



Published quarterly by the Robinson Jeffers Committee of
Occidental College, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles,
California 90041. Editor: Melba Berry Bennett.

Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

Number 18

June, 1967

The April program presented by the San Francisco State College Poetry Center was a great success. Billed as A Celebration of Robinson Jeffers, it was attended by a capacity audience in the Veterans' Auditorium in San Francisco. Dame Judith Anderson gave a superb reading of selections from Jeffers' dramas and poems. This was followed by the premiere showing of the documentary film Give Your Heart to the Hawks, produced for National Education Television by David Myers and Mark Linenthal. This is one of three documentaries made of Jeffers during the past two years and contains readings by Jeffers, Dame Judith Anderson and Walter Van Tilburg Clark against settings of Tor House and the "Jeffers Country." Highlights of the program were three excellent addresses. Professor Mark Linenthal spoke on The Relevance of Robinson Jeffers, Father Robert J. Brophy, S.J. on Robinson Jeffers: Religious Seeker, and Dr. Frederic J. Carpenter on Robinson Jeffers: Prophet of the West.

The same week, the University of San Francisco presented The Labyrinth Theatre group in two programs, Roan Stallion, Hungerfield and Poetry of War and Peace, (1918-1962). (Information about this group is in Newsletter #17.)

Those of you living in the San Francisco area will be interested to know that a Robinson Jeffers Society has been established there. Write to Father Robert J. Brophy, S.J., c/o University of San Francisco for information regarding membership.

We have received several letters complimenting us on our letterhead, designed for us by the Ward Ritchie Press. Letters have also been received complaining that The Stone Mason of Tor House "seems" to be difficult to buy. We are delighted to have the opportunity to tell you that the first edition of two thousand copies is sold out. The second edition of fifteen hundred copies will be available June sixteenth, though there are already hack orders for five hundred. The kudos go to Ward Ritchie for his handsome presentation, to Lawrence Clark Powell for his Foreword, and to the resurgence of interest in Jeffers (we predict a tidal wave by next year).

We had expressed our intention of giving you a list of Jeffers' works in translation, in this issue, but lack of space necessitates our putting it over to our next issue.

Hannah French, Research Librarian of Wellesley College, has submitted a list of their desiderata which some of you may be helpful in supplying. Their Jeffers

collection is an outstanding one and merits our help in filling in the gaps.

An Artist, Privately printed by John Mayfield, 1928

Cawdor, ltd., signed ed., 1928

Dear Judas, ltd., signed ed., 1929

Stars, first edition, 1930

Thurso's Landing, ltd., signed edition, 1932

Robinson Jeffers Supplement to the "Carmelite,"
Dec. 12, 1928

Fifty Poets, edited by Wm. Rose Benet, 1933

Robinson Jeffers: The Man and His Work, by Lawrence Clark
Powell, ltd. ed., 1934 and 1940 editions.

At our request the following delightful exposition has been contributed by Horace Lyon of Carmel, California. During the years 1936 to early in 1938 Mr. Lyon took a set of remarkable photographs of the Jefferses and of the Jeffers country, intended for publication. Jeffers wrote a splendid Foreword, one of his rare prose expositions. Unfortunately, due to wartime restrictions on fine printing, the book was never published. We are happy to say that the time has come for a reconsideration of the project. Lyon has given us, here, another invaluable and sensitively understanding portrait of Jeffers.

* * * * *

"JEFFERS AS A SUBJECT FOR HORACE LYON'S CAMERA"

Beginning in mid-1935 and continuing until our lives were upset by Pearl Harbor, my wife and I enjoyed a close and friendly association with the Robinson Jefferses that was possibly quite unique. We were living at the time in Carmel, a scant mile from Tor House, when my camera became the means of bringing us into closer and closer contact with them and giving us a somewhat more than casual insight into two very fascinating natures.

I had begun making a set of photographs of scenes along the coast south of Carmel which Robinson Jeffers had used as actual settings for episodes in his narrative poems, or which could have inspired certain passages in his writings. We showed some of the photographs to Una to enlist her help in identifying other sites, and she became intensely interested in our project. She suggested locations and also accompanying passages from his work, and in time Robin lost his early indifference and became genuinely interested in seeing how the camera might catch the character of the rugged and beautiful country that meant so much to him.

As I lived only a few minutes away, Una began to ask me to take simple photographs of their home, views of Tor House and Hawk Tower, the asphodel she had planted, views of Point Lobos from their windows, their dog, and finally, informal photographs of herself, the boys, and Robin. Una's quick, decisive nature necessitated prompt action and she would drop in at our house at any time of day with a request or for some discussion, or Robin would stop in to leave a note from Una, with a soft-spoken explanation. More often it would be a phone call from her that brought us to Tor House, with or without a camera. Una was always bustling and outspoken, Robin, when present, was quiet and reserved. With her we could discuss any subject and she would talk at length on his poetry and philosophy, subjects we never discussed with him and which he never volunteered. On any nature subject -- birds, rocks, tides, meteorology-- he talked freely and with deep understanding, but most of what we learned of his thoughts and motivation came from her.

Una was naturally photogenic and completely at ease under any circumstances. The boys were quite indifferent to the presence of the camera, but I found Robin a very difficult subject for even the most informal photograph. When I showed up with a camera he would immediately become tense and self-conscious, almost belligerent in his expressions, and utterly unlike his usual gentle and courteous self. I never felt that the belligerence was directed at me but rather at the prospect of being photographed. Even though Una had requested it, it was a rank invasion of his privacy and the thought of his image being held up to public gaze was repugnant to him. His feelings are evident in many of the photographs and the problem was always to get him to relax. He would obviously be making a great effort to please Una in something she had wanted but his efforts were all too often unnatural and forced. His strong personality would be a challenge to the most experienced portrait photographer, and I have never seen any photograph of him that I thought did him justice.

He could be a very different person when either Una or Haig, their bulldog, was also in the picture. I have a charming photograph of him kneeling beside Haig who was supposed to be the real subject. Robin had quite lost his self-consciousness in his desire that the dog appear to the best advantage, though Haig needed no help. He was a natural "ham."

On another occasion they were planning a trip abroad and Una asked me to take a passport picture of them both. They sat close together outside the house where the light was soft, and Robin really seemed to enjoy it. And why not? This was not to give the public a peephole glimpse of their companionship, or to hold a bit of his private life up to public gaze. This was a necessary preparation for their happily planned trip to Ireland, to smooth their journey and add to their companionship. The result is no dramatic portrait of a major poet and his wife, but a charming, simple picture of a devoted couple.

Una wanted some photographs of herself and Robin together in their living room. I do not know what she may have told him of what she had in mind, but unlike other occasions when she was in the picture with him, he was stiff and self-conscious, and could seem to do little more than strike artificial poses. Una sat at her little desk by the window with Robin beside her, seemingly intent on what she was writing. I made two exposures and there is not the slightest

change in posture or expression on his part. Then Una sat at her melodeon, with Robin on the settle behind her with Haig, and again two exposures show that he hardly moved a muscle. What could be wrong when both Una and Haig were in the picture with him? I could only guess that for some purpose Una wanted photographs of their home life, and that, to him, was an intolerable invasion of their privacy -- seated together at her desk while she wrote some important letter -- he seated by the fireplace with Haig while she played some favorite music. Such moments of companionship were precious and very personal to him, and to have the camera hold them up to public view was just too much for his sensitive nature. Robin made a great effort to play his part because his beloved Una had asked him to, but he was plainly suffering.

On a memorable occasion he and I drove down the coast together to Victorine's ranch below Mal Paso Canyon where Una wanted a photograph of him looking out to sea from a hillside. He was relaxed and almost chatty on the way, but as soon as we had climbed the grassy slope and I unlimbered my camera, he froze. He had his knobby Irish stick and his leather puttees and he tried so hard to appear to be walking leisurely in the hillside pasture, but he was stiff and unnatural. I made a couple of exposures hoping he would relax, but the results were not good. Suddenly I realized that something was attracting his attention and I became aware of the throbbing sound of a passing trawler out at sea, unusual only in its peculiar broken rhythm. For a matter of seconds he forgot himself in his concentration of the sound and I snapped the shutter. As I did so he said: "It sounds like a three cylinder Diesel." He had a strong feeling of kinship for the fisherfolk of Monterey whose lives were so deeply involved with the ocean he loved, and for a few seconds he was with them in that passing trawler. The result was probably the best photograph I ever got of Robin and one that Una particularly liked. He was a marvelous subject when his privacy was not being violated and he could forget himself.

Robin never commented to me on any photograph I took of him. And while Una expressed her own views freely, she did not tell me how he felt about any of them. She gave prints of them to anyone really interested. I wish I had kept an account of which ones she ordered the most, as it would be interesting to know which she liked best.

I never took a photograph of Robin without his knowledge. There were occasions when a "candid" shot of him could have been very revealing of his complex nature, but to do anything surreptitious with him was unthinkable. Una never suggested it, for while she strove in every way to enhance his public image, she was too deeply devoted to him and too conscious of her role as his protector, to permit any subterfuge.

When Robin was building one of the additions to their house, Una asked me to come over to get some pictures of him at work on the stone walls. He was actually a remarkable stonemason and could lay the difficult, rounded boulders from his beach into a wall that had character and beauty, no mean achievement for the most experienced professional stonemason. I felt that this would be one time when he would be so engrossed in what he was doing that he would forget me and my pesky camera. And it did help. Una would make a suggestion and he would strike a stiff pose until the feel of the stone under his hand and the poised

hammer would begin to intrigue him and he would gradually relax.

But on another occasion Una had him standing beside an old mill-stone at the base of Hawk Tower. The fine stonework made an extremely effective background for Robin, but for some reason he simply could not seem to relax. The photographs I got were not too bad but they could have been so much better.

In addition to our photographic sessions, my wife and I saw a good deal of Robin and Una at purely social functions, delightful gatherings at Ellen O'Sullivan's or Noel Sullivan's, or very small groups at their house or ours for tea or port. They were always fascinating company, Una outgoing and vivacious, Robin quiet and speaking only when he had something worthwhile to say. But it was our all-day excursions with them into the back country that we found the most delightful, such as the memorable visit to the Limekilns up Bixby Creek to photograph the beautiful ruins, since burned over. Robin was completely at ease and natural, interested in seeing if the camera could see what he saw, and suggesting shots. The camera was never pointed toward him. And always on such trips, his first thought was of Una's comfort and welfare. It was a delight to see him guiding her along the rough path or helping her across the stream over logs or stones, and on the way home, arranging a robe or scarf about her in the car. On longer rides he would usually sit with his arm around her.

Their beloved bulldog, Haig, was growing old and Una wanted me to take some photographs of him. They were both particularly anxious to get him in certain characteristic attitudes by the front door. Haig, as usual, was quite willing to oblige and the results were satisfactory. When Haig died shortly afterward, he was buried among their flowers with a rough stone marker, and Robin wrote a poem, "The House Dog's Grave - Haig's Grave," which was published in a limited edition with one of the photographs of Haig at the front door. It had probably all been planned by Una when they realized that his days were numbered. Their affection for him was very genuine, and Una told me afterward that when she and Robin looked over the photographs together to select one for the book, the tears streamed down their faces.

It was a rare privilege for us to know Robin and Una Jeffers as we did.

---- Horace Lyon

Carmel, California
March, 1967