

On Publishing Mary

by Dilys Wood

Mary was a determined, aspirational writer who put a high value on all truly original, dedicated endeavour in the arts. She knew that she was a driven perfectionist and I believe she sometimes felt (quite rightly) that she succeeded in her high aims. She gave very generous praise and encouragement to other poets and her taste was catholic provided she felt the poet had something to say. She could be silent or come out with penetrating comments when she felt you were falling down and she held empty, pretentious work in absolute scorn (but mainly silently).

Her work is greatly admired by those who give proper attention to its exceptionally well-honed, accurate, thoughtful and eventful character – ‘eventful’ because each poem is a small or large *happening* (in 1960’s jargon), full of developments, surprises, questions, ironies and subtle humour. She had no formal religion, I think, but the potency of her work derives from her perfect responsiveness on different levels, including her utterly convincing intuitions of a spiritual dimension in human experience.

It says nothing for the state of poetry in the UK that some established publishers rebuffed her full collection, *As Birds Do*. Publication by Second Light was second best, I think. The quality of her work demanded recognition of a more prominent kind. However, I think Mary liked the high production values of her book and enjoyed reading from it. It makes me glad and sad that the support she had in making her work better known came mainly from women fellow-poets. Mimi Khalvati and Myra Schneider helped her shape *As Birds Do*, a book which flows beautifully from poem to poem, covering a very wide range.

At the end of her life, Mary wrote a very fine poem about death in brave and striking language making use of myth. This was brusquely turned down by our two leading poetry journals – failure again to respond to her exceptional gift and, in this case, the relevance for many of this courageous poem. Perhaps I should not mention a negative experience but, happily, the poem was welcomed by the *Long Poem Magazine* and published this summer.

Knowing that she suffered from some obtuseness makes me want to see Mary’s book and later poems more widely read – indeed, studied by serious students as they deserve. Like Keats, her reputation suffered from starting writing in a climate not right for her type of profundity. The climate may now be changing, with recognition that keeping spiritual awareness alive and helping readers face pain and fear can be key functions performed by serious poetry. Mary’s work offers this support while remaining often delightfully self-mocking and down-to-earth.

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Note: Second Light Publications went on to publish Mary MacRae’s posthumous collection *Inside the Brightness of Red*, SLP, 2010.