

LIVES OF THE POETS

Poetry Loses A Leading Spirit – Anne Stevenson (1933-2020)

Anne Stevenson was a major Anglo-American poet, biographer, essayist and teacher. In 1989 her biography of Sylvia Plath, *Bitter Fame*, caused controversy as it was thought to lean towards Ted Hughes rather than Sylvia, though Stevenson greatly admired Plath's work. Stevenson's first love was music, which she studied, but following the break-up of her first marriage, she studied English at Ann Arbor University, Michigan, going on to write poetry. Her first collection, *Living in America*, was published in 1965 and her last, *Completing the Circle*, reviewed in ARTEMISpoetry 25 (pp 17-18), in 2020. She published over 20 collections. Second Light Network included Anne in several Readings and she made contributions to ARTEMISpoetry. It was a privilege to know this vital, highly-strung, sharp but basically benign personality. Perhaps because her writing style is essentially so clear and direct, the depth and scope of her work may be as yet under-appreciated. [Eds. Also see p17 for article by Gillian Allnutt, *Cementing a Friendship*.]

Ann Drysdale: I first met Anne at Ty Newydd. I had begun to experiment with poetry and signed up for a weeklong workshop with a poet I had long admired. It was a joy, a nourishing mix of scholarship and laughter. Anne was very deaf and often misheard words and phrases. One of her recent books had been badly received, chiefly because, through no fault of her own, she had been hindered in her access to much of the material that would have made it into the book she had hoped to write. When asked why she went ahead with it when she realised this was happening, she replied “I’d spent the advance” and went on to tell how, in an attempt to rally her dampened spirits, her daughter had poured her a whisky and proposed the toast ‘fuck the begrudgers!’ She heard this as ‘fuck the McGregors’ and so it became.

When I heard of her death, I recalled the phrase, remembering her telling me of it, the laughter at the time and the subsequent occasional quoting of it with a conspiratorial grin; the whole spirit of solidarity in the face of the world’s nay-sayers. In those early days I turned to her often for advice and support and she gave both, unbegrudged. I am, with many others, in her debt.

Cynthia Fuller: In August 1980 I organised and taught on a week-long WEA residential course on Women and Writing – a combination of literature and creative writing. I asked Anne Stevenson to be Poet in Residence. I had been struck particularly by her collection *Correspondences* which traced the history of a New England family – letters in poetic form. Anne agreed and I continued to know her from then until her death last year.

Anne delivered inspiring sessions on the residential course, reading her own work and leading discussions on other poets, including Sylvia Plath. Some aspects she was less happy with – requests for women-only sessions and more radical feminist ideas led to some fiery debates! Anne was always direct and forthright in her views. She could be sharp and her wit was incisive. All ideas and philosophies interested her. Her warmth and enthusiasm were contagious.

Anne lived for some years in Langley Park – a village just over the hill from here. She wrote some wonderful poems about Co. Durham in her collection *The Fiction Makers*, and has written movingly about the many places she lived. She came back to live in Durham and became part of the community, a regular at readings, and in 2016 she delivered the Bloodaxe poetry lectures for Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts. But it is her poetry – with such range of tone and subject – that bequeaths us her untiring interest in everything, her wit and sparky mind, her observation, and her music.

S.J. Litherland: I knew Anne as my neighbour in Durham but I first met her in a tiny ex-pit cottage in Langley Park in the days when empty streets were bought up by hippies and socialists who wanted to establish communes of artists. Anne was living with her partner Michael Farley and they were struggling to keep afloat Ceolfrith Press which was relaunched as Taxus. Poetry presses had butterfly lives and Taxus did not last. Her publications reveal that she always had a soft spot for small presses

with strange names. She was an interesting mixture of New England severity and elegance and Bohemian quirkiness and this is true of her poetry. She had no time for academic snobbery. She reminded me of a young girl in her enthusiasm and appreciation of life, and this extended to the work of others. She was supportive and ardent. One of my favourite poems is *Willow Song* written for her close friend Frances Horovitz who died in her forties. The refrain conjures up banks of rosebay willowherb, a familiar sight on derelict workings. Anne elevates the common flower into a metaphor for grief and loss. She turns without a qualm to the traditional ballad form. She was brave and uncaring of fashion which she transcended.



Shed Poets Remember Bernie Kenny

Marguerite Colgan: Bernie went forth and everything delighted her: rasp of wren, life awakening sun, a flowering thistle, always the sea. Each house move became a nesting home, every novice poet a pupil and we were all welcomed. She painted her feelings and images in words, filling eight books of poetry, each one a love song to life.

Forty five years ago Bernie joined our teaching staff. We all, junior infants, parents and teachers admired her grace, her kindness, her calmness and she and I became firm friends.

Three of us went to painting classes and Bernie soon showed real skill. She retired and started creative writing leading to poetry. On reading her first book I dashed off a letter. She told others that she would send for me when I retired and in 2004 invited me to join her Sheds and Bealtaine. What a joy it was and still is.

We loved our visits to Second Light, the workshops, the company, Bernie always responding to the prompts with her well-chosen words. A few years ago she suggested that we not go. I guess the journey was getting too much for her, try as she might. I was loathe to go without Bernie but will again to remember her. I have been rereading some ARTEMISpoetry and am hungry again. We will meet again when times are better.

Rosy Wilson:

Bernie Speaks

i.m. Bernie Kenny, 1925-2020

Now, *there is nothing I want to possess*
no-one I envy, ninety-five years are
enough in this world we inhabit, share
with badgers, birds, bees, sheltering trees.

It is autumn, leaves are falling, yellow
umber, russet, the colours of long frocks
I always wear. I'm ready to wave good-bye
to six children, their families, my diaspora.

Life is good, I was loved by my father,
headmaster at Ennis, husband who's waiting,
little children I taught and fellow-poets
writing together in my garden shed.

I sleep with moon lanes on calm waves
wake with sun-rise, red-gold on the horizon.

A Thank You to Jamie Dedes

Dilys Wood: Jamie Dedes, a US poet and activist who died in 2020, became a Second Light member and took a keen and active interest in us. She ran *The Poet by Day*, a webzine in support of poets, other writers and worthwhile causes. Over many years she featured and publicised the aims and activities of our network and the work of individual members. Her enthusiasm was inspiring and we have lost a good friend.

Myra Schneider recollects: "I came upon Jamie Dedes by chance when I found a perceptive and in-depth review of my book *Writing My Way Through Cancer*. This must have been in 2006 in her webzine *The Poet by Day* in which she featured daily interviews, poems and information about poetry. After that I was in frequent contact with her and she reviewed and publicised all my books and sometimes included a poem I'd written. People from all over the world visited her site and she publicised magazines, competitions and other writing opportunities worldwide. This amazing woman had to give up her job as a features editor because of severe health problems but although she was on a kidney machine and only had one functional lung and was bedridden she never gave up, never complained but simply went on producing the webzine. She started and for some years edited and co-edited the in-depth *The BeZine* poetry magazine which came out a few times a year and often included work by Second Light members. Her refusal to give up is a lesson to us all. I much miss her."

Limited Edition Subscription Invitation

***there was a maze*, by Joanna Boulter (1942- 2019)**

Joanna Boulter died in September 2019, having finished her final, wonderful collection, *there was a maze*. Vane Women are honouring her memory by arranging private publication of this collection to coincide with the second anniversary of Joanna's death. The book will be available by subscription and will be a limited edition. We're inviting everyone who knew Joanna and would like to have a copy of the book to email Annie Wright at annie.wright01@gmail.com to register your interest. We anticipate the book will cost around £10 with post and packaging included. Responses by 30th June latest would be appreciated.

An *in memoriam* article by Annie Wright appeared in Issue 24 of ARTEMISpoetry in which she says 'A founding member of Vane Women, she was an extraordinary poet; warm, witty, a fierce critic'.

Joanna set up the publishing house, Arrowhead Press, with her husband, Roger Collett. Of her own four full collections, her first, *24 Preludes & Fugues on Dmitri Shostakovich* (Arc Publications 2006), was shortlisted for the Aldeburgh prize for a first full collection. She was a talented musician and collaborated with composer Andrew Webb-Mitchell on his *Songs of Awe and Wonder*. These are just a few of Joanna's achievements. Her optimism and determination in the face of cancer was truly inspirational.

Dilys Wood