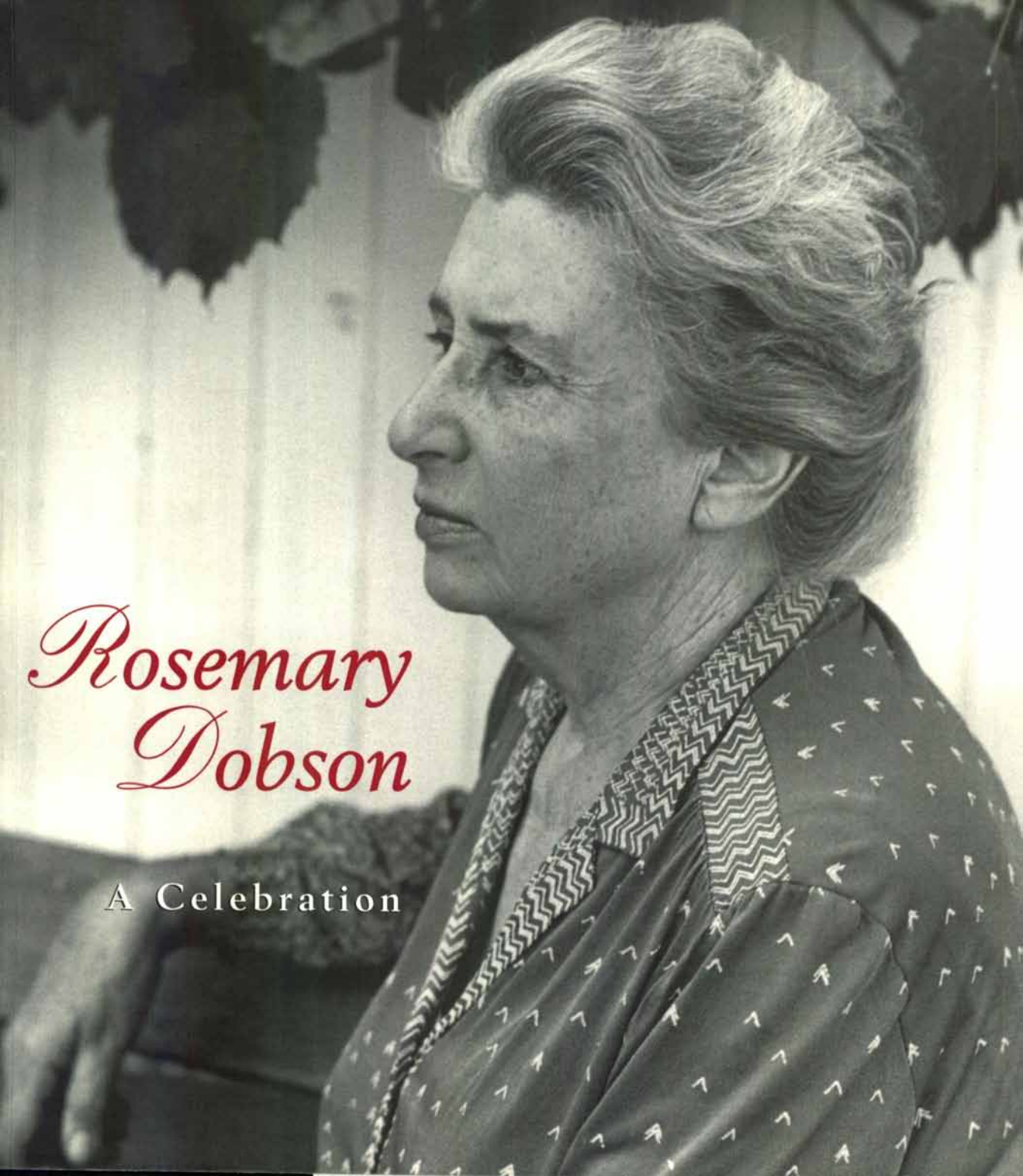
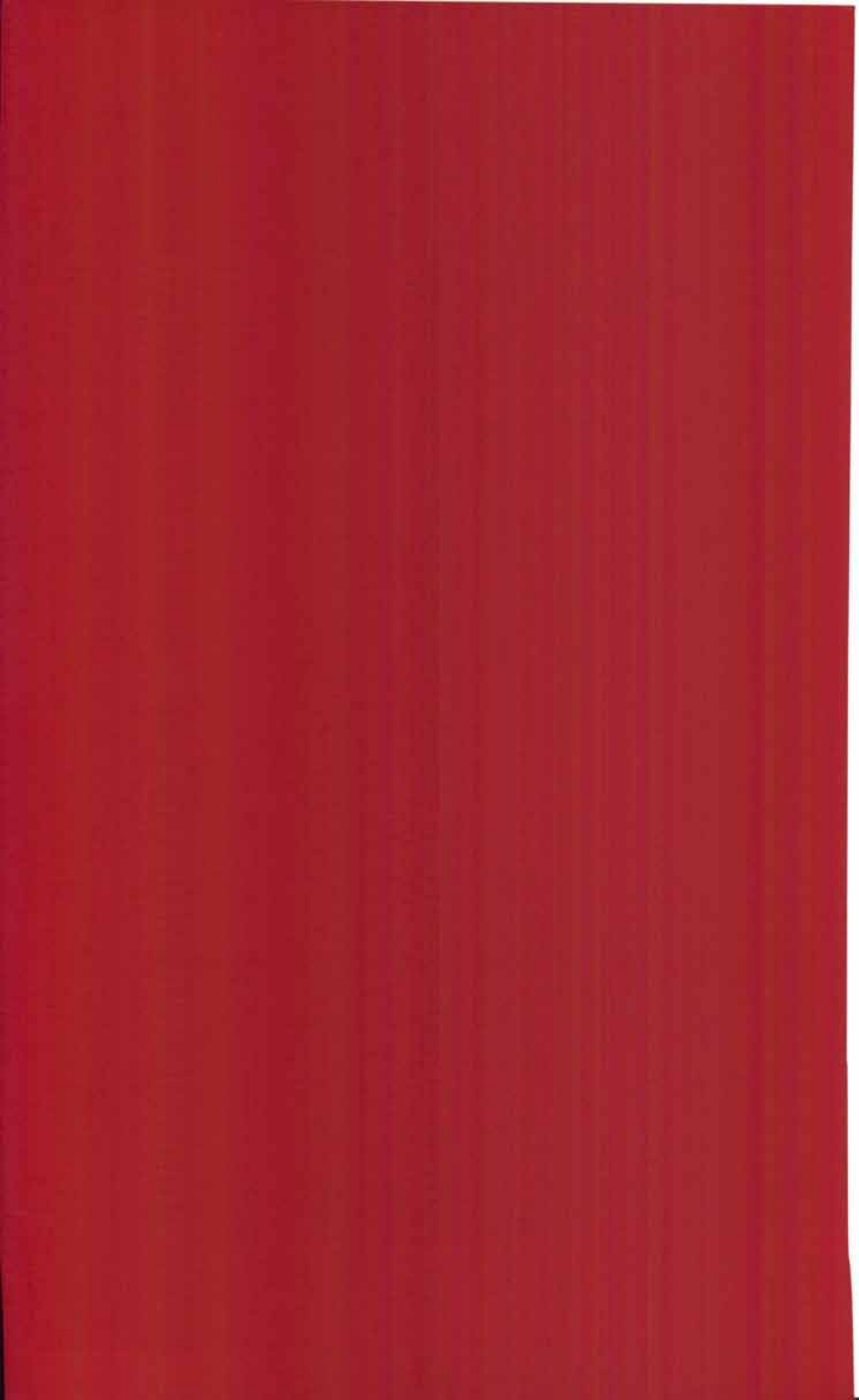


Rosemary Dobson

A Celebration



Rosemary Dobson

A Celebration

Compiled and edited by Joy Hooton
for the Friends of the National Library of Australia

Featuring essays by Joy Hooton,
Elizabeth Lawson, Paul Hetherington and David McCooey

Friends of the National Library of Australia
Canberra 2000

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Rosemary Dobson outside Angus & Robertson Publishers
in Sydney c.1949

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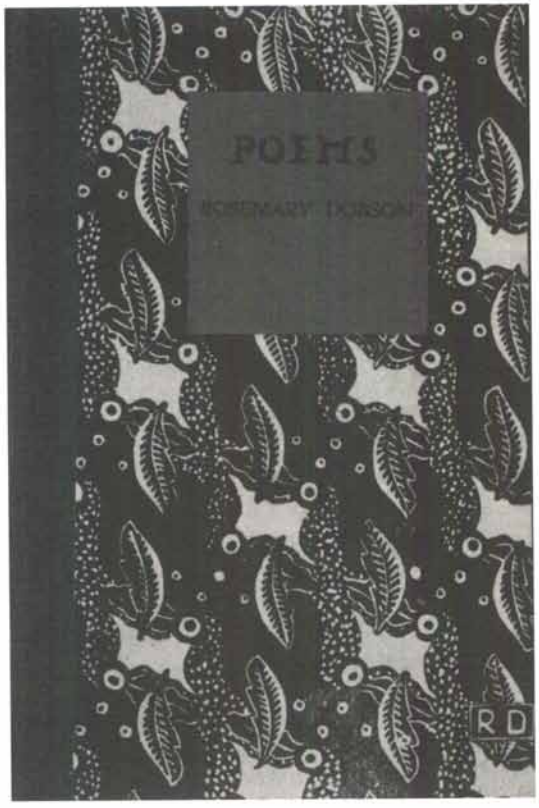


Rosemary designed and cut the cover for this early collection of her poems while at school at Frensham, Mittagong

Rosemary Dobson: A Life of Making Poetry

Joy Hooton

1. 'Anatomy of Beginnings'[1]

Rosemary Dobson was born in Sydney in 1920. Her father, A.A.G. (Arthur) Dobson, was born in England into a large family with literary preoccupations and strong religious convictions. His father was Austin Dobson, poet, essayist and authority on eighteenth-century literature. Rosemary is retrospectively grateful that she was ignorant of his achievements for quite some time after she had discovered her own bent.

After some years in South America training as an engineer, Arthur Dobson came to Australia, where he worked as a civil engineer and met his future wife, Marjorie Caldwell. It was a time of general depression and Marjorie had had to leave school early, but she was eager for self-education and continued to read critically and well all her life. In view of their second daughter's subsequent vocation as a poet it seems wonderfully fitting that the parents should have met for the first time at a session of the Dickens Society.

Plagued with ill health for several years, Arthur Dobson did not live long enough to be remembered vividly by his two daughters; he died when Rosemary was five and Ruth seven. His death was a major blow to the small family, who were now without a home of their own and went to live with their maternal grandmother's large family or from time to time with other relatives or in rented houses. Rosemary's poem

'The Widow' from *Untold Lives* looks back to the continuing impact of her father's death on her mother's life.

> Under the fine straw of her wide-brimmed hat
> Turned back, bright eyes and dark-brown hair
> And so much innocence and timidity . . .
> Yet when he came, despite his foreignness
> Of life lived elsewhere, sure in mind and will
> She 'gave her heart', in the old phrase, at once
> Receiving in exchange his to protect,
> Sustain, support, and very soon to lose.
>
> Firm at his death she grew in firmness, moved
> With two small girls from house to rented house
> Each time diminished. Yet she wrote each week
> By surface mail to his family
> Reporting on her pledge to rear the two
> By precepts he'd enjoined. They in reply
> Wrote with affectionate concern, and sent
> Books 'for the nursery'. She must have smiled.

Another poem—'Who?', from the same collection—recalls a brief holiday with a now unknown 'Auntie Molly', whose good spirits revived their mother's innate light-heartedness, amazing the two girls accustomed to registering unconsciously her anxieties.

Postoffice-Store-in-one sold bread and milk.
Returning to our house we scuffed along
Cloth-hatted, sandalled, kicking at the stones.
Mother and Auntie Molly walked ahead
And suddenly Mother stopped, threw back her head
And laughed and laughed there in the dusty road.
We were amazed to hear our mother laugh.

The lack of a permanent home and their mother's economic and other difficulties did not, however, in any way make for an unhappy childhood. Rosemary began writing poetry at the age of seven, finding a great delight in the musical and painterly possibilities of words and sharing that delight with her mother. The poem 'Autobiographical' from *Untold Lives* is a wonderful celebration of the timeless moment when the seven-year-old child, sitting on an upturned bucket while her mother hangs out the washing, reads aloud her first poem and is praised:

We went back in together. Proud and pleased,
Pink-faced, puffed-up, I thought of poetry
Blowing, bright coloured, all about the world.

The Dobson family in England had only a limited idea of the strained circumstances of 'Arthur's widow'. However, they were nonetheless an important distant presence during the early years of the two girls and were to have a significant effect on their lives when one of the aunts, Aunt Lissant, made a special journey to Australia. Her visit led to a meeting between Marjorie Dobson and Winifred West, the

co-founder and headmistress of the prestigious girls' school, Frensham, at Mittagong. Offered a position as housemistress at the school and free education for one of her girls, Marjorie Dobson replied that she could not accept, being unable to leave one daughter behind, whereupon Miss West telegraphed her to bring them both.

Their move to Frensham was an extremely important breakthrough for both Rosemary and Ruth. Ruth was to go on to make her career in the then Department of External Affairs at a time when women were generally invisible in the diplomatic service, eventually becoming Australia's first woman career diplomat Ambassador. She served as Australian Ambassador in Denmark and Ireland. As for Rosemary, the school was possibly the perfect environment, even though the other girls often came from wealthy families while the Dobson family was without a home to go to during the holidays, staying either at the school or visiting relatives. She revelled in the school's well-stocked library, in its beautiful setting and family atmosphere and in the unusual ethos established by Winifred West. In several interviews she has paid tribute to Miss West's enterprising, forward-looking spirit and her encouragement of the students' creative endeavours in a spirit of community.

Two teachers in particular encouraged her dual passion for poetry and painting—Ruth Ainsworth, who was in charge of the Art Department and Esther Tuckey, who taught English. Another lifelong passion also grew at this time after Winifred West decided that the school should have a printing press and commissioned Joan Phipson, now a well-known writer for children who was then in London, to set one up at the school. During her research on printing presses Joan Phipson visited the Hogarth Press, where Leonard Woolf was very encouraging. Back at Frensham, Rosemary and Joan produced Rosemary's first book of poems on their small Adana press. Rosemary, working with a razor blade, produced the linocut for the cover and they also hand-

bound the two hundred copies of the book. The little book is now a valuable item in the stocks of book collectors. A copy was sent to Leonard Woolf, who wrote back to say that it was equal to anything that the Woolfs had produced when they started the Hogarth Press.

Although Rosemary is the opposite of a confessional poet, several poems look back to this time at Frensham and to her younger self, who was both different and yet the same. They include 'Autobiography' from *Selected Poems*, and 'Growing Up', 'The Green Years' and 'Collects for the Days' from *Untold Lives*. 'The Green Years', for example, reflects on that distant 'green' stranger, the 'yard of pump-water', the 'long thin girl' of the past, a dreamy, careless girl, content 'With wandering thoughts', but who is nevertheless still known:

> I knew that girl. Knew that for her each art—
> The paintings looked at and the poems read—
> Ringed its own radiance round the everyday.

After finishing her schooling Rosemary continued at Frensham for a time as an apprentice teacher of art and art history with Ruth Ainsworth. Then a small inheritance when she was 21 allowed her to spend two years as a non-degree student at the University of Sydney, where she studied every English course available. She also studied drawing as a private student with Thea Proctor. While the courses at the university with such teachers as Professor A.J.A. Waldock extended her knowledge of literature, her work with Thea Proctor influenced both her poetry and drawing. The combination of elegance, strength, discrimination and balance in Thea Proctor's work were qualities which she felt were also important in poetry. Meanwhile, the

opinion that one art can influence another—and that of all the arts, painting and poetry are the closest—is one that she has maintained in several later interviews and essays. For the same reason she has continued to keep up her skills as a visual artist, attending life-drawing classes in Canberra and painting when on holiday or travelling. Thea Proctor, who was in the habit of sketching her students, made several drawings of Rosemary.

In the early 1940s, after a short period as a cipher clerk in the Royal Australian Navy, Rosemary began work with the publishers Angus & Robertson first as a proofreader and soon afterwards in the editorial department. The 'Firm', as it was known, was an extremely stimulating environment, although the physical quarters were exceedingly cramped and even hazardous had a fire broken out. Headed by the influential editor, Beatrice Davis, the offices were frequented by most writers of the day, including John Blight, Francis Webb, Hugh McCrae, Xavier Herbert and Ruth Park. Nan McDonald, Beatrice Davis's deputy and a fine poet, became a lifelong friend. And it was there that Rosemary met her future husband Alec Bolton, who joined the Firm's editorial department in 1950 as an editorial trainee. In her 1973 Blaiklock Memorial Lecture, published as *A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting in the 1940s*,[2] Rosemary describes the range of poets who came to prominence in that decade, largely through the *Bulletin*'s 'Red Page', then under the editorship of Douglas Stewart, and also through the recently founded literary magazines, *Meanjin* and *Southerly*.

At this time Rosemary was submitting more and more of her work to editors, including Douglas Stewart. They first met when Rosemary, with some trepidation, visited his office at the *Bulletin* after offering her poem 'Australian Holiday' for the 'Red Page'. She subsequently became a great friend of both Stewart and his wife, the

painter Margaret Coen. At this time she often visited the studio at 12 Bridge Street in Sydney, which the Stewarts shared with Norman Lindsay. Later, when Alec Bolton was editing for the publishing firm of Ure Smith, he worked on Lindsay's novels and they visited him at Springwood, where Alec took a now well-known photograph of Norman and Rosemary.

Douglas Stewart played an advisory role in the preparation of her collection of poetry published by Dymocks in 1944, *In a Convex Mirror*. Remarkably mature for a 24-year-old, these poems showed the effects of the years of study and contemplation of both art and poetry. Even more remarkably they established a distinctive tone and attitude and developed several themes which were to persist in the later poetry. It was clear that this was a poet who had already found her own voice and was writing from a nucleus of firmly held aesthetic values. The collection was well reviewed but her work received more public recognition after the title poem of her second collection, *The Ship of Ice*, published in 1948, won the *Sydney Morning Herald* prize for poetry that year.

In 1951 Rosemary and Alec Bolton were married and moved to Neutral Bay. Their first child, a daughter, was born in 1953 but only lived a few hours. This tragic personal event is the subject of Rosemary's poem 'The Birth (ii)' from *Child with a Cockatoo*. Another daughter, Lissant, was born later, followed by two sons, Robert and Ian.

Alec Bolton was born in 1926 in Sydney. His father died when he was seven and his mother moved with her two sons to Hunter's Hill to be close to their extended family. From 1940–43 he was a student at Sydney Grammar School, having won a half scholarship, and at the age of 18 followed his elder brother's example by enlisting in the Royal Australian Navy. After completing the officers' training course at the Flinders Naval Depot, he was posted to a minesweeper working out of Darwin and

spent some months surveying in the Arafura Sea and the Timor Sea, later joining a minesweeping flotilla in southern Australian waters. After demobilisation in 1947 he studied at the University of Sydney, meanwhile caring for his mother, who suffered a series of severe strokes, dying in 1950.

While living in Sydney the Boltons made many friends in the literary and publishing circles of the city, but a major relationship was a three-way one between Francis Webb, Nan McDonald and Rosemary. Webb was troubled by mental illness, which frequently led to his incarceration in institutions. However, he became godfather to the youngest of the Boltons' children and maintained his part in the friendship, which lasted until the early 1970s when he and Nan McDonald died within a few weeks of each other.

In 1960 Alec Bolton left Angus & Robertson's, where he had been promoted to director of publications, and subsequently joined the publishing firm of Ure Smith. In 1966, however, he accepted an appointment as the London editor of Angus & Robertson and the family moved there that year, settling in Richmond. The London years from 1966 to 1971 were stimulating for both Alec and Rosemary in that they offered concerts, theatres, art galleries and some travel—and for Alec, the opportunity to learn about printing. Bitten by the idea that he would like to have his own press, he enrolled at the London College of Printing as an evening student. Rosemary, meanwhile, went to classes in Greek civilisation. Alec's gift of the travel books of Pausanias, who travelled all over Greece in the second century AD, subsequently stimulated the sequence 'Poems from Pausanias' included in the collection *Over the Frontier.* However, cut off from her roots, Rosemary found herself unable to write poetry at this time, although she completed work for the book on the artist Ray Crooke, *Focus on Ray Crooke*, for the University of Queensland Press.

Alec and Rosemary with (from left) Robert, Ian and Lissant
on holiday in Moss Vale, c.1965
Photograph by Alec Bolton

In 1971 Alec Bolton was appointed founding Director of Publications at the National Library of Australia and the family returned to Australia to live in Canberra. Home to numerous writers and especially poets, the small city proved a congenial place for Rosemary's work. The literary community was a close one in the 1970s, including such poets as Bob Brissenden, John Rowland, David Campbell, Alec Hope and Dorothy Green. Rosemary remained involved as the community grew to include such younger poets as Alan Gould, Philip Mead, Geoff Page and Kevin Hart. Other writers who lived elsewhere, such as Barbara Hanrahan, Fay Zwicky and Philip Hodgins, later became close friends. At the same time, while steadily producing poetry, she was also involved in editing anthologies and giving interviews and public readings of her poetry. She paid several visits to other countries, representing Australian literature. These visits were important for meeting poets from other cultures, such as Denise Levertov, Michael Ondaatje and Eastern European poets including Zbigniew Herbert. Lectures at the Australian National University by Professor John Mulvaney proved very stimulating and she took courses in Modern Greek.

The friendship with David Campbell was particularly important for both poets. Meeting regularly with such Russian speakers as Natalie Staples and later Robert Dessaix and Olga Hassanoff, they responded individually to translations of Russian poets including Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova and produced two collections of their versions, *Moscow Trefoil* (1975) and *Seven Russian Poets* (1979). Later, after Campbell's death in 1979, Rosemary wrote the sequence 'The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell', celebrating Campbell's work and the richness of their friendship. Published first by Alec Bolton on his Brindabella Press in 1981 and included in the *Collected Poems* these spare, eloquent poems show the influence of the ancient Chinese poets whom Rosemary had been reading.

In 1972 Alec Bolton had set up his private press, the Brindabella Press, which produced limited fine editions of poetry, frequently illustrated by the poet herself or himself or by another artist. The first book, David Campbell's *Starting from Central Station*, was illustrated by William Huff-Johnston, R.F. Brissenden's *Elegies* by Robin Wallace-Crabbe and A.D. Hope's *The Drifting Continent* by Arthur Boyd. John Rowland illustrated his own collection, *Times and Places*, as did Rosemary for her *Greek Coins* and *The Continuance of Poetry*.

The press became more active after Alec Bolton's retirement from the National Library in 1987, eventually producing 23 books, two broadsides and a portfolio of linocuts by Barbara Hanrahan. Although printing the books on the press was entirely Alec's work, Rosemary had input as an editorial adviser and proofreader. Their collaboration was also important in the series of photographs of Australian writers that Alec Bolton produced over several years, now an extensive collection held by the National Library. If the years of so-called retirement were broken tragically and suddenly by Alec's death in 1996, the richness of those years together is given testimony in the works that they both produced. Alec's achievements were recognised in 1978 when he won the Book Design Award of the Australian Book Publishers Association for *Time Given* by James McAuley, in 1982 when he won the Colophon Society's Award for *The Continuance of Poetry*, in 1993 when his work was celebrated by the Friends of the National Library of Australia and in 1996 when he was elected a Fellow in the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In 1995 he was included in the Hall of Fame of the Australian Book Publishers Association.

Rosemary Dobson's poetry achieved recognition early but it was some time before reviewers and critics became attuned to her distinctive concerns, to her reticent art. Alec Hope's 1972 essay in *Quadrant*, 'Rosemary Dobson: A Portrait in a Mirror',[3]

for instance, is a reassessment that firmly disowns his 'brash' review in *Meanjin* published 20 years previously. Fortunately, one of the clearest interpreters of what has been her consistent aesthetic ethos is Rosemary herself. In interviews, essays and poems, she has frequently described her perception of the importance of poetry and the special role of the poet. In a key essay, for instance—'Over My Shoulder', published in *Island Magazine* in 1989— reflecting then on 40 years of writing poems, she maintains that poetry is 'a vocation' and that in attempting to write poetry 'one enters a world of privilege'.[4] It is a position that she has often since upheld. In the 1973 'Preface' to *Selected Poems* she goes further, attempting to define an essential, elusive aspect of poetry which all poets would recognise:

> there is always something that eludes one . . . 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.

Her poem 'Over the Frontier' expresses the same conviction:

> the poem that exists
> will never equal the poem that does not exist.
> Trembling, it crosses the frontier at dawn
> from non-being to being
> carrying a small banner,
> bearing a message,

bringing news of the poem that does not exist,
that pulses like a star, red and green, no-colour,
blazing white against whiteness.

And in 'At the Coast' she writes of poetry glowing and flickering in and out of shadow behind the print on pages, as light, reflected from the sea, trembles on smooth-limbed saplings.

Meditative and by no means programmatic or didactic, her poetry is a search for illumination, an attempt to win through to a reflective quiet poise which can be shared by both poet and reader in times that are inevitably and always unquiet. Exquisitely balanced as these poems are formally, they are 'hard won', their multiple, layered meanings winnowed from spare, limpid words. The poems of her first collection, *In a Convex Mirror,* are already austere, lucid and compressed but these features have become even more marked in the later poetry even as there has been a formal freeing up. As she comments in 'Over My Shoulder', 'As one grows older one also requires a return to essentials and structures, a turning-away from ornamentation and inessentials.'

But the search for essentials was there from the first, encouraged by the spare Matisse-like drawings of Thea Proctor and emulated in language. In 'Out of Winter' from *Cock Crow* the poet, wrung by grief, asks for solace from:

the anatomy of beginnings, landscapes
Bared to the bones of rocks and boulders,
The simple truths of early paintings—
Births, deaths, and belief in visions.
. . .

Schooled in the miracles of Fra Angelico
I await the Angel of the Annunciation.
. . .
Await the bird in the bough, the tremor
Of life in the veins, another springtime.

And the same attentive, open-eyed waiting for a moment of grace is sought in a much later poem from the 'Poems from Pausanias' sequence in *Over the Frontier*:

This most I envy, most would emulate,
the watchful eye, the trained receptive ear,
the mind that waits illumination, waits
to see, though blind; though deaf, at last to hear.

2. Timeless Art and Human Time

One of the most consistent preoccupations running through the poetry from *In a Convex Mirror* to *Untold Lives* is with time. Indeed, the earliest poems about the visual arts are concerned as much with time as they are with painting. Some of these earlier poems celebrate the permanence of paintings, their apparent triumph over time. 'Paintings', for example, from *Child with a Cockatoo* rejoices in the achieved still present of art which represents to 'the intricate, devised / Hearing of sight' people and landscapes that are forever changed. Other more complex poems implicitly meditate

on the more elegiac impact of paintings, which in their very vivid representation of a present subtly suggest its passing. One of the best-known poems, for instance, 'Still Life' contemplates an actual still life canvas:

Tall glass, round loaf and tumbled cloth
And leaning flask of smoky brown,
The guttered candle and the cask;
And Time and Silence flowing down,

Welling against the canvas, held
By stroke and feather-touch of paint
As one might build a weir to hold
Some spreading pool in sweet restraint.

Whose was the hand that held the brush?
And who the guest who came to break
The loaf which I, three hundred years
Belated, still reach out to take?

I, who now pour the wine and tilt
The glass, would wish that well you fare,
Good sir, who set out food and drink
That all who see might take and share.

Portrait of Rosemary Dobson, c.1940
Photograph by May Moore Studios

Celebratory as the poem is, it has a deeply ironic core, suggesting the paradoxical absences that are implied for a viewer 300 years on. That is, the actual absolute disappearance of these material icons of welcome and hospitality, the ironic contrast between the life they live on the canvas with such vivid and inviting immediacy and their actual unattainable deadness. Evoking a compulsion to pour the wine and break the bread, the painting also, of course, frustrates that compulsion. Time and water are not the same in that no weir can be built to hold the temporal force back. James McAuley in a fine 1970s essay titled 'The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson', noticed the same effect:

> Art defeats time by arresting things within its still duration. But the triumph of art is at a price: what it rescues—and gives back to us as an image of beauty or truth or fulfilment—has been taken out of life; though we have it, we have it only in the mode of art, not in actuality. The bread feeds the spirit, but it cannot be grasped and broken and eaten; the wine cannot be poured and drunk. The way the poem reminds us of this distinction is paradoxically by seeming to ignore it, as if one could reach into the picture-space and break the loaf and pour the wine.[5]

Another later poem, 'The Mirror', eloquently celebrates the limpid, incandescent quality of Vermeer's paintings which seem invariably to arrest 'Time that is always gone', creating a still centre of peace. But this impression of achieved cancellation of time is balanced by imagery and by a rhythmic pattern suggesting restless movement, the illusion of mirrored reflections and the ephemeral nature of a painted canvas—'This tangled, broken web of paint'. Traditionally structured in four six-line stanzas with the lightest of rhymes, the poem

itself is almost a replica of a Vermeer painting in the contrast between decorous surface and inner, implied tensions, or at least between a contemporary viewer's dual impression of time as movingly and beautifully arrested and the actuality of 'Time the Destroyer'.

> Who look on Truth with mortal sight
> Are blinded in its blaze of light.

If Renaissance and Dutch painting first suggested this elegiac tension between time's illusory moments of stillness and its intransigent progress, the preoccupation has continued but reflected in a range of natural scenes and events. Water, which runs through all Rosemary Dobson's poetry usually as a metaphor of renewal, consolation, friendship or inspiration, is not surprisingly also sometimes a metaphor for cyclical change ('The Tempest') or for time's persistent erosion ('Foreshore'). A late poem from the sequence in honour of the late David Campbell, 'White Flowers', encapsulates this long accretion of reflections on watery time, now compressed into the sparest, most eloquent of meditations:

> White water pours down the hillside
> On the rock two fish swim under the water.
>
> Flannel-flowers splash in a falling torrent
> Push aside boulders, spill over the ledges.
>
> Held still in the eye like a fish carved in sandstone
> They become a white cloud visiting the rock-face.

But time takes many other shapes. It is present as nostalgically recovered cyclical change in such poems as 'Summer's End' and 'Picnic'; as an Australian past affectionately and amusingly recalled in 'Mrs Potts the Flat-iron' and 'Country Press'; as a more personal peopled Australian past in the succinct portraits of *Untold Lives*; as the poignant realisation of a mother whose children will inevitably grow away from the moment of birth in 'To a Child' and 'Annunciations'; as the human stories embodied in myth, 'Old History / Beating upon the present', stories which persist to haunt contemporary experience as in 'Above the Bay'. For European and Australian myths are intricately sewn into all this poetry, emphasising Rosemary Dobson's belief that myths are true, reflections of what always exists.

One interesting sequence of late poems, 'On Museums', reflects alternatively amusingly, ironically, ruefully or poignantly on the 'articulate past' they offer, which may be at once oppressive, disturbing, moving, challenging and necessary. In other poems the destructiveness of contemporary political time intrudes ('ruined Rostov falls in flame, / Cities crumble and are gone' from 'In a Convex Mirror'), or in others the pathos and sufferings of old age are confronted ('The Footsoldier' and 'Visiting'). A number of poems deal with death—with news of a friend's terminal illness ('The Letter'), with the loss of a child soon after birth ('The Birth (ii)'), with examples of stoic acceptance ('Flute Music'), with the loss of a friend and fellow poet ('The Continuance of Poetry' sequence), with the ironies of deaths represented in paintings ('Painter of Antwerp' and 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian'), with the extinguishing of a rare talent in the political holocaust of Soviet Russia ('Reading Mandelstam').

Two poems in particular with death as their subject demonstrate the range of tone and impact which this eloquently spare, clear style can achieve, 'The Three Fates' and

'Being Called For'. The first, a witty, ironic, hard-edged response to mortality, mixes contemporary experience of a film reeling backwards and Greek myth to deny the existence of any other life than this one. The second is a finely modulated personal conversation with death and stoical acceptance of mortality. Death, who is not named in the poem but is an implicit presence, may come 'at any season' to find the speaker 'ready' with the coins for the ferry in a basket.

Restrained and controlled as these poems are, they are also impassioned. What Hope has called Rosemary Dobson's 'passionate serenity' is 'hard won', while the costs of the struggle for a quiet mind lie within the poems' speaking silences. Again and again, what is not said sets off tensions within what is said. A small handful of poems, meanwhile, are more explicit about dark, troubling emotions, such as 'The Tiger' and 'Visiting' and, most eloquently, 'Grieving':

> Friends die, one after another;
> Each time a dark disorder
> A ceaseless banging of shutters
>
> Upstairs there, in the mind;
> Beating of wings, loud weather
> Days, nights together.
>
> To force on the mind order:
> Journeys taken on maps,
> Attentive delving into

The roots of the language,
A search for the true invention
Of form by line in drawing.

Also, renewal of linen—
Keeping the old customs
Putting sides to middles.

Thus, mind and hand stilled
And with a gentler grief
To draw down the blind

The white holland blind
Like a banner of love
Against that wild confusion.

Passion, in the sense of a passionate engagement with life, also emerges throughout this poetry. It is reflected in the enjoyment of friendships, family relationships, intense appreciations of landscapes, art, literature and music and a relish for the sheer diversity of human personality. The poems of *Untold Lives*, for instance, explore poignantly, ironically, satirically, or comically a great diversity of individuals whose stories are 'untold' in a historical sense. Many poems, such as 'Country Press', 'Mrs Potts the Flat-iron', 'Piltdown Man' and 'Captain Svenson', are also frankly playful, *jeux d'esprit* which delight in their own humorous unfoldings. And if time is often presented as an intransigent element, it is also often subverted by subtle irony. Characteristically for this

poet who appreciates ironic, surprising juxtapositions and what she has described as 'wayward observations', several poems reflect on the quirky creativeness of time. A late poem, 'Canberra Morning', celebrates the irreverent advantages of growing older:

Life gets better
as I grow older
not giving a damn
and looking slantwise
at everyone's morning.

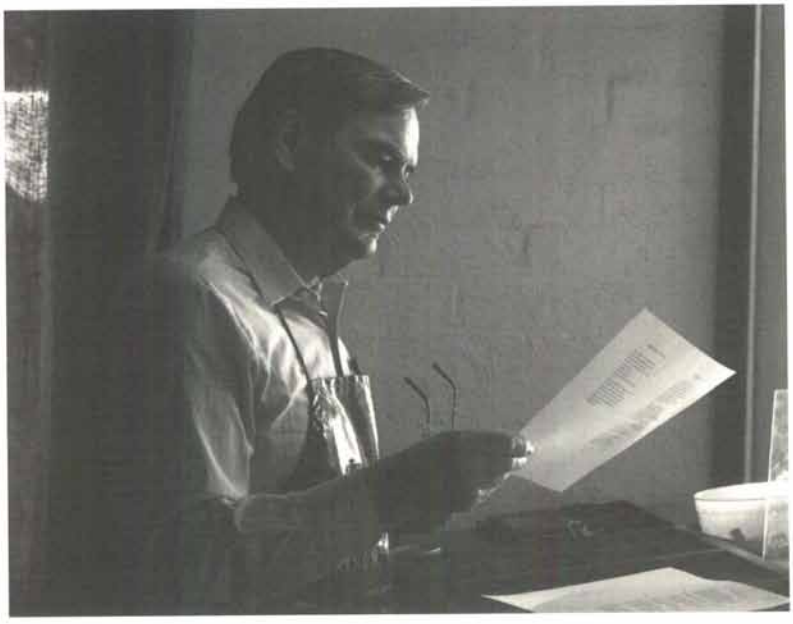
The much longer, elaborately developed monologue 'Child with a Cockatoo' takes as its subject the strange inclusion of an Australian cockatoo in a painting long before Australia had been discovered by western civilisation ('a sign unread, / A disregarded prologue to an age'). And a more recent sequence of poems, 'Willows', focuses in eloquent spare forms on the connections made over both long and short periods and over great distances in space by natural sequences, friendships and the stimulating exchanges of like minds.

This steady preoccupation with time, which has taken diverse forms over decades of writing poetry, demonstrates if nothing else the remarkable consistency of Rosemary Dobson's concerns and attitude of mind. If we take two apparently disparate poems, separated by 40 years, 'The Eater of the Pomegranate Seeds' from *The Three Fates* and 'In a Convex Mirror' from the collection of that title as an example, it becomes obvious that formal differences apart, the poems are recognisably by the same hand. Perfect equilibrium, purity of diction and finely modulated cadences are features of both. The later poem is freer, more light-hearted, wittier and more elliptical. It draws on

myth as the earlier one draws on a Dutch painting. But just as both briefly juxtapose past time with the present both are more fundamentally concerned with time's eternal pendulum, which cannot in the first poem extend 'The silence between tick and tock' or in the second alter the sequence of seasons. What marks both poems as distinctively Dobson poems, however, is a more intangible quality, what A.D. Hope described in the essay mentioned earlier as 'a consciousness of the unapprehended, of what Keats called "the burden of the mystery" . . . It is characteristic of Rosemary Dobson's poetry that it is full of celebration of the observed, the perceived, the actual but it is even more full of the expectant, the listening, the receptive but unfilled sense of something lying just beyond the frontiers of perception.'

Meanwhile, if time is a dominant force in all Rosemary Dobson's work, other forces are celebrated as subverting it. Poetry itself is presented as such a force, a form of pollen dispersal, making links between diverse cultures and languages and forming connections between poets divided by space or by centuries. Describing herself as a 'flexible traditionalist', she is intensely conscious of the voices of the past but equally open to diverse voices of the present. Many poems pay tribute to the work of other poets which has influenced her own—the Greek poet George Seferis, his second-century forebear, Pausanias, the Chinese poets Li Po and Wang Wei, the Yugoslav Vasko Popa, the Polish Wislawa Szymborska, the Australians David Campbell, Douglas Stewart and James McAuley, the American Philip Levine. Similarly the insights provided by museums, the study of prehistory, art galleries, the craft of fine printing and the landscapes of both Australia and other countries are celebrated in a rich blend.

Looking back at what is now more than six decades of published poetry, the reader is struck first by a remarkable consistency but secondly by a remarkable variety. Perhaps



Alec Bolton at work at his Brindabella Press in Canberra in 1987

balance is the keynote here: consistency balanced with variety, reserve with passion, past with present, tradition with innovation, wit with compassion, ancient myth with contemporary life, domesticity with culture, and above all Australia with Europe.

However much Rosemary Dobson's art is indebted to European influences, it is firmly rooted in Australia. Obvious as her poetry's Australianness is in terms of literary, artistic and cultural influences, landscape and historical myth, it is perhaps most Australian in its very tact, its avoidance of absolutes and its openness. In the commentaries she wrote in the 1960s on a series of Australian paintings, for instance, Rosemary referred to 'the continual shifts of light and shadow' which characterise the shade of gum trees, evoking what she termed the 'secretive' nature, the giving and withholding of understanding in the Australian landscape. Here perhaps is the initial seed of her acknowledged search for 'something only fugitively glimpsed; a state of grace which one once knew, or imagined, or from which one was turned away', which has impelled the writing of some of the finest poetry in Australian literature.

It is particularly fitting that this *Celebration* of Rosemary Dobson's poetry coincides with the publication of her latest collection, *Untold Lives and Later Poems*. The poems in the 'Untold Lives' section of this new publication first appeared as a separate collection published by Brindabella Press in 1992 while a handful was included in Rosemary Dobson's *Collected Poems* (1991). The two remaining sections, 'The News and Weather' and 'Poems of a Marriage', have not been collected before in book form.

Reading the poems of 'The News and Weather' section as a group is to enter territory that is at once familiar and new. All the distinctive characteristics of Rosemary Dobson's later poetry are present here. As balanced and measured, as subtle and evocative as their predecessors, these poems share the freer forms that have been a feature of her work since *The Three Fates*. The same artful artlessness, the same spare,

limpid compressions of the much admired 'Continuance of Poetry' sequence, which resonate in the mind long after reading are joined with more extended meditations or sequences sparked by experiences in distant countries, such as 'Four Poems of Ambae' and 'The Birdwatchers, Norfolk'. As in the earlier poetry, in some of these latest poems the art of painters, poets and writers provides starting points for alternative or further development. And as in the earlier work, the Australian landscape is a profoundly known context with human significances that seem bitten into the bone. The title poem, for instance, immediately sets the tone for this drama of emotional and even spiritual interchange between the land and the observing consciousness:

> I smoothed the pelt of the hills with my long looking
> And the hills rose up and stretched in the early light.
> In the home paddocks, along the river-flats
> Black cattle doubled their height with morning shadow.

But there are also significant differences of content which are more a matter of deepening emphasis than of absolute change. Most striking is the plain-speaking confrontation of contemporary violence and ugliness which features in such poems as 'The News and Weather', 'Down Here by the River', 'The Artist, Lecturing', 'As it Happens', 'A Letter from Another Country' and 'Innocence, Lost'. This last poem implies that it is a violence that has become endemic in recent times:

> Now that I've grown years older
> Assassins strike every day—
> Murder most foul. I take it
> Coolly, heart-stopped no longer,
> Cauterised, numbed. And ashamed.

Others, such as 'The Artist, Lecturing' and 'As it Happens', link this contemporary violence with the age-old cruelties. The former reflects on how these terrors were perceived and represented by the artists Goya and Arthur Boyd, while the latter's progression to thoughts of genocide through its six spare two-line stanzas is sparked by a suburban domestic scene.

Tough-minded as these poems are, they are also celebrations; they share the same passionate engagement with life that I have described above. The title poem, 'The News and Weather', is perhaps the most striking example of this dual confronting of times that are 'terrible' with rich enjoyment of living. Like A.D. Hope's 'Ode on the Death of Pius the Twelfth', this fine poem is likely to become central to an understanding of the poet's credo. Meanwhile, the same tough-mindedness shifts to another wittier, sharper key which is close to black humour in the two linked poems 'Show Girls', lovely examples of Rosemary Dobson's 'slantwise' view of life, evoked in the earlier poem, 'Canberra Morning'.

There is another shift of emphasis in this collection, towards a more intimate projection of self. As critics of her work have often remarked, Rosemary Dobson is a strikingly reticent poet but here she includes several poems which reflect frankly and movingly on her life in its eightieth decade. They include the delicate expression of personal stoicism of 'A Thought from George Herbert', with its muted acceptance of impaired eyesight and anticipations of the final darkness:

> From several splendours
> I move to bareness
> A white-washed room

With a window telling
Of starlight, darkness
And pre-dawn pallor

And a white holland blind
To draw half down on
The full blaze of sunlight.

The collection concludes with the three 'Poems of a Marriage', whose gentle cadences express the rich treasure of married love and something of the impact of its loss. Combined with the sharply perceptive dramatised portraits of 'Untold Lives', the new poems of this collection will greatly enrich and extend our appreciation of Rosemary Dobson's poetry.

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[1] The phrase, 'Anatomy of Beginnings' is taken from 'Out of Winter' in *Cock Crow* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965).

[2] Rosemary Dobson, *A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting in the 1940s.* Sydney: The Wentworth Press, 1973.

[3] A.D. Hope, 'Rosemary Dobson: A Portrait in a Mirror', *Quadrant*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1972, pp. 10–14.

[4] Rosemary Dobson, 'Over My Shoulder', *Island Magazine*, no. 39, 1989, pp. 55–59.

[5] James McAuley, 'The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1973, pp. 3–10.

A Selection of Poems by Rosemary Dobson

Portrait of Rosemary Dobson
Photograph by May Moore Studios

The Anthropologist

Her post-box is an outrigger canoe
Her house a long-legged frailty over water
She writes her letters sitting on the floor.

'I wash in moonlight at the river's mouth
Where only the women bathe, sleep on the slats,
Eat rice and fish, a handful of green beans.

'We talk in pidgin all day on the sand
And trace this watery world's geography
Learning the patterns of the coastal trade.'

She writes of gifts and courtesies returned
Rituals, feasts, the functions of exchange,
How what is offered is a gift of self—

The singing of an irreplaceable song.
Invested with the richness of her living
Her letters give a newer stretch to thought.

What can I send that's equal in return?
These words (this gift, this poem) go to my daughter
In Murik village by the Lower Sepik.

Poem published in **Untold Lives: A Sequence of Poems**
(Officina Brindabella, 1992)

The Major-General

Grounded in Greek he kept the stoic phrase
Ready like a revolver in his drawer,
Ex-army, major-general, could outstare
Weakness, opinion and, at last, old age.
He beat the mischief from his younger son;
His wife grew tremulous, pity and grief
Aroused her protests, but she did not speak.

Sustained by shoe-trees, trouser-press and cane—
A rough-cut blackthorn with a silver knob—
He kept his bearing, earned a wide respect
And envy for his wife. Each morning strolled
About the well-kept garden, cut two flowers,
One for his tweed lapel, and one for her
Laid on the breakfast-table like a threat.

Poem published in **Untold Lives: A Sequence of Poems**
(Officina Brindabella, 1992)

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.

Poem published in **Collected Poems**
(Angus and Robertson, 1991)

The Bystander

I am the one who looks the other way,
In any painting you may see me stand
Rapt at the sky, a bird, an angel's wing,
While others kneel, present the myrrh, receive
The benediction from the radiant hand.

I hold the horses while the knights dismount
And draw their swords to fight the battle out;
Or else in dim perspective you may see
My distant figure on the mountain road
When in the plains the hosts are put to rout.

I am the silly soul who looks too late,
The dullard dreaming, second from the right.
I hang upon the crowd, but do not mark
(Cap over eyes) the slaughtered Innocents,
Or Icarus, his downward-plunging flight.

Once in a Garden—back view only there—
How well the painter placed me, stroke on stroke,
Yet scarcely seen among the flowers and grass—
I heard a voice say, 'Eat,' and would have turned—
I often wonder who it was that spoke.

Poem published in **Collected Poems**
(Angus and Robertson, 1991)

Folding the Sheets

You and I will fold the sheets
Advancing towards each other
From Burma, from Lapland,

From India where the sheets have been washed in the river
And pounded upon stones:
Together we will match the corners.

From China where women on either side of the river
Have washed their pale cloth in the White Stone Shallows
'Under the shining moon'

We meet as though in the formal steps of a dance
To fold the sheets together, put them to air
In wind, in sun over bushes, or by the fire.

We stretch and pull from one side and then the other—
Your turn. Now mine.
We fold them and put them away until they are needed.

A wish for all people when they lie down to sleep—
Smooth linen, cool cotton, the fragrance and stir of herbs
And the faint but perceptible scent of sweet clear water.

From the sequence 'Daily Living', published in **Collected Poems** *(Angus and Robertson, 1991)*

The Artist, Lecturing

'A Memory of Arthur Boyd'

So long exposed to the 'dangers of his work'
The great man spoke with calm and courtesy,
Answered their questions as they stared, intent,
Braced to a stiffened horror by assaults
Of demons, beasts, his alienating mind,
Those sexual conflicts.
Still the slides came on
Fixing their numbed sight to the very edge
Above the hurl to Goya's ultimate feast.

The talk was done, the artist gone away.
The audience, silent, one by one dispersed.
Quitting the room, the building and the site
They walked, regardless, in the city's streets,
The traffic belching by: bulldozers, trucks,
The killer carriers blackened with their smoke.
And some saw him—aghast, bemused, in fear,
The great man trembling at the pavement's edge.

Poem published in **Untold Lives and Later Poems**
(Brandl & Schlesinger, 2000)

The News and Weather

I smoothed the pelt of the hills with my long looking
And the hills rose up and stretched in the early light.
In the home paddocks, along the river-flats
Black cattle doubled their height with morning shadow.

I heard the currawongs' cry as they swooped above me
The news they told was *You can't change the weather*
And who would want to, walking out very early
With pink and grey galahs tumbling for grass-seeds.

I picked a fig from the laden tree in the garden
And heard a voice that spoke in a tongue of flame
From the fiery sun behind the trembling tree-top:
You are lucky to be alive in these terrible times.

I peeled back the green of the fig breaking into its centre
Galah-coloured, pink and grey its thousand flowerlets,
And ate of the fruit of the garden and understood
The voice that seemed to flash in the air above.

The message must be received, taken into one's being
As knowledge is taken, biting on apple or fig—
Terrible times in the world that will not be changed—
And I walking out on such a morning early.

Poem published in **Untold Lives and Later Poems**
(Brandl & Schlesinger, 2000)

Rosemary Dobson's Painting Poems

Elizabeth Lawson

This essay reflects on Rosemary Dobson's poems about paintings. While I mention at once her lifelong engagement with art of all kinds and her early training in art and design under Thea Proctor, my commission is to look away from the poet's life and write about her poems.

Rosemary Dobson's poetry rarely forgets the visual arts. At a time when many poets were writing about classical art and myth, when Kenneth Clark's influential *100 Details from Pictures in the National Gallery* (1938) and *More Details from Pictures in the National Gallery* (1941) were inspiring a close scrutiny of paintings, her early 'painting poems' are as elegant as any. While these painting poems were written well before the 1963 *Australian Poets: Rosemary Dobson*, references to artists and paintings gild the lines of all her work. Even the later, unpromisingly titled 'The Para-glider' from *Collected Poems* (1991) sees its canopy unfolding 'Like a spill from a paint-brush' and records the delighted voice of Leonardo da Vinci, early prophet of human flight, boasting from the fifteenth century: 'I told you so.'

So evident throughout the poetry is this tracery of art in flashes of line and colour, the fall of light on pots, pergolas, stones, that at first I thought my essay need simply illustrate the 'painterly' emphasis of Rosemary Dobson's full *opus*. The gaze of this

poet is often that of the visual artist she herself is, as in 'For the Painter Ben Nicholson'. Or it becomes the gaze of historical artists—Jan Vermeer, for instance, who sees in a Dutch interior a mirror gathering 'All summers in a stroke of gold' and who, reaching to share a Dobson thought, observes that 'All night, oblivion, is stayed / Within the curtain's folded shade.' ('The Mirror')

Reflections in a mirror, the delicate light that falls along curtains, light this poetry. Some of it, having travelled from the early fifteenth century, especially perhaps from Jan Van Eyck's masterpiece *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), has found its ivory-thin likeness at Australian windows, on Australian hills at dawn and in these poems. Rosemary Dobson found the colours, tones and stories for her painting poems mostly in Renaissance Italian and Flemish painting in the National Gallery in London, in works by Frans Hals, Hans Holbein—his 'King' woodcut from the *Dance of Death* (1538)—Pieter Brueghel, Carlo Crivelli and Sandro Botticelli. She found them also in works by artists of other times, Theodor de Bry, for instance, and in William Hogarth's perfect *The Graham Children* (1742). In later poems we meet our contemporaries, Mark Rothko and Giorgio Morandi. Such names and imagery illuminate not only the early painting poems but, scattered across the poetry, mark dominant patterns of poetic reflection.

Even so, after the early painting poems, it must be said that Rosemary Dobson's poems refer to poets and to myths, calligraphy, books, sculptures and museums as much as to paintings. Hers is not, after all, an especially 'painterly' poetry. To the contrary, it directs its energy, humour and intelligence to storytelling, to the kind of meaning only poetry can catch, not in brush strokes but in words. 'I choose poetry', she writes with emphatic clarity ('The Artist's Wife'). And within poetry's field she mostly 'chooses' story, the simplified beguiling action of ballads or the strong moral movement of

Rosemary Dobson and Norman Lindsay at Springwood in 1964
Photograph by Alec Bolton

dramatic monologue. Just as in a painting poem a few cameo phrases evoke visual memories of a painting, so her stories unfold from a supple chain of action phrases and, as with the best poetry, their strength is their scrupulous verbal economy. This poet is first a storyteller, one whose stories speak always for the moral imagination.

The painting poems, ironic, witty, amusing, grave, both celebrate their painting subjects and reveal much about the poetic principles of their creator. Once, overcome by exhaustion in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, I collapsed in a chair strategically placed before a Rembrandt self-portrait. After about 10 minutes, in an astounding and unforgettable experience, all the centuries between myself and Rembrandt kaleidoscoped to nothing and a living Rembrandt spoke directly to me across an eerie space of 3.5 metres. Nearly all of Rosemary Dobson's early painting poems concern the capacity of art to speak across centuries into the reader's present with fresh immediacy:

> I speak
> Five hundred years ago. You hear.
> My words beat still upon your ear.
> ('Paintings')

Rosemary Dobson is clear on how this immediacy is achieved. The centuries-old masterpiece we find in a gallery reverberates with 'life' because of its use of the techniques, ideas and 'details' of its own time. From its idiomatic depiction of its own intimately known present flows a powerful immediacy of sensation and meaning. Similarly, a poem about an old painting, as she writes in her introduction to *Australian Poets: Rosemary Dobson*, is no mere 'lifeless repetition' of something that belongs to the past. Using the 'thought and technique' of the poet's own time, each poem becomes a living thing of the present.

One of her earliest painting poems, 'In a Café', surprises us with its revelation of the common source of Sandro Botticelli's 'Venus', she who arises nakedly memorable from the foam on a scalloped seashell. She's a girl, fully clothed, whose world is our modern everyday world, as the butt-ends of cigarettes, dregs of tea and that twentieth-century way of telling and tolling, the 'emphatic till', insist. The cafe scene is, before anything, ordinary ('A man forgets his hat, returns') and its drama is Botticelli's absorbed translation of that ordinariness into an earthly divine:

> He limns her in an instant, always there
> Between the doorway and the emphatic till
> With waves and angels, balanced on a shell.

This assertively democratic poem understands exactly where all images of the divine originate, in the people happening by, the bystanders of the great legends. It is not just that we make our gods in our own image, but that, in Aby Warburg's famous, but variously rendered, dictum: 'Truth (or God) exists in the detail'. Poem after poem in Rosemary Dobson's painting group tells this story about the great paintings. And they tell it in language which is new because it is ours (and therefore 'poetic'). Leonardo's 'I told you so' is in our idiom, not his. Old paintings and old poems

> Find distant destinations,
> Can seed new songs
> In another language.
> ('Translations Under the Trees')

A principle of poetry-making is this 'translation' of story into present-day ('another') language.

A fairly late poem, 'Canberra Morning', speaks of 'looking slantwise / at everyone's morning'. Ironically, given Rosemary Dobson's commitment to the 'ordinary', many of the paintings her poems contemplate are about great moments in the Christian story: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Raising of the Dead. Seeking out the ordinary in the momentous, the sacred in the ordinary, the slantwise perspective moves their glittering heroes and splendid moments pugnaciously sideways so that the view, turning on 'details', becomes indirect, the meanings indirectly surprising. The poems rediscover value, not in these miraculous occasions but in those humble folk doomed like most of us to walk untrodden ways. The process is, of course, two-way; its ambiguity perfectly dovetailed. Botticelli finds his 'Venus' in a side-street cafe and his painting glorifies that ordinary girl. But Botticelli's painting is equally blessed by the cafe, without which it cannot exist. 'God exists in the detail.'

Examples of this dogmatic celebration of bystanders who hold horses 'while the knights dismount', who are the 'dullards' and 'silly souls' too fascinated by the crowd to catch the action, include Pieter Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Calmly intent on their real worlds, Brueghel's sublimely ordinary characters fail to notice Icarus's tiny inelegant legs disappearing in an obscure corner of the sea and canvas. How are the ambitious fallen? The richly allusive poems 'Painter of Antwerp' and 'The Bystander' suggest no better way for their poet to celebrate the anti-heroism and realism of her time and the democratic ideals of her place than by looking slantwise, 'the other way', with Pieter Brueghel.

The world of these poems is one of historic moments and common bystanders, and its meaning, their interdependence. The tiny girl bystander of the poem 'Detail of an

Annunciation by Crivelli' speaks with balladic confidence both for herself and what she sees. Unlike her poet, far from 'looking the other way', she chases the limelight, boasts childlike of her privileged vision ('I saw the Dove, I saw the Lady') and delights in the attention the artist gives her:

> My dress hung down in fold on fold,
> And when the painter filled it in
> He edged it round with strokes of gold.

She shows an 'ordinary' flattered response to the gilding of her dress, but Crivelli, knowing 'God exists in the detail', knows he sanctifies her. Amusingly, she is as important as she thinks she is. Hers is a child's ballad of voiced simplicity. And of a discreet complexity through which a more sophisticated voice obliquely honours the extraordinary elaboration of this Renaissance painting with its divine radiance dispersed deep in mortal territory. Few paintings have ever filled so complicated a perspective with so many self-engrossed bystanders unheeding of Mary's adventure. All are tangibly mortal. Yet who more mortal than Mary of the Annunciation?

Rosemary Dobson's 'slanting' allows her to revalue the elements of the great European stories with dramatic surprise and to invest her retellings with moral perception. Her 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian' sees, correctly, the agony of Sebastian receding before the distracting black splendour of his archer–executioners. Like the little Crivelli bystander stealing the show, Sebastian seizes back the moral core of his martyrdom as he queries a merely aesthetic enthusiasm oblivious to his excruciating torture. Made (in the painting) the passive bystander of his own story, the

poem's Sebastian challenges his reader to use actively her feeling imagination. To fail to 'feel' the violence of this martyrdom is to fail to 'read' the painting. This, like the Crivelli poem, uses an assertive seizing of central interest by a bystander to allow a slantwise revaluing of a great story.

Rosemary Dobson is one of our finest poets, often our most amusing and most elegant. Her poems are witty and deeply moving. At the end of a most violent century and at the depressed, cynical beginning of another, her poetry quietly overturns our greatest loss. Contemptuously ignoring our new fate as commodities, surplus at that, it presents us again as fully human, meaning sublimely ordinary.

'An Irreplaceable Song'[1]

Paul Hetherington

1. 'Autobiographical'

In celebrating Rosemary Dobson's poetry, I propose to celebrate a life lived with, and partly through poetry. However, I do not propose to dwell on biographical issues. Rather, I will approach Rosemary Dobson and her values through a discussion of a handful of her key poems and what they say about her preoccupations, particularly friendship and love. Through this discussion, I hope to offer a glimpse into the many-faceted concerns of one of Australia's finest twentieth-century poets.

In the beautiful limited edition collection of Rosemary Dobson's poetry, *Untold Lives* (1992), published by Alec Bolton's press, Officina Brindabella, there is a poem called 'Autobiographical':

> 'Clothes-props', 'Clothes-props', faint from the distant streets,
> Faint from the distant past the cry returns.
> There was a prop and line where first we lived.
> At this time I was seven. (Father had died
> Two years before and we were moving soon.)
> Now with a notebook on my knee I sat

Upon an upturned bucket. Nearby, my mother
Was pegging out the clothes. 'Read it,' she said.

I read her my first poem:
A beautiful sunset gleaming
A beautiful gold to see . . .

Pink in the face, embarrassed, I read on.
The rhymes went 'click' as rhymes, I knew, should go,
Click like the pegs as Mother pegged the clothes,
Click, snap. She pushed the prop. The clothes hung free.
'I am pleased,' said my mother. 'Pleased. I'm pleased.'
We went back in together. Proud and pleased,
Pink-faced, puffed-up, I thought of poetry
Blowing, bright coloured, all about the world.

This poised and disarming poem encapsulates a great deal that one will find in Rosemary Dobson's work. There is a sense of personal reticence, perhaps most striking here because this poem's title offers the promise of autobiography. There is a grace in the writing, and an attentiveness to detail. There is an unsentimental tone—almost, at times, a matter-of-factness. And there is a sense that the poem accumulates meaning steadily, so that details become more charged as the poem progresses. There is also an unobtrusive mastery of formal elements, as is most apparent in the relaxed and skilfully modulated iambic pentameter of the main body of this poem.

Most significantly, perhaps, this poem says a great deal more than it first appears to do. It places recollection at the centre of the human quest for meaning and emphasises the importance of mundane detail in making sense of a life ('"Clothes-props", "Clothes-props"'). The poem then connects such detail to fundamental concerns: the relationship of child to parents; the sense of being located in time and place; the development of a child's individuality and self-consciousness; and the importance of language, and a mastery of language, to allow the possibility of a privileged utterance—both the expression of love and even a kind of transcendence ('poetry / Blowing, bright coloured, all about the world').

The reader leaves this poem with a heightened sense of the subtle possibilities of human relations, and with a sense that poetry allows a way of articulating fundamental issues and questions. Another poem, this time entitled 'Autobiography' rather than 'Autobiographical', and this time written in a superbly fluent iambic tetrameter, begins:

> Time holds the glass the wrong way round:
> I see a matchstick child, thin,
> Dwindling through far-off summer days
> Exhausted in a cotton dress,
> Sustained by longing, burning still
> With passion underneath the skin
> For love, for words, for excellence.
>
> She crouches over poetry,
> Starts like a bird and trembling waits

Marjorie Dobson (née Caldwell) with her first-born daughter,
Ruth Lissant in 1918

The lightning-flash of love, exchange
Of name for name and known for known.
She learns that word and love are one
Though each assume a different form,
And she the seeker and the sought.

'Of name for name and known for known. / She learns that word and love are one'. This marvellous formulation is reminiscent of the famous opening of St. John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' For the poet, saying, naming, knowing and loving are all part of the same possibility, the same utterance, the same quest. She restates this theme in 'The Cry' from *Cock Crow*, which concludes with the lines 'Where minds of poets meet and merge / Into a single cry of love.'

And for Rosemary Dobson, this quest not only resides with poetry. It is the artist's quest; the artist's search for self-definition. Her poem, 'The Mirror', in the voice of the artist Jan Vermeer, contains the lines:

Oh you who praise
This tangled, broken web of paint,
I paint reflections in a glass:
Who look on Truth with mortal sight
Are blinded in its blaze of light.

The child's vision of poetry 'Blowing, bright coloured, all about the world' has, in the view of a mature artist, become 'reflections' of a blinding 'blaze of light', just as in the

poem 'Autobiography' love was a 'lightning-flash'. However, Rosemary Dobson's vision of love and poetry as illumination in darkness is a complex one, and not easily summarised. One way into a further understanding of this vision is to consider her sequence of poems, 'The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell', first published by Brindabella Press in 1981. As a way of leading in to my discussion of this poetic sequence, I would like to mention the poetry of China's T'ang Dynasty.

2. 'What time will the wild goose arrive?'

The poets of China's T'ang Dynasty (618–907)—China's 'Elizabethan Age'—often celebrated love between friends. They lived in a period when friendship was considered one of the important elaborations and achievements of civilised life. Friendship not only implied significant obligations, but to achieve and maintain the intimacy of true friendship demanded an appropriate decorum and reticence.

Such reticence was not coy. It assumed that a true and subtle understanding between friends required both directness and discreetness in its expression. Self-expression that was overtly violent or overly sentimental was considered a distortion of friendship. It was believed that the love of friends demanded considerable delicacy and restraint.[2]

In Chinese poetry of this period clarity and a pared-back eloquence were combined with the practice of alluding to, and even incorporating, other poets' work, along with references to the visual arts. Such allusiveness was a form of homage to the magnificent Chinese literary and artistic tradition and in every sense, as the poets of

the T'ang Dynasty reinvigorated Chinese poetry, they based their innovation on the traditions that they had inherited. Their allusiveness also allowed them to summarise an issue swiftly by, for example, conjuring a well-known quotation—much as we might today use a quotation from Shakespeare's work.

When Tu Fu (712–70), perhaps China's greatest poet, wrote the following short poem, he was making a number of points at once:

Thoughts of Li Po at the World's End

Here, at the world's end, a cold wind rises.
What are you thinking now, old friend?
What time will the wild goose arrive
now rivers and lakes are swollen with autumn floods?
Literature resents a successful life,
mountain goblins delight in people passing—
you should talk with that wronged poet's ghost,
drop a poem as gift in the river Mi-lo.[3]

Tu Fu is missing his friend, the famous poet Li Po, who is in exile (the wild goose is simultaneously a symbol of a wished-for letter between friends separated by distance and a symbol of a traveller in difficulties). He is worried that Li Po's life is precarious because of the autumn floods and unknown dangers (the 'mountain goblins'). He summarises his concerns by alluding to 'that wronged poet's ghost', Ch'u Yuan of the fourth century BC, who was banished by the King of Ch'u because of false allegations against him, and who drowned himself in the river Mi-lo. Tu Fu is

suggesting that Li Po has been wronged, like Ch'u Yuan. The suggested gift of a poem is a way of appeasing Ch'u Yuan's wronged spirit and of sustaining Li Po.

Tu Fu's short poem not only expresses his concern for an absent friend; it also recognises friendship as symbolic of what is reliable and sustaining in an uncertain world; as durable in the face of separation and personal trouble. His vision in this poem, and incidentally in other poems addressed to Li Po, emphasises the importance of compassion and love despite the vicissitudes of a notoriously fickle court society. Friendship was a touchstone for sincerity, and the expression of such friendship in poetry became a way of affirming the value of what was true.

3. 'The Continuance of Poetry'

Rosemary Dobson's poetic sequence 'The Continuance of Poetry' clearly has complex origins. The poet provides some clues as to these origins in her note to this sequence, when it was republished in the collection *The Three Fates & Other Poems* in 1984. Part of this note also appears in a slightly revised form at the end of her *Collected Poems* (1991).

In this note Rosemary Dobson acknowledges a debt to two collections of English translations of poetry from China's T'ang Dynasty, one featuring the work of Wang Wei, and the other featuring the work of Li Po and Tu Fu. She also writes that,

> In these poems I refer to some of the places that [eminent Australian poet] David Campbell wrote about: for example, the

> Aboriginal rock-carvings found in the Ku-ring-gai Chase area near Sydney; the east coast of New South Wales; urban Canberra and its environs, and the university. I also refer to the project of making imitations or versions of poems from the Russian in which we were jointly involved for a number of years.

While she says nothing explicit about friendship in this note to 'The Continuance of Poetry', the poetic sequence itself says a great deal about the subject. Like the Chinese poets whose example she naturalises into contemporary English—and who were themselves in the habit of writing poetic sequences—her series of poems celebrates true understanding between friends and the creative harvest that this understanding may yield. And her sequence links her complex idea of friendship to the long tradition of poetry throughout human history—and, finally, to creative artistry of all kinds. Like the Chinese poets before her, her poems move partly through evocation and suggestion, and partly through a marvellous kind of plain speaking:

1. A Good-bye

> We have seen you off as far as the yellow-box-tree
> Returning I sit for a little while reflecting
> On the long white clouds low at the horizon.
> The wind sharpens the distant Brindabellas,
> In the courtyard the fallen plum-blossom settles.
>
> There will be time enough and time enough later
> For crossing the threshold to lamplight and conversation.

2. The Messages

When you set out on your long journey
The houses of your friends became empty,

Rooms resounded with the need of reassurance.
But here on the page are your messages.

Here are poems: stones, shells, water.
This one weighs in the hand. This one is shining.

This one is yellow. And this smooth to the fingers.
Ching chink says this one clear as a wind-bell.

Poems are set about in the empty rooms of houses.
Windows open on clouds in the blue distance.

3. White Flowers

White water pours down the hillside
On the rock two fish swim under the water.

Flannel-flowers splash in a falling torrent
Push aside boulders, spill over the ledges.

Held still in the eye like a fish carved in sandstone
They become a white cloud visiting the rock-face.

4. Exchanges

When people lend books to each other
Their meaning is giving.
They bestow excitement, joy, imagination.

You lent me Rothko, I lent you Morandi,
We exchanged whole art galleries,
Museums, sculpture, encyclopedias.

Years ago I said, 'Here is Popa.'
You said, 'Here is Berryman.'
Who owned up to the coffee-rings on the Manet

Which had to go back to the Kingston Library?
All, all were returned long ago.
Now they are gone I hold them.

The two opening poems of 'The Continuance of Poetry', so poised and beguiling, look almost artless and seem to move with the ease of natural utterance. This, and their tact, is a measure of their artistry. In the first poem, as Rosemary Dobson associates 'the long white clouds'—an image borrowed from the poet Wang Wei and, in part,

symbolising for her 'some incorporeal, ideally pure country of the spirit'[4] —with the absence of her friend and fellow poet, and focuses her sense of loss through the image of the fallen plum-blossom, she tells us that her sense of absence is palpable and that hers is a deeply felt friendship. The two lines beginning 'There will be time enough', with their faint echo of T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', are both eloquent and poignant.

In the second poem, which explores further the idea of absence, poems are identified as 'messages' and, in turn, are associated with what is tangible and resonant: 'stones, shells, water' and, later, 'wind-bells'. The strong images of light in Rosemary Dobson's work, which I mentioned earlier in this essay, have transmuted. They have become a 'shining' poem and 'Windows' that 'open onto clouds'.

In this sequence's third poem, 'White Flowers', Rosemary Dobson celebrates how the imagination can transform what is observed into an image of something else, as 'Flannel-flowers' 'become a white cloud visiting the rock-face'. In the fourth poem, 'Exchanges' she shifts register, stating that 'When people lend books to each other / Their meaning is giving.' As she elaborates upon this idea, she ensures that the idea of reciprocity, of shared imaginings, is placed at the centre of her poetic sequence, along with the idea of the durability of friendship: 'Now [the books] are gone, I hold them.' Significantly, these books contained the works of both past and contemporary poets, painters and sculptors.

Although there are a total of 12 poems in 'The Continuance of Poetry', I do not have space to consider them all. Instead, I will conclude my discussion with a short analysis of the sequence's eighth poem, 'At the Coast':

> The high wind has stripped the bark from the gum-trees,
> Smooth-boled they follow each other down to the water.

Alec Bolton and Rosemary Dobson at a Friends of the National Library of Australia function in 1993 in honour of Alec Bolton's contribution to fine book design, printing and publishing in Australia

Photograph by Loui Seselja

From rented houses the daughters of professors
Emerge smooth-limbed in this light summer season,

They step from behind the trees at the edge of the water
As smooth as ochre and as cool as lemon.

And which are girls and which are smooth-limbed saplings?
The light is trembling on them from the water.

They glow and flicker in and out of shadow
Like poetry behind the print on pages.

In this poem, Rosemary Dobson's vision of light returns to its place of origin; to poetry that glows and flickers—not as words printed on the page, but as something transcendent and invested with both the observable, tangible world, and with desire.

Indeed, the poet cannot finally distinguish in this poem between the smooth-boled trees and the smooth-limbed girls. They move in and out of each other as the creative mind of the poet transforms what it perceives into a larger vision of illumination where everything partakes of the light of what it is near to; where possibilities move along with tangible realities, and neither is given precedence over the other. And this vision of possibility and poetry is actuated through the affirming sense of the continuing moment of friendship: 'Two poets walking together / May pause suddenly and say, / Will this be your poem, or mine?' ('Poems of the River Wang')

Love and friendship are difficult, if recurrent themes, for poets. Successful poems on these themes require an attentive gaze and a full and meticulous control of

language. Rosemary Dobson has sometimes been characterised as a poet whose work is spare. The truth is that her work is rich with a fastidious delight in the pleasures of language and the complex possibilities of meaning. If we stay with her work, it will entrance us.

One way into Dobson's life—into what is 'Autobiographical'—is to begin with the value of love affirmed in all of her work, and the simultaneous recognition that poetry, love, desire and transcendence are all problematic concepts. There are no simplicities, unless it is the simple-seeming utterance of so many of her resolved and eloquent poems.

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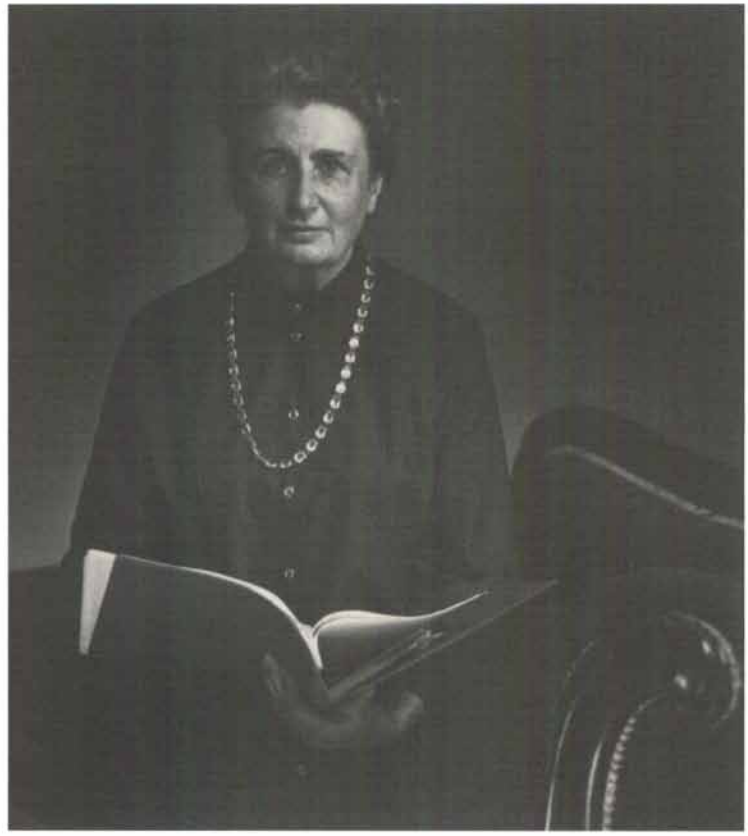
[1] The phrase, 'An irreplaceable song' is taken from Rosemary Dobson's poem 'The Anthropologist' in *Untold Lives* (Canberra: Officina Brindabella, 1992), p. 34.

[2] These brief observations about ideas of friendship in the T'ang Dynasty in China are my own and, of necessity, are a simplification of what were complex attitudes in a highly sophisticated society.

[3] Translation from the original Chinese by Ken Gardiner and Paul Hetherington.

[4] See Rosemary Dobson's note at the end of 'The Continuance of Poetry' in *The Three Fates & Other Poems*, p. 46.



Rosemary Dobson, 1981
Photograph by Max Dupain

Rosemary Dobson: Vision and Light

David McCooey

Critics of Rosemary Dobson have almost habitually discussed her poetry in terms of light and vision. Its virtues are said to be lucidity (from the Latin for light, 'lux'), clarity, keen observational power and lightness—'wit' also being etymologically linked to sight. Some critics take this characterisation further. Werner Senn links vision with Rosemary Dobson's representation of Australian landscape;[1] Barbara Giles discusses the poetry in terms of 'Austerity and Light';[2] and Noel Rowe considers the visionary possibilities of looking 'slantwise'.[3] One way or another, all critics of her poetry invoke (implicitly or explicitly) the tension between vision as an objective faculty and vision as the visionary.

Rosemary Dobson discusses her work in similar terms, stating for instance in an interview with myself that 'Simplicity, clarity, austerity are qualities I hold to', and that she was 'determined to write with clarity and with an edge of wit, or as close as I could come to it'.[4] But she also reasserts her belief that poetry is 'a search for something only fugitively glimpsed',[5] a metaphor that critics of her poetry have also often employed. Rowe sums up the visionary relationship between seeing and glimpsing: 'Dobson's poetry expresses the moment when the "undeflected eye" is caught "looking slantwise", just glimpsing something other, something unexpected, something mysterious.'

What do clarity and lucidity have to do with the mysterious, with things glimpsed? Rosemary Dobson's poetry engages us because it so consistently suggests answers to this question. The relationship between the seen and the unseen is present from the poet's earliest work. Many of the early poems discover the hidden through tableaux, iconography and ekphrasis (that is the verbal representation of a visual artwork). Such forms are among the most ancient forms of poetry so it is not surprising that she turns from paintings to more ancient things—and literature—in her deepening search for 'essentials'. Such a search requires austerity, certainly:

> And the poem that exists
> will never equal the poem that does not exist.
> Trembling, it crosses the frontier at dawn
> from non-being to being
> carrying a small banner,
> bearing a message,
>
> bringing news of the poem that does not exist,
> that pulses like a star, red and green, no-colour,
> blazing white against whiteness.
> ('Over the Frontier')

But it also involves metaphysics, that realm of first principles and the unseen. 'For the Painter Ben Nicholson' directly links the physical and the metaphysical:

Finding and learning
the inner essence,
making and showing
by signs and symbols

that a tree like a glass
contains its tree-ness
and frost is white
on the rim of darkness.

These and other poems interrelate light and vision, but also negativity: images of absence, non-existence, gaps and death. Where the 'poem that does not exist' blazes 'white against whiteness', like an unwritten text on a blank page, being itself is 'white on the rim of darkness'.

The negativity of Rosemary Dobson's visionary poetry has gone mostly unnoticed by critics, perhaps because of the poet's formality and decorum, or perhaps because of her interest in wit, her many poems that employ humour, jokiness, bathos and fantastic conceits—a different kind of 'metaphysical' poetry. But even these conceits often rely on images of the negative, as seen in 'The Midnight Reader' or 'Jack', the jack-in-the-box: 'My mortal husk is shelled at death / And shut inside a narrow box; / But he is coffined up in life: / Oh, what a bitter paradox!' In addition, there is the negativity of silence, the silence of observing. In 'The Young Girl' the Slessor-like vision of the poet's earlier self, glimpsed through a window, places the girl 'In time and silence lost'. Both the poet looking back and the girl looking ahead see loss.

But weighted against such imagery is an interest in material things, real presences. Rosemary Dobson's painting poems are simply one stage in a project dealing with the materiality of our imagined world, with the connection between seeing and vision. This project finds expression in history, art, myth, the language of science, classical literature, archaeology and ancient Chinese literature. Amid the poems on paintings we find poems on mapmaking, a newspaper, masonry, the alphabet, the ampersand, the Missal, a tapestry, a Book of Hours, the theatre, a Greek vase, and 'Greek coins'. Such concerns make Rosemary Dobson a paradoxical poet: a visionary materialist.

All these objects exist (at least potentially) in the worlds of both light and vision, enlightenment and the visionary. They connect the subjective inner world with the material world of life, and the conventional relationship between light and life is seen in the sequence of poems on giving birth. In 'The Edge' the poet describes bringing back from 'the world's end . . . / Tidings of light beyond the dark'. But the darkness before life is akin to that after, so that 'as Lazarus who was born / Again beyond the edge of death, / I see the world half otherwise / And tremble at its mysteries.' In 'The Birth' and 'The Birth (ii)' this apparently exhausted metaphor of light-as-life is given almost unbearably poignant expression as an image of loss for a child who dies shortly after being born: 'So there was light / And human hands, before the tide / Returned you to the oblivious night.' These poems at the end of *Child with a Cockatoo* and the beginning of *Cock Crow* mark the shift to a more austere and abstracting eye:

> I ask the anatomy of beginnings, landscapes
> Bared to the bones of rocks and boulders,
> The simple truths of early paintings—
> Births, deaths, and belief in visions.
> ('Out of Winter')

Rosemary Dobson with (from left) K. Slessor, R.D. Fitzgerald and John Thompson at a party in Sydney to launch the *Penguin Book of Australian Verse*. August 8, 1958
Photograph by the Sun Herald

Interestingly they also show Rosemary Dobson at her most romantic and least concerned with maintaining a classical decorum. Here the images of vastness and sublimity exist within images of domesticity, motherhood and the body.

Light here is clearly metaphysical, but the relationship between sight and the visionary is tested in a number of later poems. 'The Eye'—originally from a pamphlet entitled *Seeing and Believing* and republished in *Collected Poems*—deals with the poet's failing sight: 'one day the dark fell over my eye.' The injured eye is covered by a 'holland blind' and 'a sheet of shadow', things in turn likened to birds and clouds. These shadows are both visible and a species of what we might call 'visionary opacity': 'The filaments moving / Seemed dark birds against their whiteness / Or drifting, undeciphered omens.' 'The Eye (ii)' in the same collection continues the image of light washed away of meaning. The poet's physical surroundings, the calico across 'The single window of the room', echo her inner existence. The blurred vision is a prefiguration of something which cannot be directly named, but which speaks implicitly of infinity, and of death: 'As when a wave that's edged with white / Recedes into a shadowy sea'. The poet inhabits two worlds, one in which the earthly and everyday are seen, and one in which the numinous and deathly are glimpsed. Her physical impairment lends itself to spiritual insight, even as it literally half-blinds her:

> If you should come to find me here
> I will look up with one good eye
>
> From these my books, this pen, this chair,
> Table, thin-curtained window-pane

To greet you. In the other eye
That edge of light, that shadowy sea.

Here the poet's physical surroundings take on an archaic turn ('these my books') hinting at a kind of monastic existence; a withdrawing from the world to the inner world of the mystics and scholars of the past, the visionaries of the western tradition.

Rosemary Dobson's elegiac interests are always balanced by a more celebratory and worldly tone. It is significant that 'A Letter to Lydia', the nearest she comes to an apologia for her poetry, is filled with light. In the second part of the poem the poet describes a visit to her friend in Greece. 'I go with open eyes' she says, regarding the contemporary realities of such an archetypal place. But the light that she seeks to represent threatens silence or sacrifice:

How begin to write
Unless like Ikaros my words take wings
To fall from such impossible endeavour
Down down, and drown in silences forever,
Or to be immolated in the eye of light.

In other words, as she invokes at the end, *'Nothing in Excess'*. The Ikaros-poet must avoid the burning sun above, and the drowning sea below. Returning home she seeks the Greek 'austerity and light' in the works of the poet Seferis: 'his concern / With light and love and journeys and unrest'.

This poem may seem uncharacteristically programmatic, but it does help answer the question posed at the beginning: what do sight and glimpsed visions have to do

with each other? Rosemary Dobson's emphasis on seeing habitually moves from sight to insight. For her, to look is always to look into; to observe is to undertake a kind of observance. This is seen most clearly in her most important and beautiful poem, her elegy for the poet David Campbell, 'The Continuance of Poetry'. This poem balances perfectly the relationship between material things and what they silently imply. The light of a friend's poetry balances the loss of light suggested by that friend's death.

> Here are poems: stones, shells, water.
> This one weighs in the hand. This one is shining.

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[1] Werner Senn, 'Vision, Language, and the Land in Rosemary Dobson's Poetry', *Antipodes*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996, pp. 111–16.

[2] Barbara Giles, 'Austerity and Light: A Tribute to Rosemary Dobson', *Poetry*. ed. Ivor Indyk and Elizabeth Webby, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992, pp. 42–44.

[3] Noel Rowe, 'Looking Slantwise: The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson', *Modern Australian Poets*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 12–23.

[4] David McCooey, 'A Conversation with Rosemary Dobson', *Antipodes*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1996, pp. 107–110.

[5] Rosemary Dobson, 'Author's Statement', *Poetry and Gender: Statements and Essays in Australian Women's Poetry and Poetics*. ed. David Brooks and Brenda Walker, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989, pp. 32–33.

List of Rosemary Dobson's Publications

Poetry

In a Convex Mirror: Poems. Sydney: Dymocks, 1944

The Ship of Ice: With Other Poems. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1948

Child with a Cockatoo and Other Poems. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955, reprinted 1956

Rosemary Dobson. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, Australian Poets Series, 1963

Cock Crow: Poems. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1965, reprinted 1966

Selected Poems. Sydney: Angus & Roberston, 1973, revised 1980

Greek Coins: A Sequence of Poems. Canberra: Brindabella Press, 1977

Over the Frontier: Poems. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1978

The Continuance of Poetry: Twelve Poems for David Campbell. Canberra: Brindabella Press, 1981

The Three Fates & Other Poems. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, July 1984, reprinted December 1984

Seeing and Believing. Canberra: National Library of Australia, Pamphlet Poets, 1990

Collected Poems. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991, reprinted 1992, 1993

Untold Lives: A Sequence of Poems. Canberra: Officina Brindabella, 1992

Untold Lives and Later Poems. Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2000

Translations (in collaboration)

Moscow Trefoil: Poems from the Russian of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975
Seven Russian Poets: Imitations. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979

Prose

Australia: Land of Colour Through the Eyes of Australian Painters. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1962
Focus on Ray Crooke. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1971
A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting in the 1940s. Sydney: The Wentworth Press, 1973

Young Adult Fiction

Summer Press. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1987

Editor

Songs for All Seasons: 100 Poems for Young People. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1967
Australian Voices: Poetry and Prose of the 1970s. Canberra: Canberra Fellowship of Australian Writers in association with Australian National University Press, 1975
Sister Poets, 1. Carlton: Sisters Publishing, 1979
Directions. Ryde: Round Table Publications, Youngstreet Poets 4, 1991

AWARDS

1948 *Sydney Morning Herald* Award for Poetry (for 'The Ship of Ice')
1966 Myer Award II for Australian Poetry (for *Cock Crow*)
1977 Honorary Convocation Member, Australian National University
1979 FAW Robert Frost Award for Poetry (now Christopher Brennan Award)
1984 Patrick White Award for Literature
1984 The Grace Leven Prize for Best Volume of Poetry for the Year
(for *The Three Fates*)
1985 Victorian Premier's Literary Award (shared) (for *The Three Fates*)
1986 Honorary Life Member, The Association for the Study of Australian Literature, ASAL)
1987 Order of Australia (for Literature)
1996 Hon. DLitt. (University of Sydney)
1996 Australia Council: Writer's Emeritus Award

About the Contributors

Joy Hooton is one of the three authors of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1985, 1994), which won a New South Wales Premier's Prize. She has compiled several bibliographies of Australian literature and has written extensively on life-writing. Her most substantial work on the subject is *Stories of Herself When Young* (OUP, 1990).

Elizabeth Lawson is an author, poet and critic whose books include a scholarly edition of Louisa Atkinson's first novel, *Gertrude the Emigrant: A Tale of Colonial Life* (1998), *The Natural Art of Louisa Atkinson* (1995), *The Poetry of Gwen Harwood* (1991) and *Changed into Words* (1980), a collection of her own poems. She was also curator of the major exhibition *Birds!* (1998) for the National Library of Australia.

Paul Hetherington has published five volumes of poetry, most recently *Canvas Light* (Molonglo Press, 1998). His earlier collection, *Shadow Swimmer*, won the 1996 Australian Capital Territory Book of the Year Award. He is Director of the National Library's publishing program.

David McCooey's *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (Cambridge University Press) won a New South Wales Premier's Literary Award in 1996. He has

written widely on Australian poetry and is the author of the 'Contemporary Poetry' chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (CUP, 2000). He lectures in literary studies at Deakin University, Geelong.

This collection of essays pays tribute to acclaimed Australian poet, Rosemary Dobson, whose papers are held in the National Library. Joy Hooton traces a remarkable career, spanning more than six decades. Elizabeth Lawson examines Rosemary Dobson's lifelong engagement with art, as reflected in her 'painting poems' while Paul Hetherington offers a glimpse into the poet's many-faceted concerns. The celebration concludes with David McCooey's exploration of the relationship between light and vision in Dobson's poetry. The book also features a selection of Rosemary Dobson's poems, highlighting the diversity, artistry and wit of one of Australia's finest modern poets.

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