

## ROBERTS, EVELYN BEATRICE (Lynette) (1909 - 1995), poet and prose writer

**Name:** Evelyn Beatrice (Lynette) Roberts

**Date of birth:** 1909

**Date of death:** 1995

**Child:** Angharad Rhys

**Child:** Prydein Rhys

**Parent:** Ruby Roberts (née Garbutt)

**Parent:** Cecil Arthur Roberts

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** poet and prose writer

**Area of activity:** Literature and Writing

**Author:** Daniel Hughes

Lynette Roberts was born on 4 July 1909 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the first of four children of Cecil Arthur Roberts (d. 1949), a railway engineer, and his wife Ruby (née Garbutt, d. 1923). Her baptismal names were Evelyn Beatrice, but she was known as Lynette by her family, and in later life used the name Lynette Roberts for all her published work. She had two sisters, Winifred and Rosemary, and her brother Dymock was the youngest child. Cecil Roberts's family had moved to Australia from Ruthin, north Wales, and from Australia Cecil moved to Argentina to work as a railway engineer, having previously married Ruby, whose grandfather was from Pembrokeshire.

In 1914 the Roberts family moved from Buenos Aires to London, where Cecil enlisted in the armed forces and fought in the First World War. The family returned to Argentina in 1918 following the end of the war, and the sisters were educated at a convent. Lynette spoke Spanish in her childhood (though this was not her first language), and her Argentine heritage and upbringing would inform a number of her later poems. Ruby Roberts caught typhoid and died in 1923, shortly before Lynette turned fourteen, and after this the family returned to England where the girls were sent to school in Bournemouth. Dymock attended Winchester School but suffered from schizophrenia and was committed to a mental asylum in Salisbury from the age of sixteen until his death.

In the 1930s, Lynette studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts while living in Fitzrovia, and travelled to Madeira with her friend Celia Buckmaster, where Lynette began writing poetry and wrote short fiction inspired by her travels, some of which was published in *Life and Letters Today*. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, Lynette travelled through Hungary, Austria and Germany with her friend Kathleen Bellamy, a journalist, whose reports for *La Nación* were illustrated by Lynette. Upon her return to London, she trained as a florist under Constance Spry and opened her own florist's shop, Bruska.

Lynette was briefly engaged to the racing driver and soldier Merlin Minshall, but broke off the engagement when she met the Welsh poet, editor and writer Keidrych Rhys (William Ronald Rees Jones, 1915-1987) at a Poetry London event in 1939. The two married on 4 October 1939 in Llansteffan, with fellow Welsh poet **Dylan Thomas** as best man. Following their wedding Lynette and Rhys moved to Llanybri, Carmarthenshire, where they rented the cottage Tŷ Gwyn. Lynette kept a diary during her time in Llanybri, from 1939 through to 1948. She was drawn to her Welsh roots, becoming absorbed in the village's ways of life, and it was there that she developed the subjects and aesthetics which would define much of her writing. Her diary, poems and essays from this period powerfully evoke a particular place and time, as well as states of mind which range from the idealised simplicity of village life through to the catastrophe and trauma of modern war. Alongside her immersion in village life, Lynette studied Welsh history, myths and legends, local flora and fauna, and corresponded with and travelled to meet a number of substantial figures of the literary scene. Significant correspondents included Edith Sitwell, who frequently praised Lynette's work, and from 1942, Robert Graves, who remarked that his *White Goddess* owed much to Lynette Roberts.

Keidrych Rhys was called up in July 1940, after Lynette had suffered a miscarriage in March of the same year. Although she had immersed herself in village life, Lynette's time in Llanybri was not always harmonious, and in 1942 some of the villagers isolated her after they came to believe she was a German spy. The fraught atmosphere and emotional strain of this incident were captured in her diary, poems and an unpublished essay, though her work also articulated the sense of joy, purpose and belonging she found in village life.

Lynette's time living in Llanybri, her explorations of the village's history and everyday culture, and the Second World War, provided much of the creative material for her most significant works. In 1942 she sent some of her poems to T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber, who responded positively. Eliot turned down a long poem, then titled 'A Heroic Poem', but requested more short poems, which were published as the collection *Poems* in 1944. Roberts's best-known poem, 'Poem from Llanybri', appeared in the volume. Addressed to the soldier and poet **Alun Lewis**, the poem is an invitation to Llanybri, but beyond this invites the reader to share in and defend the cultural heritage of Wales. In this sense, Roberts can be seen as aligning herself with a poetic tradition that goes back to **Taliesin** in the sixth century, that of the poet as the preserver and defender of a besieged culture.

In 1948, Eliot would request Roberts's 'A Heroic Poem' once again, and at Eliot's suggestion, Roberts added explanatory notes and 'Arguments' to her text, which would appear in 1951 as *Gods with Stainless Ears*. *Gods* is Roberts's masterwork. An evocation of a particular place and time, a complex medley of home front war and poetic biography, *Gods* is a mythic-historic examination of Llanybri and a call to defend it from both Fascist aggression and cultural uniformity. Across the text, a powerful polemic against war and totalizing forces emerges, combining in the late stages of the poem to suggest that the post-war settlement might yet threaten the particular culture Roberts is at home in. Both intensely private and inescapably communal, the poem is experimental and idiosyncratic but has a coherency accomplished through its singular focus on Llanybri. It is a remarkably original work, in focus, structure and aesthetics, and it roots the heroism of the war in Roberts herself, her friends and community, and like the court poetry of medieval Wales, it preserves and recalls a community and culture in crisis.

Also in Llanybri, Roberts wrote the experimental historical novel 'The Book of Nesta', which sought to recover and reconstruct the life of the Welsh princess **Nest ferch Rhys**, further demonstrating Roberts's attempts to preserve, defend and reconstruct her local cultural heritage. Despite interest from Graves, Eliot and others, the novel was never published; in part due to paper shortages but in some senses because its cultural and feminist politics seem to have largely escaped the male editors who read the text. In 1944, Keidrych Rhys's Druid Press published *An introduction to Village Dialect: and seven stories, an essay and short stories* by Roberts. During her time in Llanybri, Roberts also worked on a variety of prose pieces about village and wartime life, some of which appeared in magazines such as *The Field*, some of which remain unpublished, and many of which - despite their seemingly eclectic range of interests - are leant the same coherency when viewed as a body of work dedicated to a culture in crisis.

Roberts and Rhys had two children. A daughter, Angharad, was born in May 1945, while their son Prydein was born in 1946. In 1949 Lynette divorced Rhys and lived in a caravan purchased for her by her father, first in Laugharne graveyard and then in a non-residential site in Bell's Wood, Hertfordshire, near her children's boarding school. While living in Bell's Wood, she attempted to compile an anthology of regional poetry, but the project never came to fruition and she split her time between the caravan and Kent Terrace, London, while continuing to work on her poetry as well as unpublished short fiction and radio poetry. 'O *Lovers of Death*', a verse drama, was broadcast on the Welsh Regional Service in 1952, and the radio ballad 'El Dorado' followed on the *Third Programme* in 1953. Her last major published work, *The Endeavour*, a historical novel about Captain Cook's first voyage, was published in 1954 by Peter Owen, by which time Roberts was living in Chislehurst.

In Chislehurst in 1955-56 Lynette developed the idea of setting up a gallery in some nearby caves. The sculptor Peter Danziger chiselled sculptures into the chalk walls, while the artist Denis Williams painted directly onto the walls. A partial collapse of the ceiling injured Danziger, putting an end to the planned gallery. Partly because of this accident, Lynette suffered a mental breakdown in 1956, and in the same year moved into the first home of her own in Chislehurst, which her sister Winifred had purchased for her. While recovering from her breakdown, Lynette became a Jehovah's Witness, and ceased writing creatively. She would return to Llanybri in 1970, and suffered from schizophrenia, which caused her to be committed to St David's Hospital, Carmarthen, four times. In 1983 a special issue of *Poetry Wales* published samples of her work for the first time in thirty years, which began a rediscovery of Roberts which has continued into the twenty-first century, with a substantial number of her poems, as well as her wartime diaries and selected letters, now in print.

Lynette moved to Carmarthen following her first stay in hospital, and moved to a residential home in Ferryside in 1989. Her sister Winifred bought Lynette a cottage in Llandeilo, and while living in the residential home she would frequently spend the weekend at her cottage. Throughout her life, Lynette enjoyed painting and dancing, and friends and family described her as mischievous, fiercely loyal and curious. She fell and broke her hip while dancing in December 1994, and died from heart failure on 26 September 1995. She was buried in Llanybri churchyard, where the gravestone reads 'Lynette Roberts, poet'.

## Author

Daniel Hughes

## Sources

Correspondence with Angharad Rhys, August 2024

Lynette Roberts, *Collected poems* (Manchester 2005), Patrick McGuiness (ed.)

Lynette Roberts, *Diaries, letters and recollections* (Manchester 2008), Patrick McGuiness (ed.)

Siriol McAvoy (ed.), *Locating Lynette Roberts* (Cardiff 2019)

Lynette Roberts Collection, Harry Ransom Center Museum and Archive, Austin, Texas

## Archives

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