

The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society Newsletter



Newsletter No. 7

www.emrsociety.com

March 2006

8th Annual Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society Conference Set for April 22-24

The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society will hold its 8th Annual Conference in Harrodsburg and Springfield, Kentucky on April 22-24, 2006. The conference headquarters is the historic Beaumont Inn in Harrodsburg. Academic paper sessions will be held at St. Catharine College, just outside of Springfield, Roberts's hometown.

The focus of the conference will be on Roberts's life and work; papers will examine her literature in a variety of contexts including her place in the Southern Renaissance, historical and regional perspectives applicable to her texts, her relation to Modernist and stylistic studies, and her work relative to critical theoretical interpretation.

This year's conference co-directors are William Boyle and H.R. Stoneback of the State University of New York at New Paltz. Conference Program Chair is Nicole Camastra of the University of Georgia. Associate Program Chairs are Matthew Nickel and Goretti Vianney-Benca of SUNY New Paltz. Terry Ward of St. Catharine College is on-site coordinator for the conference.



Roberts Scholars at the 20005

Mission Statement ~ The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society seeks to promote scholarship in the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, to encourage its teaching, and to pursue the goal of returning such classic novels as *The Great Meadow* and *The Time of Man* to print and keeping them there. Membership is open to all who love Roberts. We are a national organization, but we are interested in encouraging Kentucky membership and establishing a liaison with members in the Springfield area.

President's Report

2006 marks another election year for our society, and the following slate of candidates has been nominated: Gregg Neikirk (President), Nicole Camastra (Vice-President), Bill Boyle (Vice President), and Tina Iraca (Secretary/Treasurer); H.R. Stoneback will continue to serve as Honorary President. As we prepare to install new officers at the upcoming business meeting in Springfield, Kentucky, I'd like to offer special thanks to Jane Keller for her two terms of service as Vice President. In looking forward to a new executive committee, we might be reminded of some past accomplishments enjoyed by the society as well. *(continued on back page)*

"Time's Wingèd Chariot: Images of Roberts"

H.R. Stoneback

The November 1931 issue of *Wings*, the monthly booklet of the Literary Guild, is largely devoted to Elizabeth Madox Roberts. When I recently found the ephemeral 28-page booklet, a monthly mailing for circulation only to Guild members, among my grandmother's papers at my family's Civil War-era cottage in the old Camp Meeting Grove in the deep South Jersey pineywoods, I felt a sharp sense of regret that I had never asked my grandmother (nor my mother who died in 2005 at the age of 92) if they had read Roberts. It seemed suddenly and epiphanically clear that my forebears *had read* Roberts, decades before I discovered her novels on my own in the 1960s. Talk about remorseless time, regret—the *time of man*.

My fragile copy of this members-only booklet has faded penciled check marks by the lead story, a portrait of Roberts, and the following story, a review of *A Buried Treasure* by Carl Van Doren (a leading cultural arbiter of the era), as well as by the full-page spread devoted to Roberts' poem "The Legend of Munn (From a Child's Book in Preparation)". Six of the first eleven pages of the booklet are devoted to Roberts, and much is made of the fact that the selection of *A Buried Treasure* marks the first time ever that the Guild "issues a second novel by a writer one of whose novels [*The Great Meadow*] has already been selected" (Vol.5, No.11: 4). Along with these clear indications of Roberts' literary stature in 1931, what may be of most interest to readers of this newsletter is the extraordinary portrait of Roberts that leads off this issue of *Wings*.

The unsigned biographical essay, accompanied by a large photograph of Roberts (the same portrait that appears at the head of this issue of the newsletter), and a picture of her home in Springfield, begins: "She is a portrait painted in pastels, in cool, subtle colors—grayish greens, pale gold with an unexpected accent of brown. Slight and fair, with a delicate skin and gracious manners, she is a person of ethereal dignity." The anonymous portrait—presumably written by the unidentified editor of *Wings*—evokes an image of Roberts more telling than all the biographical sketches I have read: "Her hair falls softly about her long, finely molded head. Her eyebrows are straight and heavy. Her figure is slim and modishly attired. She wears turbans and she is naively proud of her skill in winding them. When she does, you see that her hands are slim and graceful." Making a perspicacious connection between Roberts' way of talking, her voice, and her literary style, the anonymous portraitist notes the intensity and specificity (no "generalities") of her conversation and how she "tells stories about people she has known, colorfully and vivaciously": "Her voice, rather low-pitched, has a lilt to it and her words are spontaneous and rhythmical. They have the same aptness, the same richness that her written words have. She laughs often, a gay tinkling laugh" (3). Finally, her deep sense of place,

her interests in Kentucky history as well as the "farm life" of her "Pigeon River country" neighbors, are contrasted with the seclusion she seeks when she stays in New York and avoids "the rather mad literary life of Manhattan" (6-7).

Three additional photographs accompany this sketch of Roberts. Two depict historic Fort Harrod buildings in Harrodsburg, and the third is a photograph with the caption: "The Palisades of the Kentucky River not far from the home of Elizabeth Madox Roberts in the most richly historical portion of the state" (7). Here I must seemingly digress for a moment and note that this photo of the Kentucky River—the exact place and perspective depicted—is the oldest and most hallowed numinous landscape of my life, from the days of my youth long before I ever heard of Roberts. In that precise place, between the ages of 16 and 21, I spent the most enchanted place-immersed days, months, years—swimming and fishing that stretch of the river, building (and sinking) homemade rafts, climbing (and falling from) those cliffs. In that place, I courted the ballad-singing figure from ancient myth who would become my wife (for 44 years now). All through that country (in 1962) I drove a Sears and Roebuck truck, delivering heavy appliances to the isolated farm homes of people whose *presence* and way of life I loved, characters I would later recognize (even their very *names*) in Roberts' fiction. And years later, returning from expatriation in Paris in 1974 (by then having read Roberts), I would buy a farm in the heart of that country. Then for 15 years, every October, I sang and picked guitar and told stories with my knobland neighbors at the Forkland Heritage Folk Festival. I do not think that any of this was on my mind when, in 1999, six of us from SUNY-New Paltz were scheduled to deliver papers at a Robert Penn Warren Conference in Kentucky and, on the way, to hold our first tentative Roberts symposium (just the six of us) at Saint Catharine College. Yet all of it must have been in the back of my mind because, given various travel plans, times and routes, the most convenient, unmissable landmark to which I could direct them, to meet me, was that place on the Kentucky River, on that very bridge from which the Roberts photo in the 1931 *Wings* was taken. We met there on a greengolden April morning in 1999, and from there we drove to the Beaumont Inn (where I had last eaten in 1959) because I wanted to buy them a traditional Kentucky meal of country ham and yellow-leg chicken, burgoo and corn pudding; and over that lunch we created the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society. As I write this, I look at the framed photograph on my desk of the six founding members of the Roberts Society standing on that bridge, a bridge to the past and to the future. Time's wingèd Serendipity? Synchronicity? Magical thinking suffused with Sentimentality? OK—all of the above.

(continued page 5)

"The 'Rarest Spirit'—Bach and Hollyhocks, Sun and Cigarettes: More Images of Roberts from the 1930s"

H. R. Stoneback

The 34-page booklet entitled *Elizabeth Madox Roberts* (Viking Press, 1938) features "An Appraisal" of her fiction by J. Donald Adams, brief reviews of eight Roberts books by nine writers including Carl Van Doren, Robert Morss Lovett, and Louis Untermeyer, and a personal portrait, "Elizabeth Madox Roberts in Kentucky," by Rosamond Milner. Previously published in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, Milner's sketch of her visit to Springfield evokes, in part, a familiar image of an elegant and ethereal Roberts, who meets Milner at the train station in Springfield: "On the platform a tall figure, with bright hair showing under the edges of a folded turban, moves swiftly toward you with adequate but slightly impersonal warmth" (13). When they enter Roberts' house, Milner feels "enfolded in a simple stateliness of hospitality that the race has preserved in only a few places"; after they sit by the open fire in Roberts' study, after Roberts "has remembered to smoke a cigarette" with her, Milner finds Roberts "no longer detached since she has brought you into the periphery of her reality" (13). Settled in for the night, Roberts reads one of her poems and Milner feels "Order and rhythm and power catch up [her] soul into peace . . . [and] the mystery of Elizabeth Madox Roberts"(14).

The next day they drive around Springfield and the outlying countryside; they visit "an old Dominican Abbey," visit with a priest in "the empty chapel," discuss Kentucky history; they follow Ellen Chesser's road through the farm country—as they drive, Roberts tells stories. Back at the house, Milner describes Roberts' garden, notes her heliophilia, or love of sunbathing. She concludes her portrait with the observation "that Elizabeth Roberts reading aloud" from her work "takes on the quality of immortality that is in her books, of an immediate immortality, a mysterious fusion with life. An echo of Bach's patterned music lingers in the air. . . (Milner's ellipses 17). And when Milner leaves the following morning, her final image is of Roberts bending over the earth, "planting hollyhock seed" (17).

When I read this portrait of Roberts to a 21st century undergraduate class, most of the students said this was pretty much how they pictured Roberts—except for two discordant details: the cigarettes and the sunbathing. "Does this mean," one Freshman wit asked, "that her books should carry a warning label—Carcinogenic Prose?" I suggested that elegance and ethereality do not exclude earthiness—and smoking cigarettes and sunbathing (two activities commented on by others who visited with Roberts) could be construed as deeply incarnational forms of earthiness. Aware as always these days when lecturing on a campus where smoking is forbidden within 50 feet of any building entrance, where students have been proselytized since birth to denounce the evils of tobacco—and to a lesser degree, sunbathing—I suggested that maybe Roberts smoked as a ritual gesture of solidarity with the farmers who peopled the pages of her fiction. Their very lives, the lay of their land, the shape of the countryside, the seasonal rhythm and order of things, were all determined by the cultivation of tobacco. (As a tobacco farmer myself, I noted, with a farm in Roberts country, I also sometimes smoked in solidarity with the tobacco farmers whose lives and land and well-being are being destroyed by a puritanical rage against tobacco, a state-sanctioned political correctness that ultimately spells displacement and deracination for many farmers, and the end of the small-family-farm in Kentucky's tobacco-country.) Sitting outside in the sun after class, smoking (51 feet from the nearest building entrance), several students remarked that Roberts' hollyhock seeds, her cigarettes, her sunbathing, all symbolized the necessary earthiness from which the elegance of her life and work grew. I lit my pipe and smiled, said nothing, feeling the intensity of the slanting sun.

Trying to piece together old portraits of Roberts from the 1930s, I have lately tried hard to remember anything I might have heard at Vanderbilt, or in long-ago conversations with Allen Tate, Jesse Stuart, and James Still about their visits with Roberts. I have searched my memory, my letters from Stuart and Still, and I have found no "portraits of Roberts." However, there is one final image of Roberts in the 1930s that is worth recording. In the vast archive of the Robert Penn Warren Papers at Yale's Beinecke Library, there are some unpublished letters from Stuart to Warren, his Vanderbilt friend and mentor. On March 25, 1935, for example, Stuart writes to Warren saying that he will be visiting with Roberts from April 10-12. Thus, Stuart laments, he will be unable to attend the conference Warren is directing at Louisiana State University on those dates because, as he put it, "I do, by all means, want to know Miss Roberts before one of us kicks the bucket." Warren had invited both Stuart and Roberts to the conference; on March 20, he had written to Allen Tate asking him to forward an invitation to Roberts to come to LSU (*Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren*. II: 24-25). In other letters, Stuart tells Warren what he has heard about Roberts' "ill health." Finally, he meets her, and in an undated letter, clearly from shortly after his April 1935 meeting (misdated 1934, apparently by a Beinecke archivist), Stuart writes Warren about his visit with Roberts. He notes her frail health and wishes he "could loan her some energy." And Stuart confirms what so many who knew Roberts have said, our most enduring image of her: "She is the rarest spirit I have ever met."

The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society

Conference Registration and Membership Form

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Email address _____

Telephone (____) _____ Fax (____) _____

**Please Detach this form and mail with check (payable to Tina Iraca, Treasurer, EMR Society) to:
Tina Iraca, 46 Montgomery St., Tivoli, NY 12583**

1) Enclosed please find \$ _____ for _____ registration (s) for the VIII National Roberts Conference.

2) Enclosed please find \$ _____ for _____ annual membership (s) in the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society.

A) All Conference participants must pay annual dues of \$10.00 per person.

B) The Conference registration fee is \$50.00. It includes the Saturday night banquet at the Beaumont Inn and all conference sessions and activities. (*A \$10 late fee is required for registrations received after March 20, 2006.*)

Conference Lodging Information:

Reserve your conference lodging at the Beaumont Inn (1-800-352-3992). Ask for the Roberts Conference room rate.

Questions about lodging and conference-related events should be addressed to: Professor H. R. Stoneback
(Stoney_Sparrow@webtv.net) or Bill Boyle (boyle711@newpaltz.edu).

Please direct all program questions to the Program Chair: Nicole Camastra – njc@uga.edu

Important Reminder: Even if you cannot attend this year's conference, please continue to support your society by sending in this form with your dues payment—thank you.



The historic and beautiful Beaumont Inn in Harrodsburg, KY, is headquarters for the 2006 EMRS Conference.

Kentucky Writers Day 2005: Words and Music at Penn's Store

For the fifth straight year, the EMRS Conference was affiliated with **Kentucky Writers Day** festivities at the Historic Landmark Penn's Store in Gravel Switch, KY. Kentucky Writers Day events included readings of the works of Kentucky authors and musical performances.



Members of the EMR Society gathered for the sixth annual Kentucky Writers Day at Penn's Store.

2005 Conference Program

Keynote Program: **H.R. Stoneback** (SUNY New Paltz), "Hideous Sound" or Joyful Song in the Eden of 'Kentucke': Audible Boone & Audobon, Roberts & Warren" (A Meditation on the 75th Anniversary of *The Great Meadow*); **Jane E. Keller** (University of Baltimore), " 'Another Way of Knowing': Female Consciousness in *The Great Meadow*"; **Steven Florczyk** (University of Georgia) "Of Epic Proportion: Roberts and Cather on the American Frontier"

Session 1 (chaired by William Boyle—SUNY New Paltz) **Tina Iraca** (University of Connecticut), "Not A Feminist Perspective, a Human Perspective: Elizabeth Madox Roberts's Treatment of Female Characters in *The Great Meadow*"; **Jennings Mace** (Eastern Kentucky University), "Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Great Meadow*: The Male and Female Frontier Paradigm"; **Michael Beilfuss** (SUNY New Paltz) "The Affirmation of Self and Other: Roberts's Transformation of Bishop Berkeley's Philosophy in *The Great Meadow*"; **Brad McDuffie** (Nyack College) "The Order of Chaos: Transferring Visions of the 'Promised Land' in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Great Meadow*"; **Matthew Nickel** (SUNY New Paltz), "Finitives Weaving the Weary Wilderness: To Make a Garden in *The Great Meadow*"

Session 2 (chaired by **Nicole Camastra** – SUNY New Paltz) **Mark Bellomo** (SUNY New Paltz), " 'Paying Attention' to Elizabeth Madox Roberts: Teaching *The Time of Man* to Students with ADHD "; **Jane Dionne** (Montgomery Elementary School), "Creating a Writing Climate in the Classroom: Modeling Good Writing with Elizabeth Madox Roberts"; **Nicole Spottke and Nicole Valentino**, (University of South Florida) "Embracing Elizabeth Madox Roberts in a Community College: Teaching 'On the Mountainside' Through Reader Response Theory"; **Gregg Neikirk** (Westfield State College), "Weeds in the Meadow: The Kentucky of Elizabeth Madox Roberts & Edith Summers Kelley"

Session 3 (chaired by **Tina Iraca**—University of Connecticut) **Noah Jampol** (SUNY New Paltz), "Garden State of Mind: The Landscape and Characterization of Evil in the Southern Novel"; **William Boyle** (SUNY New

Paltz), " 'His Long, Lone Wilderness Walk Across Kentucky': Roberts and Warren on the World of Daniel Boone"; **Damian Carpenter** (SUNY New Paltz), "Roberts and Warren: The Discovery of Self in the Natural World"; **Nicole Camastra** (SUNY New Paltz), " 'Depth and Shimmer' or 'The Secret Contact' in Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Robert Penn Warren"; **Angela Green** (University of Georgia) "A Stitch in Time: Fabric and Fabrication in The Time of Man"

Session 4 (chaired by **Matthew Nickel**—SUNY New Paltz) **James Stamant** (SUNY New Paltz), "Connecting the Life Within to the 'Outer Order': The Ordering of Tamed Chaos with Love in a New Land"; **Andrew Jameson** (University of Georgia), " 'And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth': Visions of the Frontier in *The Great Meadow* and *Green Centuries*"; **Carol Newell** (Lafayette College), "Something Like What Syngde Did: Elizabeth Madox Roberts and the Irish Modernists"; **Goretti Vianney-Benca** (SUNY New Paltz), "Life is From Within and It is Blessed: Ellen Chesser and Brad Tolliver's Quest for Identity"

Time's Wingèd Chariot continued from page 2

And now as I hold my grandmother's copy of *Wings* in my hand, I wonder if in some summer farther away and longer ago than I can remember, maybe when I was four or five years old, my grandmother, avid reader and Literary Guild member, read some Roberts to me. Did she show me those pictures of Roberts, Harrodsburg, and the Kentucky River Palisades, thus charting my course on a long circuitous pilgrimage toward the consummation of some deeply embedded vision?



President's Report continued...

While serving on the executive committee as president for two terms, I have had the pleasure of watching the society grow and flourish in ways that we may not have expected when a small group of six Roberts enthusiasts called to order the first meeting of the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society in April, 1999. In addition to our annual conference, we have also seen Roberts' work discussed at the annual meeting of the ALA, at several Robert Penn Warren Conferences at Western Kentucky University as well as symposiums at Westfield State College in Westfield, Massachusetts, and SUNY New Paltz in New Paltz, New York. Our scholarship on Roberts has appeared in *The Shawangunk Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Arts Across Kentucky*, and *Kentucky Humanities*. A new website has been developed (www.emrsociety.com), plans for a collection of selected essays on Roberts is underway, and work is also moving forward on a new biographical volume as well as an edition of Roberts's letters.

Representative of scholars from across the country, these publications and conference presentations show that Roberts' work should indeed be understood not only as it evokes her own Kentucky home, but also as it should occupy an integral place in American letters. While we have made progress in voicing this message over the past several years, I look forward to continued work with this society so that it will continue to be heard.

-- Steven Florczyk



(l-r) EMR Society President Steven Florczyk, Secretary/Treasurer Tina Iraca, and Honorary President H.R. Stoneback at Kentucky Writers Day 2005.

The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society



Honorary President: H.R. Stoneback SUNY New Paltz

President: Steven Florczyk, University of Georgia

Vice President: Gregg Neikirk, Westfield State College

Vice President: Jane Keller, University of Baltimore

Secretary/Treasurer: Tina Iraca, University of Connecticut

EMRS Newsletter Editors: Steven Florczyk/Tina Iraca

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