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## BOOK REVIEWS

A SUMMER DAY. Kate Roberts. With a foreword by Storm Jameson. Pp. 121. Penmark Press, Ltd. 7s. 6d.

Five years ago I pointed out, in *The Modern Short Story*, what was really evident to anyone interested in the short story at all: that Irish literature, already lost in the bogs of neutrality, was sick; that it seemed to have lost entirely that light which had charmed us in the 'twenties; and that in its place a Welsh renaissance, nourished by a soil at last almost free of the sourness of industrial depression, was in full flower. The years of war have increased the truth of this. In 1941 I could say that "an Irish play in London is an event; a Welsh play gets its production, if it gets it at all, in a back street theatre"; but in 1946 it is the Irish play, in the shape of Mr. O'Casey's brave and beautiful attempt to show us the lost glory, that must struggle to be heard—and shame on London for it—in the theatres of the back street, and the plays of Wales that come easily to the West End.

Miss Kate Roberts's stories have always been part of this renaissance, and even within it are unique. The Ireland of the new Gaelic teaching has not so far produced the really Irish situation of a writer who is so good that he demands translation into what until yesterday was his own literary language. Miss Roberts writes naturally in her native Welsh and is not, as far as I know, under any particular political compulsion from Caernarvon to reject English as her medium. She elects to express herself, for reasons of her own, in a language that is more foreign to Englishmen than most languages of western Europe, and to interpret by it a world that is narrower and less familiar to them than the world of provincial France or Spain. Like the masters of Europe with whom I think she is quite wrongly compared, she must be translated into English, and though these translations are themselves the work of sensitive writers she thereby places some difficulties in the way of the English critic, who can never be quite sure of her original quality.

But of the quality as seen in the translations in *A Summer Day* there can be very little doubt. She belongs to the literature of still waters. Her surfaces are oiled over with the flat dark calm of country backwaters, of undramatic lives, of apparently passionless marriages, of rural minds, of the eternal seasons, of unassuming birth and death in resignation. The winds that ruffle across them have, as Miss Storm Jameson points out in her preface to *A Summer Day*, nothing in them of the distracting emotions of anger, resentment, pride, self-pity, or bitterness. Her little ironies are gloved and oblique; her sadness is a long low sigh across the waters. I do not find in her a line touched by the shadow of savagery.

And if I reject the suggestion that she is comparable with European masters of the form, by which we must suppose Tchekov, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Maupassant, Flaubert, and the rest of the august, it is not only because I feel she lacks the stature to be put to comparisons which could only be unfair to her, but because across the Atlantic there exists a closer parallel for her wholly regional accent. It might almost be her source of derivation:—

I stopped to pick some blackberries that twinkled at me like beads among their dry vines, and two or three yellow birds fluttered up from the leaves of a thistle, and then came back again, as if they had complacently discovered that I was only an overgrown yellow bird, in strange disguise but perfectly harmless. . . . It was good to stand at last on the shoulder of the hill. The wind was coming in from the sea, there was a fine fragrance from the pines, and the air grew sweeter every moment. . . . Further down the hill, I got a drink of fresh cool water from the brook, and pulled a tender sheaf of sweet flag beside it.

Compare this:—

The farmhouse had a cool look; it was newly white-washed, and there had been no rain to wash away the spots of white-wash which had fallen at the foot of the walls. The house looked quiet and calm as newly white-washed houses do. The people of the house had the quiet look of people overpowered by the first sudden heat of summer. The garden too showed signs of spring cleaning; the potatoes newly banked up, and the dark fresh earth which had been below the surface showing now, with a strip of the old dry light-coloured earth to be seen here and there. There was a neatness in the straight furrows and in the level beds of onions. The young gooseberries hung on the bushes like hundreds of little teats.

It is probably three quarters of a century since Sarah Orne Jewett was writing the first of these quotations, which in the tender and trembling accuracy of its observation and the reality of its flavour is so much like the quotation from *A Summer Day*. The comparison does not end here. In the world of Miss Jewett's New England and the world of Miss Roberts's Wales there are the same small dramas of hidden lives, of the rosy distances of youth seen through the disenchantments of age, of solitude disturbed by the half-thrill, the half-opportunity, the half-dream of yesterday. In both writers there is the same keen, almost too keen, sense of pity for the aged, the lonely, the weak, the sick, the unloved; the same joy in colour and the same sensuous response to scent and place and air; the same danger of sentimentality and the same passive rather than active avoidance of it and, here and there, the same fall. Sometimes the stories of both writers are like blown egg-shell; pure and light in their perfection of form, transparent, shining, and yet empty of the bright yolk-stream of a harsher, fuller, bloodier living. Just as Miss Jewett hardly touched on the Civil War, in her day the bloodiest war in history, so Miss Roberts has nothing to say of the ghastly treacheries and heroics of our time. This narrowness of boundaries is not a defect in either writer. There are temperaments to whom the agony of large events is only a means of

frustration. It has been said of Miss Jewett that the perfection of her work came out of abundance. Miss Roberts's perfection, quiet and limited as it is, similarly rises out of the rich-pressed harvest of a limited but abundant regional field. Above all it shines with light: the light that once stood over Ireland to enchant us, but that is now Wales.

H. E. BATES.

ALTKELTISCHE DICHTUNGEN: Aus dem Irisch-Gälischen und Cymrischen übertragen und eingeleitet von Julius Pokorny. Pp. 180. Bern: A. Francke. 7.20 Swiss francs.

The contribution of continental scholars to Celtic studies is immense, but Professor Pokorny is doubtless correct in thinking that Celtic literature (apart from Macpherson's Ossianic fakes) is little known to the general public in continental countries, and it was a happy thought to issue a collection of German renderings from early Celtic poetry. The result is a charming volume, beautifully printed on good paper and elegantly bound, which should be a revelation to many lovers of poetry in German-speaking circles. Its chief defect is the inadequate space given to Welsh poetry, but this is not the author's fault. He escaped the Gestapo by a miracle, being at his father's death-bed in Vienna when they visited his house at Berlin to arrest him; and though he managed not only to get across the Swiss frontier but also to secure his Irish books, which were at Vienna, his Welsh library perished at Berlin, and he was dependent for this part of his work on Professor Kenneth Jackson's *Early Welsh Gnostic Poems* and *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, with a copy of my *Development of Welsh Poetry*, lent him by a friend.

The selection from Irish poetry, forty-seven pieces in all, is excellent, and is classified according to subjects, "Nature," "From sagas and tales," etc. Naturally and rightly it contains all the well-known poems, and a few later pieces are included. There are but nine selections from Welsh poetry, three of them from the *Gododdin* and two from the Llywarch Hen cycle (the second of these is from the series of stanzas on pp. 50-53 of Professor Jackson's *Nature Poetry*, which is reconstructed as a dialogue between Cyndilig and Llywarch Hen). At the end are six renderings from the poetry of the modern Anglo-Irish school, including three from Yeats.

The usual medium is a kind of rhythmical prose, but several of the versions are fully metrical, though lacking rhyme, and the Anglo-Irish poems at the end are both metrical and rhymed. The translations are beautifully done and will undoubtedly give a very attractive impression of the beauty and strength of this early Celtic poetry. They should be an eye-opener to those (and they are in the majority) whose conception of