

Rodgers, William Robert ('W. R.'; 'Bertie')

by Nicholas Allen

Rodgers, William Robert ('W. R.'; 'Bertie') (1909–69), poet and presbyterian minister, was born 1 August 1909 in Belfast, son of Robert Skelly Rodgers, insurance clerk, and his second wife, Jane Ferris Rodgers (née McCarey). Brought up in a puritan household in Ballymacarrett, his early interest in reading developed to a BA in English literature from QUB (1931). He entered the presbyterian theological college in his home city the same year. He was ordained as a presbyterian minister and installed in the parish of Loughgall, Co. Armagh, in 1935. Unable entirely to adapt his mind to the demands of his calling he published *Awake! and other poems* (1941), although the first print run of his book was destroyed in an air raid. Its opening poem, 'Express', responds to death with pity and indignation, two qualities that mark its author's general vision. 'The lovers' maps a difficult relationship, while 'Stormy day' betrays a Joycean love of associative word play with its assonantal and alliterative techniques. Brendan Behan (qv) later claimed that a republican prisoner of his acquaintance took 'Directions to a rebel' as justification for his cause, but the poem is more personal evidence of its speaker's nonconformist pedigree. The prophetic 'Awake!' imagines a postwar Europe cleared of privilege, while 'Ireland' merges a modernist awareness of self with traditional forms of naming, from Bearnagh to the Chimney Rock (one of the Mourne mountains). Travelling to Dublin in the summer of 1941, Rodgers met Geoffrey Taylor (qv), poetry editor of *The Bell*. After a period of marital difficulty, he resigned his ministry and was recruited to London by Louis MacNeice (qv) as a producer and scriptwriter to the BBC's Third Programme in 1946. From here he broadcast now precious oral histories, published posthumously as *Irish literary portraits* (1972), of Oliver St John Gogarty (qv), F. R. Higgins (qv), George Russell (qv), G. B. Shaw (qv), J. M. Synge (qv), and W. B. Yeats (qv). He published *Europa and the bull* (1952) in the same year that he resigned his post at the BBC. With a grand development in theme and style, the erotic title poem evokes the gods' animal strength in a highly charged physical world.

He wrote little after this second collection and was incapable of sustained output. Accepting the post of writer in residence at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, in 1966, he joined the staff of the California State Technical College in 1968. Taken ill, he died in Los Angeles on 1 February 1969; his ashes were interred at Loughgall on 7 March. He married (1936) Marie Harden Waddell; they had two daughters, Harden and Nini. He separated from his wife in 1946 and married Marianne Helweg in 1953. They left one further daughter, Lucy. A member of the Irish Academy of Letters, he was the recipient from 1968 of an Irish Arts Council annuity.

---

*Ir. Times, Times*, 3 Feb. 1969; Darcy O'Brien, *W. R. Rodgers* (1970); Derek Mahon, 'MacNeice in England and Ireland', Terence Brown and Alec Reid (ed.), *Time was away* (1974), 113–22; Dan Davin, 'At the end of his whether: W. R. Rodgers (1909–1969)', *Closing times* (1975), 23–42; Terence Brown, *Northern voices* (1975); id., 'The poetry of W. R. Rodgers and John Hewitt', *Two decades of Irish writing* (1975), 81–97; id., *Ireland's literature* (1988); Gillian McIntosh, *The force of culture* (1999); Marianne Elliot, *The catholics of Ulster* (2000)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.101.44.120 on Thu Aug 13 11:44:25 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.