballad *EL DORADO*. Third Programme, Feb 1st & 5th, 1953 & two rpts

O Lovers of Death, Third Programme Nov. 29th & Dec, 2nd, 1952, poem read by author,

7. Poetry Readings

Oxford University: O.U.P.S. February, 1952

Wadham College, Oxford University. May 1952.

Institute of Contemporary Arts. Autumn 1951.

Institute of Contemporary Arts, Spring 1952.

East End Music Association. 1952. Rhythm and 'Movement Group. November 11th, 1952.

Ethical Church, December 9th, Bayswater Music & Poetry. December 9th, 1952.

Fortnightly in Public houses under the "Poetry and Plays in Pubs" sponsored by a committee for verse and prose recitation" (Sponsors, John Masfield, Dame Sybil Thorndike, etc.)

8. Manuscripts Awaiting Publication:

Transcription of Sir Ralph Radcliffe's three remaining plays (1519–1559).

Taken from original handwriting of Tudor Period with Lord Harlech's permission. He is the owner of this valuable manuscript. Article in "Hudson Review" and one Interlude to be printed this year in USA.

A historical novel on Welsh Mediaeval [sic] History.

Green Roads A collection of Rural Essays,

A Carmartheshire Village Folklore and customs of War years, Llanstephan, S.Wales.

The Fifth Pillar of Song. 82 New Poems.

O Lovers of Death. Verse Play, as broadcast on BBC

EL DORADO. A ballad of 175 stanzas, based on a true narrative of 4 young men who went to seek gold on the Patagonian plains in 1883, BBC broadcast.

Collection of Short Stories

Anthology of Hertfordshire Poets

9. Recent References: This section adds to the bibliography with recent references.

BOOKS:

LYNETTE ROBERTS: *COLLECTED POEMS*, edited and introduced by John Pikoulis, (Seren, Bridgend lct: 1998. pp229, withdrawn - approximately 6 or so escapees exist, purchased at Blackwell's, Oxford and amazon.co.uk)

RECENT ANTHOLOGIES:

'Sweet Singers': *An Anthology of Carmarthenshire Poems*, (ed.) Janet Dube, Carmarthenshire C. C., 2000

Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry, (ed.) Keith Tuma, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001

ARTICLES:

Lewis, Alun: correspondence w Lynette Roberts and Keidrych Rhys, *Wales* VIII 28, March, 1948 p410-431. [Reprinted in extract *Poetry Wales* 19.2, 1983.]

Conran, Anthony: "Lynette Roberts: War Poet" <1st version>, *The Anglo-Welsh Review* 65, 1979 p50-62

Conran, Anthony: "Lynette Roberts: War Poet" <revised>, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1982) p188-200

Archard, Cary: introduction on the Lynette Roberts Special Issue, *Poetry Wales* p5-7

Pikoulis, John: "Lynette Roberts and Alun Lewis", *Poetry Wales* 19.2 (1983) p9-29

Lynette Roberts: 'Parts of An Autobiography', *Poetry Wales* 19.2 (1983) p30-50

Lloyd, Joanna, ed. Correspondence between Lynette Roberts and Robert Graves, *Poetry Wales* 19.2, p51-124

Conran, Anthony: "Lynette Roberts: The Lyric Pieces", *Poetry Wales*, p125-133

Duncan, Andrew: "Interview with Martin Seymour-Smith. 25.8.93.", *Angel Exhaust* [London] 10, 1994, p 63-77 [cf p72-74]

Wheale, Nigel: "Lynette Roberts: Legend and form in the 1940's", *Critical Quarterly* 36.3, 1994

Obituary: *The Guardian* 13th October 1995, p17: "A real village voice", John Pikoulis

Pikoulis, John: "Awen warcheidiol: mae cerddi anarferol Lynette Roberts yn ei gosod ymhlith y goreuon o'r llenorion Eingl-Gymreig". In: *Barn* 394 (1995), p. 44-5.

Conran, (Tony) Anthony: "Lynette Roberts", *Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997) p163-76. [See also p114, 177, 189 & 259]

Wheale, Nigel: "Beyond the Trauma Stratus: Lynette Roberts' Gods with Stainless Ears and the Post-War Cultural Landscape", *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* vol. 3, 1997, p98-117

Pikoulis, John: "Six Poems by Lynette Roberts", *Poetry Wales* 34 2 (1998) pp 3

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