

MODERNISM WITH A NORTHWEST INFLECTION

By Eleanor Berry

One of the handsomest books on the shelves of the Oregon Poetry Collection in the State Library is a 1979 volume, *Collected Poems* by Mary Barnard. When it was published, Barnard was 70, well-known for her translations of Sappho and her writings on myth, but her own poems were still scattered. The *Collected Poems* brings them together and arranges them in seven sections of about ten poems each, so they can be savored over several sittings.

Mary Barnard's poems reflect a deep familiarity with the Pacific Northwest combined with the direct influence of several major innovators in modern American poetry—Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore. Williams had found a way to write poetry infused with the everyday life and speech of the greater New York area where he spent his life. Barnard turned the flexible free verse and contemporary diction that he had pioneered into a medium for writing of her home country.

Born in Vancouver, WA, in 1909, Barnard grew up in a world of coastal forest and lumber mills much like that rendered in the paintings of British Columbia artist Emily Carr. In her "Cool Country," the land is envisioned as a green pod from which "come the red cheeses, / the apricot-colored lumber, deckloads / moving into the green like lanterns."

After growing up in those green valleys, accompanying her father as he drove "the roads / extending like root tendrils / under the angles of mountains," Barnard attended Reed College, graduating in 1932. The next year, she mailed a sample of her work to Ezra Pound, who responded with encouragement. Soon she moved east, closer to what was then the center of American cultural life. Her poetry received early recognition, and, at Pound's suggestion, she

met Williams and Marianne Moore. She continued exchanging letters with all three of these innovative American poets for many years.

One of the positions she held back east was curator of the extensive poetry collection in the Lockwood Memorial Library at the State University of New York in Buffalo. Her poem “Encounter in Buffalo” opens with the line, “The country lies flat, expressionless as the face of a stranger.” The sight of a freight train redeems this unfamiliar and uncongenial landscape, linking it to the known and beloved one she had left behind: “Its span is the span of trestles above mountain gorges, / its roar the echo of streams still wearing away stone.”

A recurrent theme in Barnard’s poetry is a yearning for contact with the everyday physical world, both natural and made, and an impatience with pretension. Sometimes this manifests itself in gentle satire. “The Spring” follows the course of a small stream from its origin “under a boulder” to its entry, “a mere trickle still,” into a river. The poem ends,

Nameless, it has two little ponds
to its credit, like a poet
with two small collections of verse.

For this I celebrate it.

Sometimes Barnard’s satire is not so gentle. In “Static” she complains at the “whiskered mumble- / ment of grammarians” that prevents her from hearing “Sappho’s laughter” in the lines of that great lyric poet of ancient Greece. She dubs those stuffy commentators “Greek pterodactyls / and Victorian dodos.”

Informing all Barnard’s work is a deep sense of her heritage from a line of working class women. The poem “Inheritance” begins, “I have no inheritance in / the only sense you know.” It names female ancestors who, making their way gradually westward from Virginia, sacrificed what few material things they had, bore daughters, and died:

My own pride is theirs
descended through that willful girl
proudest of all, who turned
twenty on her death-bed—

...
armor stronger than silver
against time and men and women.