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The Unexamined Voices of the Poet Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald

A reassessment of the work of Jane Elizabeth Gostwycke Roberts MacDonald (1864-1922) begins with her family. Her poetry and reputation were overshadowed by that of her brothers Sir Charles G. D. Roberts and Theodore Goodridge Roberts. Even her name changed according to her place in the family: she was Charles's mirror image, "Charlie-in-petticoats," to her immediate family she was "Nain," and in Lloyd Roberts's essays on his "clan" in *The Book of Roberts* she was "Aunt Janey." In marriage she chose a cousin Samuel Archibald Roberts MacDonald and wrote under the name of Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald. Under both her maiden and her married names she wrote and worked for women's suffrage in Fredericton, in Nelson, BC, and in Ottawa. She published three books of poetry: her *Poems* (1885) and *Northland Lyrics* (1899) were followed by *Dream Verses* in 1906. *Northland Lyrics* was a collaboration with her brothers William Carman Roberts and Theodore Goodridge Roberts, while *Dream Verses* was entirely her own. This last book of poetry contained her new poetic voices. Here Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald not only expanded on the mystical poetry approved of by her older brother but also wrote with domestic voices which told of her suffering, of her love, of her childhood, of her home and garden, and of her children. The voice of philosopher is augmented by that of lover, child, mother and sage.

We know which poetry her older brother admired. In the volume of *Who Was Who in Canada 1875-1933*, edited by Charles Roberts, she was praised for the poetry in her last book of verse with the example of

"Damaris" purporting to be typical of her style. It was, obviously, selected by her brother. This is one of the more obscure and least accessible of her poems. It was written with a sentimental and nostalgic recollection of past happiness. Yet it had the insubstantial images of dream as the ghostly Damaris, "Vague as a half-remembered dream," moved like the summer wind through grasses and cedars. Perhaps, in writing her obituary, her brother chose a poem about remembering old times: "Yet ah, what thoughts awaken / And what old hopes return, / When Damaris goes singing / Among the upland fern" (441). The repetition of these four lines at the end of each of the two eight-line verses makes the poem uncomfortably imprecise and, because the author is so vague, incomplete.

The other voices found in this last volume were more authentic and accessible but more personal than her brother may have liked, or than he may have realized. Certainly he quoted an appreciative review of *Dream Verses* in his obituary of his sister, "a wholly womanly nature may be heard in every line," but did not acknowledge that aspect of her poetry in his choice of poem to illustrate her style. In *Sir Charles God Damn* John Coldwell Adams described the collaboration of Elsie Pomeroy with the subject of the authorized biography, *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts*. This biography omitted, among many other things, any mention of his sister's unhappy marriage and the death of her daughter in infancy (1900). Lloyd Roberts, however, hinted at her unhappiness, describing her bravery as she "created a last home for her mother and boys" (116). Sir Charles, in a letter to Lloyd from Yeomanry Officer's Corps Camp in England 1915, mentions Elizabeth's husband: "No news from Arch. I think it would be very dangerous for him to have an English Commission, as some drinking is universal, & the temptation for him to taste would be incessant" (Boone 308). Similarly, in a letter written in the same year to Carman by Jean Bliss, we read that Elizabeth's mother was "very thankful to have Nain in Ottawa with her, away from Arch" (Adams 122). In all of this we see personal tragedy: the loss of a child and of a marriage. Add the loneliness of the poet when her older brother, her mirror image, departed for, and then remained in, New York.

To examine the development of Roberts MacDonald's poetic voices it is appropriate to explore her mature poetry in *Dream Verses*. *Dream Verses* was written in two parts. Part One explored the efficacy of the

world of dream in transforming reality and healing human suffering. The themes of loss and death and the joy of transformation echoed in her work. Here too were love poems, presumably to her husband whom she married in 1896. Part Two contained poems written for her children Cuthbert Goodridge Roberts MacDonald and Archibald Gostwycke Roberts MacDonald, as well as for Hilary Roberts who died in infancy. Two elegiac poems for "Hilaire" were found in Part One.¹

Both Elizabeth and Charles Roberts were educated by their father at home and then went elsewhere for further schooling. It is understandable that they shared attitudes and philosophies about poetry. Charles, like his father, who had Elizabeth's first book of poetry privately printed in Fredericton, obviously encouraged his sister's writing, sending her poetry to the editor of *Century* where she was published in May and November, 1888. Likewise, he informed William D. Lighthall of her work. Thus her poems appeared in his edition of *Songs of the Great Dominion* in 1889.

Perhaps due to their Rectory education, Wordsworth's influence, together with that of their second cousin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was obvious in the work of both siblings. Elsie Pomeroy suggested in her biography that Sir Charles's collected *Poems* (1901) contained "significant poems . . . of philosophy and mysticism" which "have received but little general recognition as such. They seem to have been overshadowed by the so-called nature verse of Roberts" (115-116). Here also "Autochthon," said Pomeroy, with the obvious approval of Roberts, "reveals the influence of his great kinsman Emerson" (117). Similarly, the concepts of immortality found in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" recurred in Roberts's "Kinship" where he spoke of childhood as a "bewildering vision / And the borderland of birth" (*Poems* 17).² Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald shared with her brother a philosophy that early childhood holds the "dream" world from which poetic inspiration and a sense of immortality emanate. This could be seen in the title of her collection of *Dream Verses* and in her poem "In Dream's Domain" which appeared there:

In that glad world of dream Time cannot reach,
Where true hearts answer truly, each to each,
And glance or touch can utter more than speech,

With hand held fast in hand along the green
Dim road we ran, through drifted shade and sheen,
While fresh winds sang our laughing words between.

It seemed that so for ever we could run,—
That all the tangled web of days was spun
And life and youth immortal were begun.

Dream strange and dear, how often in the throng
And stress of duties, like a breath of song
Your memory has returned to make me strong! (3-4)

While Sir Charles G. D. Roberts abandoned this theme in later works, Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald continued to develop it in her own way. She created a paradigm in which childhood, houses, and gardens became "dream" houses and gardens complete with the "blue roses" of her fantasy world.³ This world links imagination, poetry (poets were "dream-led" [68]), death, love and immortality. Sometimes too studied and self-conscious, this configuration of images contained intriguing references to the wind which was sometimes the source of the poet's inspiration, the impetus for her shift into a fantasy world, and at other times the holy spirit.⁴

This wind also had associations with childhood. It compared favorably with that represented as a transforming fairy figure by the early fantasist and friend of John Ruskin, George MacDonald, in his children's novel *At the Back of the North Wind*. The shape-changing North Wind carried the hero to the magic pastoral land reminiscent of Herodotus's classical pastoral vision. This novel was first published in serial form in the periodical *Good Words for the Young* (1868) and appeared in book form in 1871. One wonders if the young Roberts could have read it in the Rectory.⁵ Certainly both George MacDonald and Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald shared the problems which arose when an author created a pastoral fantasy-world which was similar to heaven. These problems were central to a theology which attempted to explain pain, suffering and death as part of the function of a caring and loving God. To personify a figure, whether it be the North Wind, the "dream-winds" (41), or the holy spirit, as one who carried human beings to another more perfect world while

they were still alive in this world causes the reader to question the relationship of such a figure to the Christian God in whom both authors clearly believed.

While both Sir Charles G. D. Roberts and Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald wrote of nature as a healing force, Roberts MacDonald extended the theme into a mystical philosophy. In *Dream Verses* human beings, gardens, houses and wild nature existed in parallel worlds: the one was temporal, flawed with pain and death, the other was a timeless dream-world where colors changed but landscape and nature remained recognizable. The wind, love and poetry-writing seemed to effect the change between the worlds. This world of dream transformed reality into a place where human suffering was temporarily removed and replaced by healing visions.

Elizabeth's less accessible poetry could have considerable power. It could be moving, poignant and strong. The author combined her lyrical talent with multi-sensing imagery and the insights of mysticism.⁶ The fact that memory was sometimes included in her shift to the world of "dream" connected her Wordsworthian concepts of childhood to the visions of a parallel and healing dream-world. It also indicated the power of the image of childhood for a poet who had such a happy childhood within the Roberts clan that she drew on it for her description of a Canadian childhood in her children's book *Our Canadian Cousin* (1904).

Her philosophical verse could be marred by the use of the cumbersome "we" as the voice of a ponderous adult Everyperson. As Roberts MacDonald developed new voices, however, her poems, such as that about our planet "sweeping . . . through star-deep fields of space," changed as she used the "we" to speak as one child among many. She anticipated her direct and childlike voice as she spoke with curiosity and wonder: "Little world among so many, / How, despite your graves and tears, / We your puzzled children love you, / Singing, swinging down the years" ("Sphere of Wonder" 83).

The period between 1885-1906 saw many changes in Roberts MacDonald's life. Her brother Goodridge died suddenly in 1892 within days of contracting the grippe at Acadia Villa, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where he was staying with his fiancée Minnie Sophia Prat. The transforming imagination of the philosopher and dreamer-poet could bring brother and sister together again through her poetry. Even some of her obscure poems

about death may have referred to him ("When Fades the Year," "Old Friends Old Ways," and "The Fields of Peace"). Her poem to M. S. P., "The House of Boughs," must have been written to Minnie Prat who died in 1900, referring as it does to the "green Acadian woods" (64). Again she tried to unite the childlike games of her youthful past together with her present grief and an anticipation of future contentment:

The world might go if love would stay;
 Our play-house had the sky for dome
 In green Acadian woods that day
 When Heaven and Earth were ours, in play. (65)

Roberts MacDonald's preoccupation with death continued in a celebratory elegy for Juliana Horatia Ewing, the children's author, who died in England in 1885 but who was a close friend of her aunts, Emily and Mary Hyde Roberts, during her Fredericton years 1867-9. Emily became Elizabeth's mother-in-law (Blom 308). Again the moral philosophy of the Anglican Ewing and that of the Anglican clergyman's daughter-poet provide a sympathetic bond which informs an otherwise mediocre poem.

In the new century, the poet lost both her second child at ten months of age in 1900 and her father in 1905. Emma Elizabeth Hilary Roberts MacDonald (b. May 1899, d. March 1900) was buried in a service performed by her grandfather, George Goodridge Roberts. Such experiences, together with her marriage in 1896 and the birth of her two boys Cuthbert Goodridge Roberts MacDonald in May 1897 and Archibald Gostwycke Roberts MacDonald in November 1901, developed new, less philosophical voices, while her dream-world provided a deeper context. Her mixed feelings of grief, loss and joy were captured in the simple poem "Poppies." Here the experience of the real world was more immediate than that found in her mystical poetry. Nevertheless she still presents us with a dream world parallel to our own reality and gained by love:

When all the world was white with snow,
 I dreamed of poppies, row on row,
 Breaking the white with crimson glow.

So blooms, I thought, the red of love
 Richly, life's frozen wastes above,
 Breaking the bitter spell thereof! (14)

Gone was the cumbersome language and the references to "we" and "us" that appeared in less direct verse. This piece prefigured the new voices of the love lyrics and the poems of Part Two of *Dream Verses*.

Thus the new voices which were emerging from the experiences of a mature woman (separated from the influences of her powerful older brother) praised present phenomena rather than those of the past or of the "dream" in some of the verses in Part One. Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald relinquished the Victorian tones of the poetry her brother admired. As Angela Leighton comments, when referring to *Aurora Leigh* in her book, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, the female voice "repudiates the habit of nostalgia which tempts the Victorian poet with the glamour of the past" (115). Instead "The 'real everyday life of our age' which Barrett Browning confronts in *Aurora Leigh* is mainly the 'real everyday life' of women, in all its small domestic detail" (115). So, too, Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald asserted the validity of the present and the domestic to be fit subjects for poetry. The garden, love and happiness were things of the present:

When the paths in the quiet garden
Are shaded with elm and vine,
When the dusk is hushed and holy,
And moon-light half-divine,
Thoughts sweet as June
In the weary brain upstart,
And love, love like a tide
Rises and fills the heart. (23)

The image of the powerful tides of Fundy reinforced the sense of the experiential present in this poem.⁷ Similarly, Roberts MacDonald's sadness remained unaltered by dreams; she could accept reality without changing it. In "Gray Days," for instance, she expressed her sadness felt "By the lonely river" when "Spring has lost her way" (95). Here she returned to the Fredericton image of the river as a mirror of her feelings: "Here last year together / Found we love supreme: / Now 'tis gray, gray weather, / By the sobbing stream" (95).

Thus Roberts MacDonald's poetic voices spoke of the unfashionable domestic sphere of her life. Love, home, garden, children, loss and loneliness preoccupied the poet. In talking of such women poets, Angela

Leighton analyses the position taken by critics like Jacqueline Rose and Julia Kristeva and the psychoanalytical criticism of Jacques Lacan and Harold Bloom and finds aspects of their criticism inappropriate for Elizabeth Barrett Browning and similar poets (like Roberts MacDonald). She makes the point that

The woman who writes cannot be a muse or an 'Other,' and she ceases to be an object of mystery or desire. Instead, she assumes the new power of being a subject in her own right, but in a tradition which has no mythological or ideological description for that subjectivity. (20)

Like Barrett Browning, Roberts MacDonald used herself and her own interpretation of her life as the subject of her poetry.

In her love lyrics, namely "Companioned," "Homing," "The Yellow Rose," "Via Amoris," "Love's Messenger" and "One Star," Roberts MacDonald's companion had real qualities and was not the cloudy, god-like figure of the mystical verse. To whom these poems were written with such feeling is debatable. Who knows if she referred to her husband's journeys or if she wrote for Charles or possibly one of her children, or even if the figure was an imaginary one? Rather than focussing on the identity of the object of her love, Roberts MacDonald concentrated on her experience of the love itself:

My heart is like a homing bird,
That flies to thee, to thee,
Across the lonely leagues of earth,
Across the restless sea.

A wandering dove and all forespent
It beats against the pane;
Oh open wide the casement, Dear,
And take it home again.(98)

Such love for the traveller was expressed with the flowing lyricism whose control Elsie Pomeroy praised in 1951 as "the exquisite melody, the delicate phrasing and the inevitable word" ("Elizabeth Roberts Macdonald" 15). In such poems Roberts MacDonald's voice was explicit and unashamedly emotional, communicating an authenticity of feeling in the directness of its focus.

Such lyrics also referred to her personal tragedy. One of them ("Via Amoris") could read like an anniversary poem in a popular greeting card. Yet in this, ironically, Roberts MacDonald expressed her hope in her marriage, despite the suffering that has been shared. "Via Amoris" spoke of the early love relationship when "our hearts were light with loving, / Fair around us the wide world spread, / Life before us was ours for proving, / Doubt was conquered and dead" (93). Together the couple in the poem faced the "wintry weather" of loss and sadness and yet they still "out-brave the years" and "Still we whisper, the closer leaning, / "Golden sunlight or skies of gray, / Wild white storm or the sweet woods greening,— / Love shall show us the way!" (94).

By far the strongest of the voices emerging from this collection were those of both child and mother. One outstanding four-line poem from Part One, "An Autumn Leaf," had qualities reminiscent of the shorter poems of Christina Rossetti or Robert Louis Stevenson. Elizabeth shared with the reader the childlike openness of a poet who is excited by life and nature, who found it full of wonder:

My heart is like a golden leaf
 This Autumn wind has found
 And blown across a dreamland wall
 To some enchanted ground. (35)

While keeping this tone of enjoyment of the simple things of life, Roberts MacDonald spoke directly to her children in Part Two of *Dream Verses*. She shared her love of life as she rediscovered the pleasures of childhood through her own children. Not that she ever forgot her own happy childhood; she often referred to it elsewhere in her poetry and prose, but she experienced its freshness and excitement again as she explored her domestic world of gardens and houses through her children's eyes. In the first poem in this series the poet, as an intensely alive person, greeted another such being, her child. She entitled it "Ave,"

Tiny bells of Elfland ringing,
 Wind-songs waking sweet and wild;
 Pale sweet blooms in shadowy places,
 Flags unfurled from every bough,
 Baby ferns with crumpled faces,—
 None so sweet as thou! (103)

The wisdom of the newborn, of those people who trail "clouds of glory as [they] come" was invoked here to teach adults the "Secrets" of existence (107).⁸ Caregivers also could teach new arrivals about the joys of this planet and travel with them on imaginary journeys where characters of children's stories, "Ash-Pet and Rushy-Coat,"⁹ and figures from medieval Arthurian romance, namely Sir Bors, Sir Galahad and "the lily-white maid" of Astolat (Elaine), wander and joust ("Journeys" 111).

By far the majority of these verses were lullabies. In keeping with Roberts MacDonald's lyrical talent, these songs for her young children wove images of magic, flowing rhythms and seemingly natural rhymes with tenderness. Her land of "dream" had become the land of sleep where imagination could play freely: "Would he be a pale May-blossom / Under leafy shade[?]" (105). She, as mother and poet, could, unfortunately, be sentimental as she fostered growth and gained new awareness of this fantasy land. "Little Bird and Lamb and Flower, / Each and all thou art, — / Field and nest and shadowed forest / Found in mother's heart" (105).

"Dreamland," "Good Night" and "Whiteness" continued this theme, while adding prayers for a safe return from dreamland. That return was also prayed for in a four-line morning poem entitled "Waking": "White lambkin, white lambkin, come up from the fold / To the dear daylight meadows all spangled with gold; / The blue laughing river sings low for thy sake, / The robins call softly;—white lambkin, awake" (113). The tenderness and immediacy of emotion communicated in this short lyric was typical of the poetic voice Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald found through the lives of her children.

This emotional reawakening was not without poignancy. The need to create a safe haven, to invoke the land of dream as a place of protection for her children was based on reality. "The Garden" was a spell, binding her child to the land of dream where the garden was both here and eternal. The last four poems in *Dream Verses* were written from the heart for her only daughter, Hilary. They are "Fairy Favours," "Guarded," "Voices," and "In Hilary's House." At this point her poetry found a new level of emotional and lyrical beauty. It emanates from her role as the poet-daughter-mother who was, in her turn, close to her mother, Emma Roberts, for whom her own daughter was named. She spoke with the voice of a sage and with a woman's voice imbued with the sense of continuation and renewal:

What do the little leaves say to my daughter?
 Beautiful, wonderful words,
 Stories and stories the dryads have taught them,
 Songs they have learned from the birds.

What do the Summer winds say to my daughter?
 Legends of ages ago,
 Lullabies sung in the days of the Pharaohs
 Secrets the pyramids know.

What does the drowsy dusk say to my daughter?
 "Sleep, sweetly sleep, all night through;
 Stars glimmer softly like kind eyes to watch you,
 Out of the shadowy blue." (121)

The girl-child was cradled in a context of the wisdom of the ages and of the personal love of her mother. Hilary's death in infancy must have been a great loss. Elizabeth published her later poetry which, "while retaining the delicate lyrical quality, [is] marked by a deeper poignancy and quite often by a philosophical note" (Pomeroy, "Elizabeth Roberts Macdonald" 15), in magazines. There were no more published collections of her work after 1906.

The voices of the philosopher, the woman, child, lover and sage emerged from the mystical and romantic philosophy of *Poems*, *Northland Lyrics* and *Dream Verses*. Roberts MacDonald's work for women's rights and suffrage and her later essay writing developed out of this intense period of her life and, presumably, out of her personal struggle when, after 1912, she left Fredericton and her marriage collapsed.

Angela Leighton's question for Barrett Browning can be asked about Roberts MacDonald: "What is the muse to this woman's writing?" (21). One can answer only that her best work stems from her domestic and personal voices. Her own story was her muse. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning's position in literary circles caused her to write love sonnets to Robert, to explore her relationship with her father and to assert her feminism in poetry, Elizabeth Roberts MacDonald's life cycle caused her to forget her brother's influence and develop her own philosophy, to explore her feelings and life story as subjects for her poetry and to express her feminism in her prose and in practical work for women's suffrage. Her voice(s) deserve to be heard.

NOTES

1. Emma Elizabeth Hilary Roberts MacDonald (born 5 May 1899; baptized 16 May 1899; buried 15 March 1900). Elizabeth referred to her as Hilary or Hilaire.
2. Wordsworth's mystical attitude to childhood is revealed in the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," ll. 5, 58, 151-4. Sir Charles G. D. Roberts reiterates this theme in "An Oblation," "Afoot," "Renewal," "Dream-Fellows" and "Ode to Drowsihood" in *Poems*. That his thinking was on nature and mysticism at this time is clear. In the same year that he wrote the foreword for *Northland Lyrics* (1899), Charles was also writing the introduction to an edition of Henry D. Thoreau's *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* (see *Dalhousie Review* 67.1 [1987]: 101-8). Thoreau was a protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson.
3. *Dream Verses*. House images and dream houses are found in "Dreamhurst," "The Quiet Land," "The House," "The House among the Firs." Garden and dream garden in "The Deserted Garden," "Gloaming," "Dreamhurst," and "The Sweet of the Year." The impossible blue rose recurs in her verse; it is designated as fantasy most clearly in "Gloaming," where "... the dear Blue Rose of dreams" is plucked beside "the magic wood" (*Dream Verses* 69).
4. "The Dream-winds," "Foretellings," "The Sweet of the Year," "In August's Glare," "When Woods are White," and "Night."
5. Elizabeth's love of story and of the rhythm of the spoken word was due to her mother Emma Wetmore Bliss Roberts, according to *The Canadian Magazine*. She recited poetry to the young Robertses and read them books of adventure by writers like Verne, Kingston and Ballantyne. She may also have read MacDonald to them.
6. Her tendency to combine senses and kinaesthetic awareness in her imagery can be seen in *Northland Lyrics*. In "Beyond the Hills" she combined shape, color, sound and movement: "The daffodils fling far the flag of Spring, / Their golden troop the garden-fortress fills, / And bird-throat bugles greet the days that bring / The daffodils" (50). Other poems that use combinations of senses are "Though Seasons Pass," "In my Garden," and "A Song of June" from *Dream Verses*.
7. Charles used the same cathartic image of the tides in "The Tantramar Revisited."
8. Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," l. 65. This same philosophy, together with her intense experience of life, was used by Lucy Maud Montgomery to create her child-character in *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne acts as a catalyst to reawaken the spiritually dead adults of Avonlea. A similar use of color, smell, plants, flowers, gardens and weather characterizes the experience of nature which so overwhelms Anne.
9. Ashen Putten and Rushen Coatie are both Cinderella figures taken from Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm ("Ashenputtel" is first translated into English in 1826) and from Andrew Lang's work. "Rushen Coatie" was collected by Lang in Morayshire and published in *Revue Celtique*, 3 (1878). "Rashen Coatie" is collected by Joseph Jacobs in his *English Fairy Tales* in 1890.

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