

ROBERTS, KATE (1891-1985), author

Name: Kate Roberts
Date of birth: 1891
Date of death: 1985
Spouse: Morris Thomas Williams
Parent: Catherine Roberts (née Cadwaladr)
Parent: Owen Owen Roberts
Gender: Female
Occupation: author
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Printing and Publishing
Author: Katie Gramich

Kate Roberts, known as Cadi within her family, was born on February 13, 1891 in Rhosgadfan, Caernarfonshire. She was the first child born to Owen Owen Roberts (1851-1931), a slate quarryman, and Catherine Roberts (née Cadwaladr) (1855-1944), formerly a midwife. Both her parents had been married before and widowed; Kate had four older half-siblings from her parents' first marriages (John Evan, Mary, Jane, and Owen) and three younger brothers, Richard (Dic), Evan, and David (Dei). From 1895 onwards the family lived in Cae'r Gors, a smallholding, where they practised subsistence farming to bolster the family income.

Cae'r Gors was Kate's home for most of her early years, and she conveys a vivid sense of the cottage and its surrounding four fields in her 1961 autobiography, *Y Lôn Wen* (The White Lane) and the 1972 volume, *Atgofion* (Memories). Today Cae'r Gors is an arts and community centre established in memory of Kate Roberts. She and her brothers were brought up close to the land, and the hard work and constant anxiety of the subsistence farmer's life is continually evoked in Roberts's early fiction, alongside the yawning terror of the dangerous slate quarry. Kate, as the only daughter at home, was expected to do her share of domestic duties for her mother; it is unsurprising, then, that she is able to provide an intimate and authentic delineation of domestic spaces and duties in her later creative work. The heather-covered slopes of the mountain formed part of her childhood world, its severe and forlorn beauty memorably rendered in her later stories. The chapel also formed an important part of the family's life since, in common with the majority of the population of the area at the time, they would spend much of their time when not working at the chapel, attending services and Sunday School, the Seiat, Cymafoedd Canu (singing festivals) and literary events. As Roberts puts it in *Atgofion*, 'Dyna gylch ein bywyd, y ty, y capel, y caeau, y ffyrdd, y mynydd' (That was the circle of our life: the house, the chapel, the fields, the lanes, the mountain).

She attended the local primary school in Rhostryfan and won a scholarship to the County School in Caernarfon in 1904. This signalled the beginning of a move away from the tight circle of her childhood. In line with the educational policies of the time, the education she received in Caernarfon was almost entirely in English, and she remembers the sense of disorientation she felt as a thirteen-year-old moving from a virtually monoglot Welsh community to a regime of

Englishness. Later in life she would be one of the first campaigners for Welsh-medium education, asserting that her greatest achievement in life was not her literary work but helping to bring into being one of the first Welsh-medium secondary schools, Ysgol Twm o'r Nant in Denbigh.

In 1910, she went to the University College of North Wales, in Bangor, where she was one of a very small number of female students at that time; she was acutely aware of her privilege and of the financial sacrifice her education meant for her parents. She studied Welsh under the charismatic [John Morris-Jones](#) and the scholar, [Ifor Williams](#), though again, as in the County School, the lectures were through the medium of English. The strikingly good-looking young Kate Roberts was an enthusiastic participant in the many literary and cultural activities at the University: eisteddfodau, debates, and student newspapers. As she concludes in *Atgofion*, 'dyma amser hapusaf fy mywyd' (this was the happiest time of my life); this is the period before the First World War which she describes as being bathed in 'tegwch y bore' (the fairness of morning) in her 1958 novel of that name.

She left Bangor in 1913 with a second class honours degree in Welsh and a teacher's certificate. She taught in a primary school in Llanberis for a year, and then in February 1915 moved to Ystalyfera in the Swansea Valley as a secondary school teacher, taking over the post of a male teacher who had joined the army. It was during her time in Ystalyfera that the first inklings of her future life as a writer first manifested themselves. She formed a close friendship with two other young women teachers, Betty Eynon Davies and Margaret Price, and the three co-wrote, produced and acted in several short plays, including *Y Fam* (The Mother), *Y Canpunt* (The Hundred Pounds) and *Well! Well!* (Well! well!), which were performed by 'Cymdeithas y Ddraig Goch' (The Red Dragon Society) in the Tawe valley during the war.

Two of Kate's brothers, Evan and Dei, were soldiers in the First World War; Evan was severely wounded and suffered from the after-effects of those wounds throughout his life, while Dei was wounded and died of dysentery while recuperating in Malta in 1917. He was only nineteen years old. Kate was devastated by the loss and would later state that it was this senseless and unjust loss of a brother who was little more than a boy that drove her to writing as a therapeutic act. She began writing short stories from this point onwards, publishing her first volume, *O Gors y Bryniau*, in 1925. These brief and resonant stories are rooted in the landscape and community of the Caernarfonshire of her childhood. They chronicle the hardship and precariousness of people's lives in this milieu and often focus on parent-child relationships and on experiences of loss and longing. If she sought catharsis from her own bereavement and loneliness in writing these stories, she succeeded in speaking with a voice which transcends the personal.

In 1917 Kate left Ystalyfera to take up a teaching post in Aberdare County School for Girls. She was a teacher of Welsh for some fifteen years in total and had a positive influence on a number of talented pupils, including the future poet, [Gwenallt](#), who became a lifelong friend. In 1928 she married Morris T. Williams (1900-1946) also a native of Caernarfonshire and a fellow-supporter of the fledgling political party, Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru. Owing to the bar on married women in the profession, she had to give up her career as a teacher. From 1929 until 1931 she and Morris lived in Rhiwbina in north Cardiff, and then in Tonypany in the Rhondda for four years. While producing a great deal of political journalism on behalf of Plaid Cymru, Kate continued to write short stories, publishing *Rhigolau Bywyd* (The Ruts of Life), in 1929. This volume focused particularly on adult sexual relationships and on marriage, painting a somewhat gloomy picture of failure of communication and misunderstanding. Nevertheless, it showed a definite advance in Kate's command of the genre; stories such as the title story and 'Y Gollod' display her ability to suggest a whole unspoken world of feeling through a few symbolic touches.

In 1935, Kate and Morris, a master printer by trade, moved back to North Wales in order to buy and run Gwasg Gee, a well-known publishing house, in Denbigh. Their new home was Y Cilgwyn, in Denbigh, where they would live for the rest of their lives. A year after the move, Kate's novel *Traed mewn Cyffion* (Feet in Chains), often regarded as her masterpiece, was published, having won joint first prize in the Prose Medal competition of the National Eisteddfod in the previous year. Though it is a short novel, it manages to delineate with admirable economy the changing society of north-west Wales in the period between 1880 and 1917. It focuses on three generations of one family, documenting their conflicts and achievements against the background of a rapidly disappearing monoglot Welsh, Nonconformist culture. It engages with the changing role of women, the deleterious influence of the Anglocentric British education system, industrial disputes and unrest, migration, and finally the profound effects of the First World War on this corner of the world. The style is realist but also makes use of a sinuous free indirect style to suggest the inner thoughts and emotions of characters. Kate dramatizes and distances her own loss of her brother in the war in the memorable scene in which Jane Gruffydd, the mother, receives news of her son's death but is unable to read the official letter because it is written in English. Kate demonstrates the skills of a consummate short-story writer in her sketching of this brief but resonant scene.

After the publication of another collection of short stories in 1937 (*Ffair Gaeaf*/Winter Fair) there was a hiatus before she published another creative volume. She was busy running the press, editing and contributing to important magazines and newspapers, including *Baner ac Amserau Cymru*, later simply *Y Faner*. (The Banner and Times of Wales; The Banner). Kate's major contributions to contemporary political and social debate as a journalist, editor and public figure have been

relatively neglected and obscured by the false notion that she was 'silent' between 1937 and 1949. Nevertheless, the demands of her extremely busy life at the helm of Gee and Sons with her husband undoubtedly did detract from her creative output at this time.

She was galvanized into writing creatively once more by another devastating loss: her husband, Morris T. Williams, died suddenly in 1946, at the early age of 46. Although the marriage, like most marriages, may not have been perfect, there is no doubting the extremity of Kate's grief when Morris died, and she was once more driven to writing as a creative outlet. She published an experimental novella entitled *Stryd y Glep* (Gossip Row) in 1949, followed by a novel, *Y Byw sy'n Cysgu* (The Living Sleep), in 1956, and a collection of nostalgic short stories, *Te yn y Grug* (Tea in the Heather), in 1959. Both the earlier texts focus on lonely and abandoned women trying to come to terms with a life in which former certainties about gender roles and relationships have been lost. They mark a new inwardness and psychological depth in Kate's work. *Te yn y Grug*, however, is very different in tone and style, returning to the experiences and settings of childhood, and creating an unforgettable central character in the exuberant Winni Ffinni Hadog, another dissident female who can find no place for herself in an unremittingly patriarchal society.

In 1960 she published an autobiographical work, *Y Lôn Wen* (The White Lane), but it is an evasive autobiography, neglecting her adult life and focusing fondly on her childhood and, above all, on the life of the community in which she grew up. She followed this in 1962 with a novella entitled *Tywyll Heno* (Dark Tonight) which is among her most accomplished and daring works, dealing as it does with mental illness, female eroticism, and the decline of Nonconformist culture. Again, the central character is a lone woman who fails to fit into a traditional society and who here descends convincingly and discomfitingly into mental distress. Kate continued to write and publish short stories in increasingly slim volumes for the rest of her long life. In these later collections, such as *Yr Wylan Deg* (The Fair Seagull, 1976), she takes the reader into the world of old people, conjuring up in an extraordinarily intimate way what it feels like to inhabit an ageing body while still retaining the passions and desires of youth.

She received a number of honours in later life, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Wales in 1950 and the Medal of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion in 1961. Despite such marks of recognition, her letters and diaries show that she felt increasingly neglected and embittered in old age. Nevertheless, she continued to make interventions in the public sphere long after she retired from Gwasg Gee in 1956, playing a prominent role, as mentioned, in the ultimately successful campaign for Welsh-medium education.

Kate Roberts's well-known epithet as 'Queen of Our Literature' ('Brenhines ein Llên') is an indication of her prestige particularly within the Welsh-language culture of Wales. She was indisputably the most important Welsh female novelist and short-story writer of the twentieth century, producing a large and various oeuvre extending over a period of more than half a century. In addition to being a creative writer, she was an influential critic, a teacher, journalist, editor and publisher, as well as an effective political activist and campaigner. From a broader perspective, Roberts can be seen as one of a new generation of British women writers who came to prominence between the wars and whose work reflected the new freedoms and responsibilities of women in the wake of the introduction of female suffrage in 1928. Like that of her contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Bowen and Storm Jameson, her work provides subtle insights into women's lives and brings to light some of the hidden power dynamics in contemporary society. At the same time, her work set a new standard for Welsh creative prose, using dialectal variations of Welsh to enhance the authenticity of her flexible and natural realist style.

Kate Roberts died on April 14, 1985 and her funeral took place in Capel Mawr, Denbigh on April 17. She was buried in the same grave as her husband, Morris T. Williams, in Denbigh.

Author

Katie Gramich

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Kate Roberts, *Atgofion* (Porthmadog 1972)

Further Reading

[Kate Roberts \(1891-1985\)](#) From Warfare to Welfare website, viewed 30 May 2019

People's Collection Wales: [Kate Roberts, 'Queen of our Literature'](#)

Coflein: [Cae'r-gors; early Home Of Dr Kate Roberts](#)

Coflein: [Gwasg Gee, Denbigh](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Kate Roberts](#)

Additional Links

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