

VI GALE MADE DUAL CONTRIBUTION TO OREGON POETRY

By Eleanor Berry

When “A Celebration of Vi Gale, Poet and Publisher” was held in Portland in February 2008, poets came from all over the state. Gale was recognized not only for her own poetry but for her work as a publisher of contemporary Oregon poetry in beautiful editions with illustrations by contemporary Oregon artists.

Born in Sweden in 1917, Viola M. Gale lived most of her life in the Pacific Northwest. Her death in 2007, at the age of 90, tore a hole in Oregon’s poetry community. But there remains the dual legacy of poems she wrote and of books by other poets that were published by her Prescott Street Press.

The range of poets published by Gale’s press can be seen in *The Prescott Street Reader*, a 1995 sampling from its first 20 years. Among them are Barbara Drake, Carlos Reyes, Peter Sears, George Venn, and Ingrid Wendt, as well as the late Mary Barnard, Kenneth Hanson, and William Stafford.

Vi Gale’s own first book of poetry, *Several Houses*, was issued by legendary small-press publisher Alan Swallow in 1959. It is one of the 100 Oregon books published between 1800 and 2000 chosen by the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission as best representing the state’s literary heritage. This book and four of Gale’s later poetry collections can be found in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the State Library.

The latest of these books, *Odd Flowers & Short-Eared Owls*, was issued in 1984 by Gale’s own Prescott Street Press. It contains a selection of poetry from all her previous books as well as more recent work. The poems are immediately engaging in their exactness of detail and in their intelligence and wry wit.

The first poem, “From Oregon on a Slightly Less Green Leaf,” speaks directly to the reader, asserting the continuity of the poet’s style and concerns: “I’m still here, barefoot and lank-haired, / at the rocky edge of the same ocean / studded with arches, caverns and stacks.”

Gale is an attentive and accurate observer of the life in Oregon’s wild places. In “Fireweed,” a poem consisting of a single sentence arranged over a dozen lines, she encompasses the complete life cycle of that familiar Oregon flower of burnt-over land and disturbed edges.

In “Bighorns,” the speaker trips her camera shutter too late, but the poem memorably captures what the camera failed to record: “lone ram, ewe, little fellow / feeding daintily on small flowers and wild parsnip / in the quartz air of their sky-hung meadows, / short-horned dame, gamboling junior, / an old boy shrewd as a peruked judge.”

Gale’s observant eye and attentive ear are sometimes turned on her fellow human observers of the natural world. “The Heron Watchers” captures perfectly the tone and idiom of a group of bird watchers discussing a sighting: “It swam in from an offshore island— / I’ve heard they dive and fish till dawn . . .” / “not so. The *Ardeidae* are quiet at night. / Not known to either swim or dive . . .”

The poems in *Odd Flowers & Short-Eared Owls* show that Gale was adept in both traditional metrics and free verse, and that she could both elaborate richly on a theme, as she does in the long final poem, “Flowers & Owls,” and compress meaning powerfully, as she does in “It Wasn’t Ever the Flowers,” which contains a great sweep of geography and history in just six lines:

Not the delicate jowls of the opium poppy.
Not the wax goblet of the burgher-economy
tulip. No more than it was the starry blue
of the great camas meadows, but when
the settlers plowed under the lilies, it
touched off the Nez Perce War.