

A Gathering around Robinson Jeffers

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THE ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER: A JUBILEE GATHERING, 1962-1988. Edited by Robert J. Brophy. Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1988. 222 pages. \$20.

The rehabilitation of Robinson Jeffers is underway. Stanford University Press is issuing his collected poetry. Robert Hass recently edited a selection of Jeffers's poems, *Rock and Hawk*. The Random House book has garnered much positive attention, as readers rediscover the prophetic, disquieting power of this poet who declared:

One light is left us: the beauty of things, not men;
The immense beauty of the world, not the human world.
Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly
At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?
These plunging promontories and flame-shaped peaks
Stopping the somber stupendous glory, the storm-fed ocean?

(“De Rerum Virtute”)

American Poetry Review in 1987 featured “Home,” a previously unpublished Jeffers narrative. In its fifth anniversary issue, the journal *American Poetry* devoted all its pages to Jeffers criticism, publishing, among other things, approving commentaries by poets as diverse as Betty Adcock and John Hollander. With the renewed interest in narrative among contemporary poets, Jeffers's thick narrative oeuvre is attracting attention; Mark Jarman discussed Jeffers's narrative “The Love and the Hate” in a 1985 essay in *New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly*. And, as the critic Terry Beers has said, new critical approaches and the general opening up of the canon mean for Jeffers's work the possibility of “a greater measure of respect.”

There have always been readers of Jeffers, of course. His 1939 *Selected Poetry* was reprinted several times. Many naturalists

venerate Jeffers—as they do, say, Aldo Leopold—as one of the essential writers of the environmental movement. William Nolte notes in *Rock and Hawk: Robinson Jeffers and the Romantic Agony* that he could be “the most widely read ‘unread’ poet in world literature.” As well, Jeffers has a core of dedicated critics, who have studied and stood by the poet, some more as partisan defenders than as scholars. Despite the resurgence of interest (there have been others, though this one seems more deep), Jeffers still remains little taught. If he is represented in the classroom at all, likely it is with only one or two poems—“Shine, Perishing Republic” and “Hurt Hawks,” for example. He is hardly regarded as the major American poet some believe him to be.

But the 1987 centennial of Jeffers’s birth gave his supportive critics and readers a chance to celebrate and evaluate: There were festivals, exhibitions, and publications, including the book, *The Robinson Jeffers Newsletter: A Jubilee Gathering, 1962-1988*. *Jeffers Newsletter* editor Robert J. Brophy, a noted Jeffers scholar, has brought together a diverse collection of articles, letters, memoirs, documents, and photographs—even a poem by Czeslaw Milosz. The book not only demonstrates the lively history of the *Newsletter* but also, importantly, helps illuminate our understanding of the poet.

The *Newsletter* began publishing in 1962, the year Jeffers died. The publication was first under the tutelage of the poet’s biographer Melba Berry Bennett, then passed to Brophy. He comments in his preface, “The *Newsletter* has become the repository of things useful to scholars, instructive to aficionados, and of interest to all who delve into the poet for whatever purpose.”

The son of a preacher, Jeffers was educated in boarding schools in Switzerland before attending Occidental College, from which he graduated at 18, in 1905. He then foundered upon the direction his life should take, studying medicine, literature, and forestry. Complicating matters was his affair with Una Call Kuster, who, at that time, was married to a prominent attorney. Una and Robinson were finally married in 1913, with every intention that they would live in England, where Jeffers would write his poems.

World War I prevented them from pursuing their overseas adventure, so they settled in Carmel, California, their “inevitable place,” Jeffers once said. As Brophy writes in his introduction, “Jeffers freely identified the two greatest influences on his life and poetry as the Carmel landscape and his wife, Una.” Jeffers spent the rest of his life on the coast, traveling only occasionally from the home, Tor House, which he built with his own hands from seashore boulders and in

which he, Una and their twin sons lived. Brophy writes:

The Carmel Big Sur landscape was both Jeffers' medium and his message. All of his poetry from 1914 quarried its seascape and crenelated canyons, isolated beaches and foreboding headlines for symbol, theme, and story. The landscape taught Jeffers—the violent nature of beauty and the importunate epiphanies of God, the cycle of storm and serenity, solstice and equinox, erosion and burgeoning life.

That Jeffers is so closely identified with this landscape is both part of his strength and part of the explanation of why he has been ignored—in the mainstream—by many critics and writers. Long perceived as a misanthropic crank of interest only for his descriptions of the California coast, Jeffers has not fared well critically.

After being hailed in the 1920s with his breakthrough volume *Tamar*, which he published after two unsuccessful, immature, and lackluster books, Jeffers saw his reputation rise. (Jeffers, in April 1932, became the first of only two poets—the other was T. S. Eliot—to grace the cover of *Time* magazine. The striking Edward Weston portrait *Time* used is reproduced in *A Jubilee Gathering*.) But in the coming decades his reputation peaked then plummeted. His dark vision of human psychology and civilization, his insistence that “the excellence of things” placed humanity in a diminished role in this vast universe that was his god, his indifference to literary politics, his continued emphasis on narratives—all these played against Jeffers. No longer the novelty he was early in his publishing career, Jeffers was out of step with politics and fashion. Reviewers, critics and fellow writers no longer cared to hear of his transhuman worldview, nor did they respect his style—long lines, bold statements and narratives steeped in incest and violence, Jeffers's emblems of human introversion.

His standing had fallen a long way from the praise of Babette Deutsch, who, upon reading *Tamar*, said she “felt somewhat as Keats professed to feel, on looking into Chapman's Homer.” By the time *Hungerfield* was published in 1954—the last of Jeffers's collections before his death—the taciturn and aged poet labored in hard times. His wife had died. He was in declining health. And while awards were bestowed and some of his plays were produced (with varying success), he was not nearly as praised nor recognized as when he had burst onto the American scene. But Jeffers, in his last days, wasn't much bothered by the indifference nor by attacks from writers like Ken-

neth Rexroth, who thought Jeffers a pompous, incompetent rhetorician.

Over the years, Jeffers's readership *outside* fashionable circles has responded positively to his poems that are, as Brophy puts it, " 'mini-sermons' to a race out of 'sync' with its world . . . (and) parables for understanding the world and man's place in it."

One such positive response is included in *A Jubilee Gathering*. Poet Dana Gioia's review of the Hass-edited *Rock and Hawk* was originally published in *The Nation* and reprinted in the *Newsletter*; it appears as the last long piece in this anthology. Well-reasoned, well-written, and altogether praiseful, Gioia concludes, "Jeffers has entered his second century quite splendidly."

Shorter, but also significant, is the response Gioia's review prompted from Edward Abbey, again published in *The Nation*, then in the *Newsletter* and now in the anthology:

Jeffers is one of our great and basic American poets, right in there with Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams. Jeffers in fact was more than a great poet; he was a great prophet. Everything he wrote about the corruption of empire, the death of democracy, the destruction of our planet and the absurd self-centered vanity of the human animal has come true tenfold since his time.

A Jubilee Gathering is more than a collection of laudatory reviews, however. In fact, Gioia's is the only review, as such, printed in the book. (No reviews published during Jeffers's career are reprinted here.) There are several items of note.

The book includes some of Jeffers's early and obscure (some possibly pseudonymous) verses, whose lines hold little promise. They are, in fact, dreadful. But to read them is useful, if for nothing else to see how far he came in breaking out of the mold of conventional versification and sensibility. Scholars likely will appreciate these poems' having been collected in one place.

These early works are in stark contrast to a late poem, "Whom Should I Write For?" a poem to his deceased wife that opens the book. "I think it is taken," the poet says of his wife's consciousness, "into the great dream of the earth; for this dark planet/Has its own consciousness, from which yours came,/And now returns . . .".

Kamil Bednar's "Robinson Jeffers in Czechoslovakia" is perhaps the book's most interesting article; it brings to light the fascinating fact that Jeffers's work has been quite popular in that country. In

1962, for example, a 5,000-copy edition of "The Loving Shepherdess" sold out in two days. From 1958 to 1983 10 volumes of Jeffers translations have sold 136,000 copies in Czechoslovakia. The magazine *Kultura* exalted Jeffers this way: "Discovery of poetical America! . . . Jeffers is one of the greatest poetical personalities of this century."

Memoirs of the poet and his family abound in this book. The famous photographer Horace Lyon writes of the difficulty of capturing on film an unguarded and relaxed Jeffers, while Richard Eberhart recalls a visit with Jeffers and muses on the quality of his life and art.

Among the 21 chapters in *A Jubilee Gathering* are explications of "Hungerfield" and "Return" and an analysis of the complex time structure of Jeffers's verse play "Dear Judas" (which includes some background on Jeffers's dramas, a neglected area of study). There is a history of Tor House, written by son Donnan, and a series of letters from Una to a friend.

Clearly, with such diversity of material, some articles will be of greater interest than others. The casual reader may not be terribly interested, for example, in the extensive bibliographic checklists or a detailed history of Jeffers's association with the Quercus Press. Some scholars likely will be. There is a lot here, and much of interest to anyone who knows Jeffers, even if only from the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. The book is attractively designed and illustrated with photographs of the poet, the California coast, his home, and drafts of letters and poems. Robert Brophy provides useful headnotes to the chapters, though there is, frustratingly, no index.

"What have I to do with you?" asks Czeslaw Milosz in his poem "To Robinson Jeffers," reprinted here from his collected poems. Milosz gives Jeffers his respectful regard, but still decides, "And yet you did not know what I know. The earth teaches/More than does the nakedness of elements. No one with impunity/ gives to himself the eyes of a god." The poem is powerful, and a contrast to the many acclamatory works in this book. It is a welcomed addition—welcomed for its balance and its beauty as a fine poem in its own right.

There is, of course, some distance between the conclusions of Milosz and the accolades of Gioia and others here. But all these writers and critics are responding to the unusual power and integrity that Robinson Jeffers's poems (and life) possessed. The responses are illuminating and provocative, as is much in *The Robinson Jeffers Newsletter: A Jubilee Gathering, 1962-1988*. This is a fine gathering. □