

Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems*

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Lynette Roberts, *Collected Poems*, edited by Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), paperback, 152 pages, £12.95, ISBN: 1 85754 842 6

This is an excellent new collection of a neglected but important poet. Lynette Roberts was born in Buenos Aires of Welsh family in 1909 and died in West Wales in 1995. Two books of her work were published by Faber and Faber: *Poems* (1944) and *Gods with Stainless Ears* (1951). The *Collected Poems* includes these texts and offers previously unpublished poems, along with individual poems published here and there, and a few additional pieces. Some of the circumstances of her life are described in a substantial introduction by Patrick McGuinness, providing scope for speculation on the relation between her life and what might have been a very different poetic career.

Speculation aside, the most important work in *Collected Poems* is the long poem *Gods with Stainless Ears*, a text with many admirers but nearly impossible to get hold of until now. It is a mistake to position this unusual long poem simply by offering analogies, because the texture is so decisively singular. Nevertheless, structural elements suggest a rethinking of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, but with more than a hint of the apocalyptic extension and post-surrealist verve of poets such as Dylan Thomas, Charles Madge and W.S. Graham. As John Wilkinson points out in *The Lyric Touch*, there's an important analogue in Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. Roberts herself dedicates the poem to Edith Sitwell, and offers an unusually suggestive preface, defending her use of 'congested words, images and hard metallic lines'. This 'metallic' quality owes as much to the bristling modernism of Wyndham Lewis – who sketched her – as to any easily identifiable points of comparison.



Written in the years 1941-3, but not published until 1951, *Gods with Stainless Ears* is subtitled ‘a heroic poem’, but is so troubled by its military armature as to be critical of what constitutes ‘heroic’ poetry. There’s a contemporaneity of reportage and newsreel in the poem’s materials, but the distinctive lexicon involves a sculpted condensation in which it can be difficult to distinguish archaic usage, scientific terminology or poetic neologism:

Over wails of boracic and tundra torn wounds,
Darkening ‘peaked’ Fuji-yama, clearing
Cambrian caves where xylophone reeds hide
Menhir glaciers and appointed feet.
Out of this hard. Out of this sheet of zinc. (p.65)

The text bristles with jarring edges, living up to the peculiar juxtapositions suggested by its title.

It takes some imagination to rethink the shape of literary possibilities which this text opened up in the 1940s and early 1950s, even if such possibilities remained latent. More than half a century later there are still qualities of the text which are

unassimilated, although there is also a quality of lambent effusion too characteristic of mid-twentieth century romanticism. Roberts can be too deliberately tragic in tone, despite the well defended and engaging texture. It is hard to imagine a sudden industry of Roberts scholarship, but there is philological work that could be done to articulate the various contexts and pressures in play in this poem. The new notes provided by Patrick McGuiness provide some helpful starting points.

Gods with Stainless Ears deserves to be much read and admired as a long poem as important as Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, and a neglected classic in the history of writing produced by women working in the British Isles.