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The Intricate, Devised Hearing of Sight . . .

A Profile of Rosemary Dobson

Climate of stillness: though I hear
No sound that falls on mortal ear
Yet in the intricate, devised
Hearing of sight these waves that break
In thunder on a barren shore
Will foam and crash for evermore.

This grey and silver Hogarth made
To paint the children as they played
Is silver sound of bells and cries,
I hear them call; they stretch their hands
To reach the cherries overhead—
The children who are long since dead.

And you, grave Florentine, who turn
And look at me with eyes that burn,
I hear you asking—"What is Time
Since Art has conquered it? I speak
Five hundred years ago. You hear.
My words beat still upon your ear."

"Paintings" by Rosemary Dobson.

On the far wall, borrowing light from the flood of sun on the floor, is a Holbein print; nearer to the desk a Botticelli. Above the low book case is the complete painting "S. Ivo" by Rogier Van der Weyden from which is taken the detail that graces the cover of Rosemary Dobson's recent Selected Poems. ("I had to be firm about that", the poet says, "The publishers wanted a picture of Lake Burley Griffin for the cover. But it wasn't right. None of the poems related to Canberra. We'd only just come here.") A beautiful Landseer line drawing of mother and child fills the near niche of wall. ("Quite unlike his 'Stag at Bay' style", Rosemary Dobson says, savouring it again as she speaks.) And most immediate of all, resting on a shelf, is a blow-up photograph of Ghiselbertus' sculpture of the 12th century from the French cathedral at Autun. (Rosemary Dobson, tall and gracious, communicates an infectious delight in beauty, in the discovery of new beauty and the opportunity it brings for plumbing life and history. She draws her hand along the Ghiselbertus piece: "See how beautifully simple it is. The angel is coming to tell

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Rosemary Dobson and the photo of Chiselbertus' sculpture.
the three kings that the star is over Bethlehem. See, they're asleep, but the angel has woken this one. And there's the star above them like a flower. Beautiful.")

Perhaps the most notable feature of Rosemary Dobson's poetry is the way it draws on the visual, on paintings, sculpture, on the Renaissance, on the European tradition, on Greek myth, on Italian marble. Her poems not only illuminate works of art in the tradition of W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams with Breughel's "Icarus", but through them celebrate life itself. "It's looking at paintings that has given me such pleasure", she explains. "Almost at times more than reading poetry. I'm a kind of failed artist, I suppose."

Rosemary Dobson's husband, Alec Bolton, is Director of Publications to the National Library of Australia. Their house, once the home of a sculptress is long and low, set under the lee of Red Hill. A prospect of Canberra—gentle green of gums pinned down by the darker emphasis of pines—stretches away from the deep windows. "I think Canberra is beautiful; physically beautiful", says Rosemary Dobson. "There are things about it I don't like, of course. My husband says we are an indulged community, and he's probably right. But I don't think I've ever lost a sense of its beauty."

Born in Sydney in 1920, Rosemary Dobson grew up there until she was nine years old. Her grandfather was Austin Dobson, English poet and essayist. Her father, one of Austin Dobson's ten children, came to Australia from South America. She remembers him only as a very ill man in his last years. He died when she was five. Her mother struggled to bring up her two daughters unaided, but was greatly helped by Winifred West, educator of vision and founder of Frensham school. Rosemary Dobson and her sister Ruth (who was recently appointed Australia's first career woman diplomat Ambassador) received their education at Frensham under most generous scholarship conditions.

"It wasn't at all an unhappy childhood", Rosemary Dobson insists. "But we felt strange at first among the children of the wealthy, coming to the school as we did with a less stable background. We had nowhere to go at holiday time as they had. Sometimes we went to houses people lent to us; we were separated a few times. Or we stayed at the school—I liked being at the school when nobody was there."

As a seventeen-year-old Rosemary Dobson returned to Frensham to do apprentice teaching of art and art history. But she had an eagerness to continue to learn. With her modest earnings she settled in Sydney and haunted Sydney University as an unmatriculated student, taking as many English courses as she could, sitting for examinations as if preparing for a degree, submitting essays, savouring poetry. She recalls those two years with gratitude: "That under-the-counter education was marvellous. I did seven separate courses. It's a pity that students can't do it now, but it seems that the competition for places makes it impossible. There must be other square pegs, as I was, who would get a great deal from it."

Rosemary Dobson had come away from Frensham with deep regard for three things. Her first love was poetry—"I had been writing it from the age of seven. I knew I wanted to be a poet." The second enthusiasm was painting—"I believe one art throws light on the other. I still find myself thinking of the technique of poetry in terms of the technique of painting." The third, an insight developed in her school days working over the platen press at Frensham, became her love of typography—"I learned quite a lot about the basics of typography and printing with Joan Phipson at Frensham. She was chief printer there and is now well known as a writer of children's books. Always since I've been moved by a page of well-set type, as one is moved by a painting."
So Rosemary Dobson found herself part of the stimulating decade of the 1940's, a period probably more significant in the development of Australian poetry than any other. Her own verse began to appear. She moved from the University group with whom she studied during the day to the students at Thea Proctor’s art classes—two very different sets of people. Thea Proctor she recalls as quite an austere person, but one of whom she became very fond. “It may sound somehow frivolous to say it like this”, she says, “but what I gained from Thea Proctor was a sense of taste. And discipline in art—she was a very professional artist.”

In the early 1940’s, after a short period as a cipher clerk in the Australian Navy, Rosemary Dobson began her long-standing association with the publishers Angus and Robertson. She became a book editor. This work brought her in contact with many of the important figures in Australian writing and art at the time. As recently as 1973 she recalled the cut and thrust and cultural fruitfulness of that time in a fascinating and invaluable lecture to an audience at Sydney University when she was invited to give the third Blaiklock Memorial Lecture. She touched on her own growth to maturity as a poet and the relationship that exists for her between painting and poetry. She reminded her Sydney audience of the range of poets who came to prominence then—John Blight, William Hart-Smith, James McAuley, Francis Webb, David Campbell and others. It was also a period of surprisingly illiberal censorship and of the court action over William Dobell’s Archibald Prize winning portrait of Joshua Smith and of the reviving presence in Australia of American poets like Karl Shapiro and Harry Roskolenko while American forces were fighting in the Pacific. It was the time of the Jindyworobaks, of the establishment of Meanjin and Southerly, of Max Harris’s Angry Penguins and the Ern Malley hoax, of the new consciousness of this country marked by Russell Drysdale’s landscapes and the poetry of Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright. It was the time of the first tentative lectures on Australian literature in Australian universities.

Against this backdrop Rosemary Dobson was submitting more and more of her work to editors whose acceptances, when they came, were more often than not in those days accompanied by apologetic notes explaining that they could not pay for the poems. “I remember feeling that I expected no remuneration for poems I published then”, Rosemary Dobson has said. “I was so much an apprentice to my trade that to see something in print was enough.”

At Angus and Robertson Rosemary Dobson had stimulating contact with her renowned editorial colleagues Beatrice Davis and Nan McDonald. And through her submissions to the Bulletin she came to know Douglas Stewart (then not long in his position as literary editor) and his wife, the painter Margaret Coen. “In those days”, she recalls, “both Angus and Robertson and the Bulletin stood in the same relationship to Australian literature—that of guardian. I met and got to know a lot of writers. My job was general editing. We all did everything from book indexes to blurbs. I learned a lot from Nan McDonald. Beatrice Davis described her as the best book editor in Australia, and I think she was. She was a very fine poet, too. Much underrated because she was so retiring. Anyway, we also read submitted manuscripts and spoke to the authors. We had all sorts of work coming in, including the terrible manuscripts with the note attached—‘my book has been admired by my whole family’—that sort of thing.”

It is Douglas Stewart’s encouragement of her poetry that Rosemary Dobson particularly remembers. He assisted her with the preparation of her first collection, In a Convex Mirror, which appeared in 1944. She often visited the studio at 12 Bridge Street, Sydney, that Douglas and Margaret Stewart shared with Norman Lindsay. Later, married to Alec Bolton who was then editor for Ure Smith, the publishers of several of Lindsay’s books, she used to visit the painter and writer at Springwood. “I think in his own way Norman was just as sure of his skill in
what he was doing as Thea Proctor was of hers. I violently disagreed with a
number of his ideas, and I suppose I preferred Thea Proctor's reserve to Norman's
overwhelming personality. But I liked him so very much. He had great generosity,
great enthusiasms, and affections and it was wonderful to know him. How fortunate
I was to have been painted by both Norman and Thea Proctor! It was fascinating
to watch them at work."

From that period, too, and into the 1970's extended a three-way friendship
between Nan McDonald, Francis Webb and Rosemary Dobson. In the 1940's
Francis Webb, diffident, just starting out as a poet, would come to Angus and
Robertson and the three would talk. Later, Rosemary Dobson recalls, as Francis
Webb's mental illness began to step disturbingly in and out of his life and poetry,
and when she herself went abroad, it was Nan McDonald's letters that kept the
three in touch. The friendship ended with tragic swiftness when Francis Webb died
in November 1973 and Nan McDonald only six weeks later.

In 1948 Rosemary Dobson's second collection of poems, The Ship of Ice, won the
Sydney Morning Herald prize for poetry. She published Child With a Cockatoo
in 1955, not long after the birth of her daughter. That book, and Cock Crow, her
further collection that appeared in 1965, contain poems that provide a new dimen-
sion in her work—deeply personal, yet universal poems dealing with child birth,
motherhood and the bonds of family; poems like "Birth", "Child of Our Time",
"Annunciations", "To Meet the Child", and the title poem of the second collection,
"Cock Crow":

Wanting to be myself, alone,
Between the lit house and the town
I took the road, and at the bridge
Turned back and walked the way I'd come.

Three times I took that lonely stretch,
Three times the dark trees closed me round,
The night absolved me of my bonds;
Only my footsteps held the ground.

My mother and my daughter slept,
One life behind and one before,
And I that stood between denied
Their needs in shutting-to the door.

And walking up and down the road
Knew myself, separate and alone,
Cut off from human cries, from pain,
And love that grows about the bone.

Too brief illusion! Thrice for me
I heard the cock crow on the hill
And turned the handle of the door
Thinking I knew his meaning well.

As she talks about it, it is clear that the poem is a deeply-felt one for Rosemary
Dobson: "It's to do with the feeling of being torn in two ways—one's human
responsibilities as opposed to what one wants to do artistically. Yes, I think at
certain stages in one's life it is necessary to be a bit ruthless in pursuing 'that one
talent that is death to hide'. Everybody feels the contrary pull at some stage. I
think it comes for a woman at that stage of having young children. Although on
the other hand the man has to earn money for a family and so on. It applies to
both. I know that I've been very lucky. My husband has given me a great deal of
help... support..."
Rosemary Dobson, and Ray Crooke's painting "Morning Light".
With her elder son, Robert, sorting new submissions for the Canberra Fellowship Anthology.
As her children grew up, and as her poetic reputation grew, Rosemary Dobson found herself more and more involved in the concomitants of writing—lecturing, anthologizing, and preparing for the occasional television programme. She continued to produce poetry steadily, but painted less and less.

In 1966, when her husband was posted to London as London editor for Angus and Robertson, Rosemary Dobson and the children accompanied him. They remained abroad for five years. "We travelled as much as we could—as much as expense, time and young children would allow", she says. "We saw a good deal, using weekends and breaks. There are things one regrets not managing, of course. But I was very fortunate. My sister was then Counsellor with the Australian Embassy in Athens. I stayed with her in Greece for a while. It was beautiful. When we returned my husband gave me a copy of the travel books by Pausanias—marvellous! He was the earliest Greek travel writer, if you like. He travelled all over Greece in the second century A.D., just absorbing it. He was most concerned with the divinities, the temples, the shrines and so on. His books are a store-house of description and legend. And I started to write then the series of poems that I’m still working on, called probably ‘Poems from Pausanias’. I hope my Literature Board grant might get me back to Greece—and then I’ll finish the series."

On return to Australia in 1971, the family soon found themselves in Canberra as a new home. "Ah", says Rosemary Dobson, suddenly the housewife of Cock Crow again, "Canberra was welcome as a place where you could hang something out and it would actually dry! I’d said if not Sydney, where we had a lot of our friends, then Canberra. And here we were—Alec was appointed to the National Library."

Rosemary Dobson works in the airy, sunny room at the end of the house, down the long corridor, down three steps, away from lounge, dining-room, kitchen, bedrooms. She is organized and painstaking in the work she is doing at present as editor by invitation of a new anthology of Australian prose and poetry to be published by the Australian National University Press for the Canberra branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Manuscripts—some 1,200 of them—litter the table in her workroom. She goes to the library at the Australian National University perhaps a couple of days a week. "I like to be where students are working. And without telephone and interruptions", she says. While the anthology takes most of her time at the moment, she also is called upon to give lectures from time to time to such groups as the Women's Graduates Association, or to the Australian Literature course at ANU where her daughter is doing second year Arts. Once a week she meets fellow poet David Campbell and Robert Dessaix of the Russian Department at the University. Over lunch in the grounds of the University Staff Centre the three confer on their versions of poems by the Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. David Campbell and Rosemary Dobson have a selection of these poems ready for publication in book form. *(see page 64)*

While she was in London, Rosemary Dobson was asked to prepare some of her poems for the University of Queensland press *Poets on Record* series. She also completed most of the work for her book on the Australian painter, Ray Crooke, commissioned by the same press. Two of his works hang in her Canberra lounge. "And now", she says with an unassuming tone of surprised pleasure that is typical of her, "I’m doing life classes in Canberra. I did some line drawings of buildings in London. In life classes, I can concentrate on ‘volume’. I’ll never be any good, of course, but I like to do it."

In the small room behind her workroom in the Canberra house is her husband’s hand press. Under the imprint of Brindabella Press Alec Bolton has already produced a beautiful small sheet edition of some of the Pausanias poems, as well as a slim book of a sequence of poems by David Campbell. "The press is something for
the future and it is Alec's project", says Rosemary Dobson, running her hands over
the cold of the metal, looking into the trays of type on a shelf. "We both have a
real joy in typography. There's a lot still to learn. But the private press is to be
considered an art form in its own right these days, what with the standardization
that has come about elsewhere with such things as computer type-setting."

The Poems from Pausanias, of course, are a natural part of Rosemary Dobson's
lifelong fascination with myth and fine art. As she has always done, she writes her
poems one at a time, and usually at one sitting, trusting first versions by and
large, rather than second thoughts that are re-worked. "Sometimes I write a poem
more or less as a discipline", she says. "And I find I can usually bring it off. I
think, though, that in those cases something has been working subliminally that
I haven't been aware of." She is very interested in the work of the younger poets,
feels that they must be well represented in the Canberra Fellowship anthology.
"What we older poets read at Canberra poetry sessions is very different from what
the younger ones are doing", she says. "But it's not merely a matter of age—the
individual's world view underlies the difference too. It seems to me that when you
are younger you have lyrical impulses, so to speak. You think of lines and then
relate them and make a poem of them. When you're older you think of an idea
and work on it to make a poem. As far as my own work is concerned, I like to
keep my options open. I'd like to think of myself as a flexible traditionalist."

In a small courtyard beside a pond where goldfish slide slowly in and out of
the sun, Rosemary Dobson sets lunch. The food on the tray is a still life—cheese,
butter, meat, figs, walnuts, fruit—and the white wine and the bread. It was Douglas
Stewart, with his particular gift of sudden penetration, who said that Rosemary
Dobson in her work is a religious person in the deepest and most important sense.
And she herself has written, in the Introduction to her Selected Poems of 1973, the
following words: "I hope it will be perceived that the poems presented here are
part of a search for something only fugitively glimpsed; a state of grace which
one once knew, or imagined, or from which one was turned away. Surely everyone
who writes poetry would agree that this is part of it—a doomed but urgent wish
to express the inexpressible."

Nowhere is her humility and artistry better reflected than in her recent poem,
"Being Called For". In this poem, as A. D. Hope has written, Rosemary Dobson
"sees herself in the mirror of eternity...".

Come in at the low-silled window,
Enter by the door through the vine leaves
Growing over the lintel. I have hung bells at the
Window to be stirred by the breath of your
Coming, which may be at any season.

In winter the snow throws
Light on the ceiling. If you come in winter
There will be a blue shadow before you
Cast on the threshold.

In summer an eddying of white dust
And a brightness falling between the leaves.

When you come I am ready: only, uncertain—
Shall we be leaving at once on another journey?
I would like first to write it all down and leave the
pages
On the table weighted with a stone,
Nevertheless I have put in a basket
The coins for the ferry.