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Herbert Faulkner West

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launched the 'Peon Corporation' among the Abercrombies and the Fitches in New York; or the triumphant afternoon in Nassau when we persuaded a colored boy to teach you and me the trick of sculling a boat; and, most particularly of course, the adventures without number in Rocky Pasture itself, whose door has always been open . . . and still is . . . and through which, obviously, you constantly come walking in again . . .

One is very much aware of you, Ken.

Yours ever,

Arthur



THE WORK OF KENNETH ROBERTS

By HERBERT FAULKNER WEST

IT is difficult to assess an author's real worth until several years after his death, and even then it is not an easy task. Quite frequently (and often wrongly) an author's reputation drops considerably after his death, as was the case, for instance, with Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and even as good a writer as John Galsworthy. Time, however, ultimately seems to winnow the wheat from the chaff.

Kenneth Roberts, born in 1885, died about five years ago, in 1957. It would appear appropriate on this occasion to look over his written work and try to give, not a final estimate, but perhaps a more just estimate than could have been given while he was living.

His career as a writer follows, in general, three periods: the first, as a reporter on the *Boston Post*, where he worked from 1909 to 1917, and his work for *Puck* and the old *Life*; the second, as a reporter for the *Saturday Evening Post*; the third, as a historical novelist.

He certainly learned much from his activities in the Siberian Expeditionary Force in 1918-19, where he was Captain in the

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Intelligence Service. With this experience as a background, he served as Staff Correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*, during which time he wrote articles on Russia, the Philippines, on Mussolini, and on Hitler. His articles on immigration, it is said, resulted in the long-needed quota system which is now law.

Kenneth Roberts' first books deal pretty much with his experiences as a traveling correspondent for the *Saturday Evening Post*. On looking over these books today, I find it difficult to believe that any of them have much lasting merit as literature, though they may have some interest for future historians in understanding a point of view prevalent in the early twenties, which I am sure Roberts reflected. For instance, a historian would not find it amiss to read Roberts' *Europe's Morning After*, published by Harper in 1921. This book represents material gathered during 1919 and the early months of 1920, during which time Roberts traveled through Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France and England. He accurately described the European chaos, as he did also in his book the following year, *Why Europe Leaves Home*. This latter is a true account of many of the reasons which caused Central Europeans to overrun America.

Then Kenneth Roberts had an amusing bout with the amazing state of Florida. This left some ephemeral works in its train, such as *Sun Hunting*, 1922, *Florida Loafing*, 1925, a book about real estate, and another book on Florida published by Harper in 1926. Again, these books have interest only to the historian who is trying to find out what Florida was like during the boom days of the twenties before the very solid crash of 1929.

It might be interjected at this point that Kenneth Roberts came from an old Maine family, that his ancestors came over in 1639, and their lives became part of the state's history. It was inevitable that when he settled down to be a serious writer his thoughts would travel back to his parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and those of them who had fought with Washington, who followed Benedict Arnold through the wilderness to Quebec, and who manned privateers in the War of 1812. So his interest in the past is perfectly understandable, and is reflected in his two books on collecting antiques: one, *Antiquamania*, 1928, the supposed collected papers of Professor Milton Kil-

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gallen, indicating the difficulties in the path of the antique dealer and collector; the other, *The Collector's What-Not*.

It is pertinent here to mention that Roberts' most consistent mentor and helper as a writer was Booth Tarkington, to whom he dedicated several of his books. Tarkington was also interested in antiques and paintings, and it is easy to surmise that many of their conversations dealt with the passions and problems of collectors. In one paragraph, Roberts sums up the collector's passion ("A Tour of the Bottlefields"): "You don't know how I feel about bottles! I love to rub bottles and to hold bottles in my hand! I have nearly three thousand bottles, and by this time next year I hope to have five thousand bottles."

Roberts also had a life-long interest in Italy. As a matter of fact, he lived there on and off, and wrote some of his novels there. The fascination of Mussolini and Fascism were powerful enough for him to write in 1924 his book, *Black Magic*, which is dedicated to the then editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, George Horace Lorimer. This book, a plea for conservatism (Roberts was a dyed-in-the-wool Maine conservative), dealt with Mussolini and Hitler, then rising stars in the twentieth century firmament. The book is an account of the benefits that Roberts thought Mussolini brought to Italy and of the perverse qualities of the Nazi dictatorship then showing its power in Bavaria. The same year, speaking of conservatism, he wrote a little book on Calvin Coolidge. Reading this today makes one realize that Roberts let his enthusiasm for Coolidge bedim his judgment of him as a president. Indeed, looking back, one can excuse the rosy optimism produced during the early twenties which resulted later in the nightmare of the 1929 crash and the second World War.

Perhaps I have spent too much time on Roberts' ephemeral books written as reports for the *Post*. It is time now to turn to his historical novels, particularly the Arundel series, upon which I think his future reputation must rest. Arundel, of course, was Kennebunkport, the home of his ancestors. By 1930 Roberts had become a craftsman through long years of writing, beginning with his editorship of the *Cornell Widow* and continuing through his extensive travels as a foreign correspondent for the above-mentioned *Post*. In the latter part of the twenties, he decided to devote his life to the writing of fic-

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tion. He already had trained himself as an accurate reporter, and he set for himself high standards as a writer of historical fiction. By this time, according to his close friend Ben Ames Williams, Roberts was the master of the tools of his trade.

His four novels about Arundel were all written in the first person, and, again according to Williams, "No one has used the first person so effectively since Blackmore wrote *Lorna Doone*." It seemed, at least to Roberts, that for him the first person came more naturally than the third. The curious reader may find in the introduction to his last book, *Cowpens: The Great Morale Builder*, his credo as a writer of historical fiction. This came to me in the form of a letter in 1936 for a book of mine now out of print, which deals with writers and book collectors. I quote one or two important statements from this letter:

I have a theory that history can be most effectively told in the form of fiction, because only in the writing of fiction that stands the test of truth do falsities come to the surface. Historians of the Northern Army have either ignored the most enlightening details of the campaigns or have failed to dig up the details which they should have possessed, or have refused to point out the misrepresentations and downright lies for which diarists, journalists, and so on were responsible . . . The constant gauge of a conscientious novelist must be, "Is this true: is this the way it happened?" That gauge is applied to everything — conversation, characters, action. The historian isn't bothered by that gauge. He can accept a statement made by a reliable man. If St. Clair says in his court-martial that the moon was full on July 5th, 1776, Hoffman Nickerson naturally feels free to accept it. When I come to writing the action on the night of July 5th, however, I find that the night was clear with a hot wind blowing: that the Americans retreated beneath the screen of darkness and smoke, and that it wasn't until Fermoy's cabin burned that the British caught sight of the retreat . . . By consulting a calendar for 1776, I find that St. Clair was mistaken. The moon on July 5th, 1776, was a new moon. It went down shortly after sundown. There wasn't any moon at all during the retreat.

Readers of Roberts know that he spent many years rehabilitating, in a sense, the reputation of Benedict Arnold. He said once that on the evidence he was able to find, Arnold was "a man of the greatest generosity, unselfishness, bravery and good taste. People persist in thinking that in *Arundel* and *Rabble in Arms* I was writing Arnold's story; I wasn't at all. I was writing the story of the Northern Army. I wrote Arnold as I

found him . . . as I tried to write everyone connected with that Army.”

Whatever faults the future critic may find in Roberts' work, he certainly will never be able to deny that Roberts set a very high standard for himself as a writer. All over America and England he had research people checking on the most minute facts. That fidelity to fact does not necessarily make a great historical novel, I would be the first to admit. It needs, besides this, great creative ability in building up characters, as well as a sense of proportion which is able to see each event in its proper perspective. Some of these qualities Roberts undoubtedly lacked, particularly in his creation of women characters, but in his blunt honesty, in his untiring search for truth, and in his unbiased attitude toward his characters he must be highly praised. There is in all of Roberts' fiction a gusto, a vigor of style and an exuberance which set him apart as a writer of historical fiction in America. No one that I know of has written as well as he about the tremendous physical effort expended by the early followers of Arnold or by Rogers' Rangers. Let us consider the Arundel series of novels.

*Arundel*, his first novel, called one of "extraordinary strength and power," appeared first in November 1929. This story is based on Benedict Arnold's secret expedition to Quebec, and deals most effectively with colonial frontier life, the fighters of the vanished Abenaki nation, the game-filled forests, ambushes, battles, and the struggles of a starving indomitable army of men attacking the snow-clad cliffs of Quebec. Using real characters such as Arnold, Burr, Morgan and Robert Rogers, he also created the immortal Cap Huff, "in whom humor was an inherent and persistent quality, as indeed it was in his creator himself," and Stephen Nason, through whose eyes we see the action. Nason's abhorrence of evil things and evil men, I am sure, was Roberts' own. In spite of the strength of this novel, its sale somewhat disappointed Roberts, but nonetheless he went on writing for the rest of his life, turning only at the end away from historical fiction to his brief honeymoon with water dowsing.

*The Lively Lady* appeared in 1931. If this novel lacks the grandeur and scope of *Arundel*, it partly makes up for this in the interest it creates in the reader by showing the sufferings of

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thousands of American seamen imprisoned in the infamous Dartmoor Prison. The hero, Richard Nason, is the son of Phoebe and Stephen Nason of *Arundel*. Roberts succeeds better than anyone I know in exposing the miseries of American seamen during this war. Perhaps his villains are painted with too dark colors and his heroes with too light. Nevertheless, in King Dick, the giant negro ruler of Prison No. 4, and in Thomas Shortland, the commandant, Roberts makes real to many the horrors of this (or any other) war. Of Dartmoor he says: "For if ever there was a place that looked like an abode for devils and lost souls it was this swarthy, sinister moor."

In some respects, I think his novel *Rabble in Arms* is his best. A sequel to *Arundel*, it came out in 1933. If one is going to read only one of Roberts' novels I would suggest *Rabble in Arms*. This tale of the Northern Army, which begins where *Arundel* ends, and ends with the second Battle of Saratoga two years later, is a blend of romance, biography and history. The title comes from George Burgoyne's contemptuous statement of "a rabble in arms, flushed with success and insolence." Roberts paints in this book perhaps his broadest canvas of the American Revolution. His descriptions of the retreat of the half-dead Americans from Canada, of the Battle of Valcour Island, the flight from Ticonderoga before Burgoyne, and the final Battle of Saratoga, reach the highest standards of any American writer of historical fiction. Once again the reader becomes especially close to Cap Huff, Benedict Arnold, Stephen and Phoebe Nason.

When Roberts wrote the following about Benedict Arnold he was using his most considered judgment: "Benedict Arnold was a great leader! A great general! A great mariner! The most brilliant soldier of the Revolution. He was the bravest man I have ever known."

*Captain Caution*, 1934, is the last of the Chronicles of Arundel. It, too, deals with the War of 1812, and is a story of the romance of an Arundel mariner and the seafaring daughter of an Arundel shipmaster. Bootleggers, gangsters, grafting politicians, slavers, demimondaines, also hold the stage. Perhaps the most thrilling episode is the hero's imprisonment in the hold of a British gun-brig. His battle to retake the brig, a prize-fight aboard a British hulk, the escape to France, and the

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final Battle of Madeira against the enemy Slade, are other high points in the story.

In a letter written to Kenneth Roberts sometime in 1935, I deprecated *The Lively Lady* and *Captain Caution* as minor works compared to *Arundel* and *Rabble in Arms*. I have never forgotten his blast in a letter in which he told me that just as much labor had gone into these two as the other two. Though this is undoubtedly true, I still feel they are products of a lot of historical material he had left over and which fitted into his scheme of writing four books about Arundel. Most critics would agree, I think, that his masterpiece was yet to come.

I remember that he was rather discouraged at this time by the sales, though they were large, of his four Arundel books. I remember telling him that in his next book he would really hit the jackpot — which, in fact, was a correct hunch.

*Northwest Passage*, 1937, was a tremendous success, both as a novel and as a moving picture, and enabled Roberts to build his magnificent house in Kennebunkport and to be free from financial worries.

Ernest Martin Hopkins, one of Dartmouth's great presidents, had met Roberts in Maine and, following the *Chronicles of Arundel*, had awarded him an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. This came, Roberts told me, at one of his low ebbs and gave him immense satisfaction and a renewed confidence in his abilities as a writer. At any rate, he now turned to the life of Major Robert Rogers and his Rangers.

The first part tells of Rogers and his Rangers' attack against the St. Francis tribes on the Canadian border, in which Rogers proved himself one of the greatest of Indian fighters; then the retreat, after having burned the village down, through the Cohase intervals; and the final escape down the Connecticut River on rafts to the safety of Old No. 4, now the town of Charlestown, New Hampshire.

Since reading this book, I have never been able to see the Connecticut above Charlestown without thinking of this great leader and his starving men coming down on rafts. The first part of *Northwest Passage* seems to me to represent the high peak of Roberts' writing as a historical novelist. I know of no book written in this country that has conveyed so well the tremendous amount of physical effort, courage and indomitable



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persistence in that wilderness march through swamps to final safety on the river. I hope some day this may be published separately.

However, Roberts was interested in telling the whole story of Robert Rogers, the story of a man reduced to adversity through human weakness and error. He insisted on seeing the story whole, and he wrote it that way. It has been called a great novel "in the strict tradition of classic tragedy," and to a certain degree this is so. Yet, I have never been able to rid myself of the feeling that, as a work of art, it would have been better ended on the American scene and not continued to Rogers' last tragic years in England.

For two winters Roberts had a researcher in London, providing her steadily with clues to run down in depicting the London and England of the time as well as the historical background of the events. Roberts finally ran down the court-martial record of Rogers' strange behavior at Michilimackinac. Rogers had been told by the King himself and his favorite minister, Charles Townsend, to hunt for a northwest passage. Fatal flaws of character finally brought Rogers to a miserable fate in Fleet Street prison.

The story is told from the viewpoint of a Harvard student named Langdon Towne, and well told it is. The novel has been translated into many languages, as have many other of Roberts' books, and I am sure it will continue to be read for a long time. The Dartmouth College Library has a copy of the Armed Services edition which was cut to 170,000 words and which contains a characteristic comment by Roberts himself: "Done by K. R. with repugnance and damned bad grace. Nearly everything that soldiers liked about the book was eliminated so that it could be sent to soldiers."

Kenneth Roberts' historical research has produced two other books which must be mentioned as valuable contributions to American history, for they make available to those interested much source material for a study of America's struggle for its place in the sun. One of these books was *March to Quebec*, published in 1938, which contains the journals of the members of Arnold's expedition, including Arnold's own, as well as that of Lieutenant John Montrossor. The second was a publication

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in 1947 of Moreau de St. Méry's journey in 1793-98, translated by Kenneth and his wife, Anna Mosser Roberts.

Meanwhile, he had written two humorous books of essays: *For Authors Only*, 1935, dealing with diets, the strange characteristics of Oxford, and so on; and an amusing comic piece, *It Must Be Your Tonsils*, published in 1936. It might also be added that during his career he wrote several one-act plays. Regarding the first of these, *The Brotherhood of Man*, he says in a note to me: "Since you are going in all over, you had better have this too. It was written in the transport coming home from Siberia, and it is supposed to depict the last days of the royal family of Russia." His love for Maine, which was a constant force in his life, was also distilled in a book, *Trending Into Maine*, which treats of travelers in Maine, shooting, ship-building, Maine cooking, etc. This was delightfully illustrated by N. C. Wyeth, and proved to be a popular book.

In 1940 *Oliver Wiswell*, the story of the Royalists in the American Revolution, was written. Vivid pictures of Bunker Hill, the battles of Long Island, the political intrigues of the British, are all stirringly told, and Roberts does his best to write unbiasedly about the American Royalists. Lack of space prevents any longer analysis of this book, which was followed in 1947 by *Lydia Bailey*, a story of Haiti.

Neither of these books, at least for me, is as satisfying as the *Chronicles of Arundel* or *Northwest Passage*. It may be that they were written to satisfy a ready market, but in any case they are too long, too full of information, and some of the characters, particularly Lydia Bailey, somehow fail to ring true.

Perhaps the foreword of *Lydia Bailey* should be quoted, as I suspect it represents Roberts' personal opinion, though it is put in the mouth of one of his characters:

All the great villains and small villains whom I met so frequently in the events I'm about to set down were consistent men — unimaginative men who consistently believed in war as a means of settling disputes between nations; equally misguided were men who consistently believed that war must be avoided at all hazards, no matter what the provocation; narrow men who consistently upheld the beliefs and acts of one political party and saw no good in any other; shortsighted men who consistently thought that the policies of their own government should be supported and followed, whether those policies were right or wrong; dangerous men who consistently thought that all people with black skins are inferior to those with white skins; intolerant men who consistently believed that

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all people with white skins should be forced to accept all people with black skins as equals. And I know that every nation that cannot or will not avoid the dreadful pitfalls of consistency will be one with the dead empire whose crumbling monuments studded our battlegrounds in Haiti and in Africa.

*Boon Island*, 1956, is to me a failure if judged by the magnificent qualities of his earlier books. This is the story of a shipwreck of 1710 in which the British ship *Nottingham* struck the ledge known as Boon Island off the coast of Maine.

His last historical book appeared after his sudden death in July 1957, and is a reprinting of two articles he wrote for *Collier's* on the Battle of Cowpens. This seems to me to recreate once again some of his old vigor as a writer on American history.

Perhaps the less said the better about his period of defending the work of his friend, Henry Gross, in the use of the dowsing rod, though it does show his passion for justice and truth as he saw it. I personally have felt that his energies had been seriously drained by the creation of seven long historical novels, so that almost by necessity he turned to another interest, which was the subject of the national problem of sufficient water. With an intensity perhaps greater than the necessity, he defended against scientists and other experts "the working of the dowsing rod." Three books were written, *Henry Gross and His Dowsing Rod* in 1951, *The Seventh Sense* in 1953, and *Water Unlimited* in 1957. Actually "Water Unlimited" was a corporation formed in 1950 to direct and develop Henry Gross's amazing ability to find water with a dowsing rod. Without getting into the merits or demerits of this situation, I do happen to know that he convinced Ben Ames Williams and many others, and perhaps one doesn't need to be convinced that water can be dowsed by the proper person with a divining rod.

I have always felt that this controversy somewhat embittered Roberts, and I have always regretted that he ever got mixed up with it. But if one remembers that the idea of spiritualism somewhat obfuscated Conan Doyle's vision during the last years of his life, so it might be said that water dowsing did the same with Roberts.

In conclusion, let me say that it is probably too early even yet to judge fully Kenneth Roberts as a writer of historical fiction. However, I think a statement may be made that so far

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in the history of American literature no one has painted so vigorously and with so much respect for fact some of the vast canvases of characters and scenes in American history.

It is interesting to note that, much as Kenneth Roberts loved Maine, he chose to be buried as a soldier in Arlington Cemetery in Washington. That he loved his country with a passion, no one can doubt, and I think this last action makes it doubly certain that no writer of American historical fiction ever loved or understood his country better than this great citizen from Maine.



SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY OF  
KENNETH ROBERTS

By MARJORIE MOSSER ELLIS

THE first compilation of the published works of Kenneth Roberts was made by George Albert and appeared in four parts in the *Bulletin of Bibliography*, September-December 1942 through September-December 1943. His research extends from the year 1920 to May 1941.

In the issue of the same magazine for September-December 1959 Ruth Stemple's checklist offers "a continuation of the earlier one and includes essays and biographical sources" omitted by Albert, "together with Mr. Roberts' later writings."

Neither of these able bibliographers touched the period before 1920 nor attempted a listing of re-issues and foreign translations of the novels. Both missed a number of items, particularly Roberts' anonymous contributions to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

This supplement is an effort to fill in some of these gaps and to bring the list up to date.

BOOKS

*March to Quebec, Including the Lost Journal of John Pierce.* Doubleday, Doran & Co., Garden City, N. Y., 1940.