Entry type: Person
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Dobson, Rosemary de Brissac

(1920 - 2012)

Born	19200618, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Died	20120627, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Editor, Poet, Writer

Summary

Honours and awards
1987 Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in recognition of service to literature, particularly in the field of poetry
1996 HonDLitt, University of Sydney
2006 New South Wales Premier's Special Award
2006 New South Wales Alice award
2001 The Age Book of the Year Book of the Year and Poetry Awards for Untold Lives & Later Poems
1996 Australia Council Writer's Emeritus Award
1996 Emeritus Fellowship, Literature Board of the Australia Council
1985 Victorian Premier's Literary Award, 1985 for "The Three Fates"
1985 honorary life member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature
1984 Patrick White Award
1984 Grace Leven Poetry Prize for "The Three Fates"
1980 Senior Fellowship, Literature Board of the Australia Council
1979 Robert Frost Prize
1978 Fellowship of Australian Writers Christopher Brennan Award
1977 Australian National University Honorary Convocation Member
1966 Myer Award II for Australian Poetry for Cock Crow
1948 The Sydney Morning Herald Award for poetry, for "The Ship of Ice"

Poet Rosemary Dobson's significant contribution to Australian literature is evident in the long list of literary awards she received. She began writing at the age of 7, typeset and printed her first book aged 17 and published over twenty poetry collections and other books during her life. The most recent poetry book, *Collected*, was published just three months before her death in 2012. Recognised early in her career as a significant poet, Dobson was acclaimed as representing "a coming of age for Australian poetry" along with Gwen Harwood, Judith Wright and David Campbell. Contemplative and meditative, Dobson's poetry is rich with references to art, history, relationship and the Australian landscape. Her move to Canberra in 1971 brought her into a rich literary and artistic community and she was freed to write again after five years in England when her pen remained still. Dobson became a vital member of Canberra's literary community contributing generously of her time as mentor to younger poets, providing readings for poetry lovers and continuing to publish her own work until she died in 2012.

Details

Rosemary de Brissac Dobson was born into a literary family. Her parents Austin ‘Arthur’ Greaves Dobson (1870-1926) and Marjorie Caldwell (-1979) met at the Dickens Society in Sydney and married in 1917. Her English-born father was the son of Austin Dobson – poet, essayist and authority on eighteenth-century literature.

The second of Arthur and Marjorie Dobson’s two children, Rosemary Dobson was born in Sydney, New South Wales (NSW) on 18 June 1920. Her sister Ruth Lissant Dobson (1918-1989) became Australia’s first woman career diplomat to be appointed an Australian ambassador.

Arthur Dobson died when Rosemary Dobson was five years old, leaving his wife and two young daughters in straitened financial circumstances. Through a family connection Winifred West (1881-1971), headmistress and founder of the prestigious Frensham School in Mittagong NSW, offered Marjorie Dobson a housemistress position at the school and scholarships for her daughters. The Dobson girls thrived at Frensham where Rosemary showed early literary talent. Under the tutelage of the school librarian – Australian children’s author and printer Joan Phipson – Dobson produced her first collection of poems. She typeset them on the school’s small Adana Press and hand-bound the 200 copies, illustrating the cover with her own linocut illustration.

Dobson frequently acknowledged her debt to West for the opportunity to attend Frensham and remained in contact with her until West’s death in 1971.

After completing school, Dobson remained at Frensham as a teacher of art, literature and printing before using a small inheritance to study non-degree English literature at Sydney University and art with artist Althea Mary ‘Thea’ Proctor. Influenced by the combination of elegance, strength, discrimination and balance in Proctor’s art and recognising the influence of the different arts on one another, Dobson kept up her visual arts skills throughout her life, painting on holidays and taking life drawing classes.

During the early years of World War 2 Dobson worked as a cipher clerk for the Royal Australian Navy. From the age of 21 she submitted poetry to newspapers and literary journals, including the *Bulletin* and *Meanjin*. In 1944 Dymocks published her collection “In a Convex Mirror” and in 1947 she won the *Sydney Morning Herald* poetry prize for “The Ship of Ice”. Working as a proof-reader then editor at Angus & Robertson publishers in Sydney, Dobson met fellow editor, Alec Bolton. They married in North Sydney in 1951 and set up home at Neutral Bay on Sydney Harbour.

Tragedy struck in 1953 when Dobson and Bolton’s first child, Alexandra, lived only a few hours after birth. Dobson expressed some of her grief in her poem *The Birth (ii)* published in “Child with a Cockatoo and other poems” (1955) beginning:

“Unknown, never to be known, lost
Beyond darkness, beyond the reach of time …”

In the following years their second daughter, Lissant and two sons, Robert and Ian were born in Sydney where Dobson and Bolton found friendship with a number of literary people including Douglas Stewart and his artist wife, Margaret Coen, writer and artist Norman Lindsay, Kenneth Slessor, and James McAuley.

In 1966 Angus & Robertson appointed Alec Bolton as their London editor and the family moved to England, where they lived in Richmond near London. Although this was a stimulating time for Dobson, with European travel and London’s feast of concerts, theatre and art galleries, separated from her Australian roots she found herself unable to write poetry.

In 1971 the family returned to Australia to live in Canberra when Alec Bolton was appointed founding Director of Publications at the National Library of Australia. With a population of around 200,000 Canberra was small compared to London, but despite its compact size the national capital nurtured a thriving literary and artistic community and Dobson flourished in the stimulating circle of creative new friends. She and Bolton made friends with the likes of poet, essayist and ANU’s foundation professor of English – Alec Hope, ANU academic and literary critic – Dorothy Green, visual artist – Rosalie Gascoigne, ANU academic and poet – David Campbell and writer Robert Dessaix. Dobson delighted in attending lectures by John Mulvaney, foundation professor in pre-history at the ANU and she took classes in Modern Greek. Her poetry found voice again and she flourished, publishing around fifteen collections of poetry in the following four decades.

While continuing to write poetry, Dobson also edited anthologies and gave interviews and public readings of her work. She represented Australian literature in overseas visits where she valued meetings with poets like Denise Levertov who later visited her in Canberra, Michael Ondaatje and Eastern European poet Zbigniew Herbert.

In 1972 Alec Bolton established the Brindabella Press which published four of Dobson’s books – *Three poems on water-springs, Greek Coins, Untold Lives: a sequence of poems* and *The Continuance of Poetry*, two of which Dobson illustrated herself.

Dobson maintained that poetry is ‘a vocation’. Her poetry is widely acknowledged for the way she simply and clearly expresses life’s complexities. She expressed the importance of this in her own words, “I really feel the necessity of the poetry being clear, so I can communicate something to people. Clarity is very important.”

Certain themes, such as water, light and time run through her poetry, with water usually a metaphor for renewal, consolation, friendship or inspiration. Joy Hooton writes that Dobson’s passionate engagement with life emerges throughout her poetry as “enjoyment of friendships, family relationships, intense appreciation of landscapes, art, literature and music and a relish for the sheer diversity of human personality.” (Hooton, 21)

In the 1990s Dobson's sight began failing – "one day the dark fell over my eye". Her progressive sight loss stimulated some moving poetry totally lacking in any self-pity, including *Poems a Long Way After Basho*:

I breathe the leaves of the basil
It has news for me-
For all my senses

Old, I strive for wisdom
As the sage bush speaks, clearly,
Many-leaved, grey and silver

Solace for my eyesight
The green leaves of borage
And its gentle blue flowers.

When Alec Bolton died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1996, Rosemary Dobson expressed her grief through "simultaneous celebrations and laments" for him (*Canberra Times*, 12 July 2012). Ever grounded in life, she wrote elegantly and sparely of her grief and of Bolton's wisdom in her poem "Reading Aloud", dedicated to Bolton and also read at her own funeral at St Paul's Anglican Church, Manuka ACT on 4 July 2012:

"We must press on."
From books to life, your thought:
"Forgive, learn from the past. Press on."
And I press on.

Dobson wrote in one of her collections that the poems "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 . . . A doomed but urgent wish to express the inexpressible".

Rosemary Dobson died in Canberra 27 June 2012. Days before she died, fellow poet Geoff Page paid tribute to Dobson and the generosity with which she contributed to Canberra's literary life:

"Rosemary Dobson has been a vital member of Canberra's literary community. She has done this both by reading her own work whenever asked – and through acting, over several decades, as an informal mentor to many younger poets. Her consistent support for readings, such as the long-running series Poetry at The Gods (and its predecessor, Poetry at the Goethe), has been a great encouragement to poets from this city (and all over Australia) who were invariably gratified to have a poet of Dobson's stature and experience in the audience" (*Canberra Times*, 16 June 2012).

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book Section
Rosemary Dobson, Hanley, Penelope, 2009

Rosemary Dobson (1920-), Ayers, Marie-Louise, 2002

Over the Frontier: The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson, Brady, Veronica, 1994

A Celebration of the Art of Rosemary Dobson, Hooton, Joy, 2000

Rosemary Dobson, Williams, Barbara, 1998

Reclusive Grace: The Poetry of Rosemary Dobson, Zwicky, Fay, 1986

Newspaper Article
Well-versed prizewinner, Ayres, Marie-Louise, 2012,
http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/obituaries/wellversed-prizewinner-20120711-21w24.html

Poet espoused tradition, yet remained distinct, McCooey, David, 2012,
http://www.smh.com.au/national/obituaries/poet-espoused-tradition-yet-remained-distinct-20120702-21d1a.html

Poet's Final Journey to the Western Star, Metherell, Gia, 2012,
http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/poets-final-journey-to-western-star-20120704-21htt.html

Poets Who Drew From World Well, Savige, Jaya, 2012,
http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/poets-who-drew-from-world-well/story-e6frg8n6-1226414945447

Rosemary Dobson, enduring voice of Australia, dies, Steger, Jason, 2012,
http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/rosemary-dobson-enduring-voice-of-australia-dies-20120628-214ho.html

Rosemary Dobson's poetic life in pursuit of the intervening angel, Lehmann, Geoffrey, 2012,
http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/rosemary-dobsons-poetic-life-in-pursuit-of-the-intervening-angel/story-fn9n8gph-122

The last of her line, Page, Geoff, 2012,
http://www.canberratimes.com.au/entertainment/the-last-of-her-line-20120615-20dn3.html

Magazine article
Last of an "illustrious generation" of poets, 2012

The Figure in the Doorway: On the Poetry of Rosemary Dobson, Catalano, Gary, 1994

A World of Difference: Australian Poetry and Painting in the 1940s, Dobson, Rosemary, 1973

Over My Shoulder, Dobson, Rosemary, 1989

Poetry and Painting: A Personal View, Dobson, Rosemary, 1977

The Intricate, Devised Hearing of Sight: A Profile of Rosemary Dobson, Smith, Graeme Kinross, 1974,
http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/westerly/pdfs/33803

"Looking into the Landscape": The Elegiac Art of Rosemary Dobson, McCooey, David, 1995,
http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/westerly/pdfs/253530

Edited Book
Rosemary Dobson. A Celebration, Hooton, Joy, 2000

Resource Section
Rosemary Dobson in conversation with John Tranter, 2004,
http://johntranter.com/interviewer/20041208-dobson-iv.shtml

Rosemary Dobson,
http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/dobson-rosemary

Journal Article

Rosemary Dobson - the Text and the Textile, Ayers, Marie-Louise, 1995

A Conversation with Rosemary Dobson, McCooey, David, 1996

A Frame of Reference: Rosemary Dobson's Grace Notes for Humanity, Mitchell, Adrian, 1981

Vision Poetry and the Land in Rosemary Dobson's Poetry, Senn, Werner, 1996

Book

Rosemary Dobson: A Celebration, Hooton, Joy, 2000,
http://books.google.com.au/books?printsec=frontcover&vid=ISBN0642107289&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Focus on Ray Crook, Dobson, Rosemary, 1971

Poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1937

In a Convex Mirror: poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1944

Child with a Cockatoo and other poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1955

Rosemary Dobson. Australian Poets, Dobson, Rosemary, 1963

Poems. Australian Poets and Artists [Adelaide]: Australian Letters, Dobson, Rosemary, 1964

Cock Crow: poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1965

Knossos, Dobson, Rosemary, 1971

Selected Poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1973

Three poems on water-springs, Dobson, Rosemary, 1973

Moscow Trefoil: poems from the Russian of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam, Campbell, David and Dobson, Rosemary. Translator: Staples, Natalie, 1975

Greek coins: a sequence of poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1977

Over the Frontier: poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1978

Seven Russian Poets: Imitations, Dobson, Rosemary, 1979

Selected poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1980

The continuance of poetry: twelve poems for David Campbell, Dobson, Rosemary, 1981

The Three Fates and other poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1984

Summer press, Dobson, Rosemary, 1987

Seeing and Believing, Dobson, Rosemary, 1990

Collected Poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1991

Untold Lives: a sequence of poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 1992

Untold Lives and later poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 2000

Folding the Sheets and other poems, Dobson, Rosemary, 2004

Poems to Hold or Let Go, Dobson, Rosemary, 2008

Collected, Dobson, Rosemary, 2012

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Rosemary Dobson, poet, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Interview with Rosemary Dobson, poet [sound recording] / interviewer, Heather Rusden

[Poetry reading by Rosemary Dobson] [sound recording] / [recorded by : Hazel de Berg]

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Papers of Rosemary Dobson, 1923-2004 [manuscript]

Correspondence, 1952-1968 [manuscript]

Papers of Dawn Richardson, 1970-2010 [manuscript]

Papers of Judith Wright, 1944-2000 [manuscript]

Literary papers 1969-1981 [manuscript]

Australian National University Archives
Sound recordings

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