

Linda Hamalian. *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*. W.W.Norton & Co. New York. 1991. £16.95/\$30.00. 444pp.

Edt. Lee Bartlett. *Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*. W.W. Norton & Co. 1991. £18.95/\$33.00. 292pp.

Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1982) was a key figure in the San Francisco Renaissance of the late 1940s and the early Beat movement in the 1950s and is an important figure in American literature and culture. Centred for most of his life in San Francisco, he is in some ways a West Coast Pound (whose politics he despised)—enormously well-read in the literatures of the world, both East and West, a selfless promoter of others' talent, and one of the finest translators of poetry in the twentieth century. Totally uncompromising, he could be irascible, infuriating, opinionated, and at the same time very funny. In short, an interesting and complex man and a fine poet. Hamalian's biography and his letters to *New Directions* editor James Laughlin suggest that his vicious tongue and temper managed to antagonize friends and enemies alike, Rexroth's greatest scorn being for the literary establishment—Trilling is a "dead pissant," Fiedler a "cow college professor," and the New York set are "cocktail fascists". Rexroth scorned the art of winning friends and influencing people and so during his lifetime, in Laughlin's words, "never received the popular and academic recognition which his work deserved."

Linda Hamalian's biography is a useful addition to our stock of knowledge on Rexroth, and can be read alongside of Rexroth's own autobiography, *An Autobiographical Novel* (1966). Well researched and lucidly written, one feels that Hamalian's judgments are shrewd and humane. She is particularly good at Rexroth's relationships with women. Married four times, he would repeatedly use his wives as unpaid secretaries and was not above using his fists from time to time. His calmest relationship (his final years with Carol Tinker) was the least passionate, Tinker first entering the Rexroth household as a paid secretary. Hamalian has resisted the opportunity of mocking the incongruity between Rexroth the lyric love poet and Rexroth the home tyrant, and instead wisely insists on his worth as a poet despite his failings as a man. In her concluding lines she writes: "If one consistent pattern ran through Kenneth Rexroth's life, it was that he was genuine in his poems the way he could not always be in his life. His vocation became his salvation." It is nicely put.

Hamalian paints a full and interesting portrait of a significant writer whose commitment to pacifism, the rights of minorities, and the working movement remained firm throughout his life, and whose nature poetry, translations (especially from Chinese and Japanese poets) and lyric love poetry deserve to be more widely known.

Rexroth's letters to James Laughlin make great reading, for there is no beating around the bush with Rexroth's opinions. Joyce is a "loathsome intellectual prig," Henry Miller "the most insufferable snob I have ever met," Frost a writer of "self-conscious farmer poetry," E.A. Robinson "a rather vulgar imitator," Tennessee Williams and Ferlinghetti are "meretricious frauds," Truman Capote is dubbed "Human Crapout," and Pound is "nutty as fruitcake." On the positive side we have

Whitman ("a real original"), William Carlos Williams ("a great man"), Dylan Thomas ("the most influential young poet in England today"), and the West Coast poets he befriended and selflessly promoted — Robert Duncan, William Everson, Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia and Kenneth Patchen. But Rexroth is never more funny than when he is on the attack. I particularly liked this:

(Yvor) Winters and I gave papers at a thing called the American Society for Aesthetics last Saturday. Jesus Christ, what people! The recipe seems to be ... extract taste and remove wit, add one tweed suit, one Phi Beta Kappa key, stir thoroughly with a blunt object, stuff balls with flour and half-bake.

The object of Rexroth's attack is often Laughlin himself, who is frequently accused of being a meany, of being ashamed of Rexroth, of pampering to the New York homosexual literati, and so on. Laughlin has the patience of a saint but occasionally he blows a fuse and blasts back, but in the end there is always a reconciliation. It is a successful and tolerant marriage built on mutual respect that lasts over forty years, Laughlin depending greatly on Rexroth's judgement and breadth of reading in deciding who to publish, and Laughlin's *New Directions* publishing the majority of Rexroth's works. As Rexroth once said, "I wouldn't have had a career without Laughlin."

The decision to publish selected letters is a good one, I think. We are provided with a full enough range of letters here. Lee Bartlett's editorial notes are very helpful and full and provide a mass of information about writers and events that cumulatively build up a sense of the literary currents of the time. I have some minor quibbles. It somewhat insults the intelligence of the reader to be told in the notes who Humphrey Bogart or Valentino are, and is it really necessary to inform us that the "Whitman" in the letter is really "Walt Whitman, American poet," or that Marx is a "German Socialist and political theorist"? — nobody thought it was Groucho. (Rexroth's vituperative style is infectious). Surprisingly, however, considering the diligence of the editor, there are times when a note would be needed but is not given. Rexroth writes "I have lost my long time negro mistress.... She was a professional assigneuse," surely that deserves a note for the curious. However, quibbles aside, these letters are gems and the editor and the publisher deserve nothing but praise for bringing them to light.

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